

Between roar and silence: existence in liminality in Camille Farrah Lenain's *Made of Smokeless Fire*¹

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ABSTRACT. Contemporary photography, particularly portraiture, increasingly explores identity, representation, and cultural memory, challenging dominant and colonial narratives. However, the experiences of queer diasporic Muslims in France and Western societies remain underrepresented. This intersection of queerness and Muslim identity is often seen as incompatible, leading to marginalization. Historically, photography has contributed to the erasure and misrepresentation of such identities. Camille Farrah Lenain's *Made of Smokeless Fire* (2020-ongoing) examines these complexities, inspired by her uncle Farid, who died of complications from diabetes and HIV, after growing up in an Algerian Muslim-practicing family as a gay man. Through intimate portraits, Lenain amplifies the visibility of marginalized queer and racialized individuals, linking private mem-

KEY-WORDS:

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ory to collective memory. Her work challenges historical narratives, using queer and liminal aesthetics to redefine identity and memory in contemporary photography.

RESUMEN. *Entre el rugido y el silencio: existir en liminalidad en 'Made of Smokeless Fire' de Camille Farrah Lenain.* La fotografía contemporánea, especialmente el retrato, explora cada vez más los temas de identidad, representación y memoria cultural, desafiando las narrativas coloniales y dominantes. Sin embargo, las experiencias de los musulmanes queer de la diáspora en Francia y en las sociedades occidentales siguen estando subrepresentadas. Esta intersección entre la identidad queer y la musulmana a menudo se percibe como incompatible, lo que conduce a la marginación. Históricamente, la fotografía ha contribuido a la eliminación y la tergiversación de estas identidades. *Made of Smokeless Fire* (2022-en curso) de Camille Farrah Lenain examina estas complejidades, inspirada por su tío Farid, quien falleció de complicaciones provocadas por la diabetes y el VIH, después de crecer en el seno de una familia musulmana argelina como hombre gay. A través de retratos íntimos, Lenain amplifica la visibilidad de individuos queer y racializados marginados, conectando la memoria privada con la memoria colectiva. Su obra desafía las narrativas históricas, utilizando estéticas queer y liminales para redefinir la identidad y la memoria en la fotografía contemporánea.

PALABRAS CLAVES:
diáspora;
queer;
liminalidad;
fotografía;
Camille Farrah Lenain

RÉSUMÉ. *Entre le rugissement et le silence : l'existence dans la liminalité dans 'Made of Smokeless Fire' de Camille Farrah Lenain.* La photographie contemporaine, en particulier le portrait, explore de plus l'identité, la représentation et la mémoire culturelle, remettant en question les récits coloniaux et dominants. Cependant, les expériences des musulmans queer diasporiques en France et dans les sociétés occidentales restent sous-représentées. L'intersection entre l'identité queer et l'identité musulmane est souvent perçue comme incompatible, conduisant à la marginalisation. Historiquement, la photographie a contribué à l'effacement et à la déformation de telles identité. L'œuvre *Made of Smokeless Fire* (2022-en cours) de Camille Farrah Lenain examine ces complexités, inspirée par son oncle Farid, qui est décédé des complications liées au diabète et au VIH, après avoir grandi dans une famille musulmane algérienne en tant qu'homme gay. À travers des portraits intimes, Lenain amplifie la visibilité des individus queer et racialisés marginalisés, en reliant la mémoire privée à la mémoire collective. Son travail remet en question les récits historiques en utilisant l'esthétique queer et liminale pour redéfinir l'identité et la mémoire dans la photographie contemporaine.

MOTS-CLÉS :
diaspora ;
queer ;
liminalité ;
photographie ;
Camille Farrah Lenain

Introduction

Camille Farrah Lenain is a French Algerian photographer who grew up in Paris, studied Photography at the ESA in Brussels and at ICP in New York City. She moved to New Orleans in 2013, where she has been teaching at Tulane University and pursuing her long-term photographic projects. Lenain's photographs have been exhibited internationally, including at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Arab World Institute in Paris, Festival Incadaques and Photoville, Griffin Museum of Photography, and more. She won The Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture, which is an annual prize to award a photographer whose work demonstrates a compelling new vision in photographic portraiture. Lenain was also the USA winner of the 2024 Leica Women Foto Project Award. Her portraiture and documentary display under-represented people and stories scrutinizing cultural stereotypes, collective memory, identity, religion and sexuality. Through her award-winning series *Made of Smokeless Fire*, Lenain explores queer identities within the Muslim culture flourishing in France. Indeed, France counts the biggest Muslim (and diasporic) community in Western Europe. *Made of Smokeless Fire* is an essential project as being queer and North African and/or Muslim is still thought to be incompatible not only in Muslim countries but also in the western world. Queer Muslim communities suffer a lack of (accurate) representation, which is not only the result of invisibilisation but sometimes also the consequence of a deliberate choice to stay out of the public lens.

This negotiation between visibility and discretion reflects a condition of liminality – a term rooted in anthropological discourse to describe the transitional stage of a process or “rite de passage” wherein individuals exist in-between phases be it in identity, time, or space. Within the context of queerness, liminality can describe a threshold position, the reality of those who challenge binary understandings of identity (sexuality, culture, religion) occupying spaces where norms are questioned and new meanings are negotiated. For queer Muslims in the diaspora, liminality denotes a state of in-betweenness in which the subject is neither fully inside nor outside any single community. Throughout her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argues that queer diasporic subjects often occupy non-normative temporalities and geographies as they challenge heteronormative and nationalist logics of visibility and belonging. This liminal space is a point of tension and refuge. It is precisely this threshold position that marks this community's visibility: positioned within a continuous negotiation of marginality and belonging, silence and expression, exposure and discretion.

So, Lenain stepped into that minefield and gathered the portraits of numerous LGBTQIA+ (diasporic) Muslims living in France, during a guided retreat in Marseille. These people have been confronted to Islamophobia, homophobia, discrimination within their own cultural group, social exile... Some have cut ties with their families, others have found a middle ground with their parents, some have reinterpreted their religion and culture to live it fully; there are as many narratives as there are portraits. In a note for the Griffin Museum of Photography, Camille Farrah Lenain addresses the following questions:

How do we photograph the invisible? How can we honour identities while respecting their secrets? What modes of representation can we develop for undefined, queer, and plural stories? How can we soften a medium that has historically been violent in its classification of human identities? (2024)

This paper analyses whether and how she answers these questions through her series. How does the series reclaim marginalized identities' bodies and voices? To what extent does the series unveil the contrasted layeredness and complexity of these identities? How does the diasporic lens challenge heteronormative and colonial narratives? The first part will explore how the series serves as a bridge from private memory to collective memory, conveying an artistic perspective that both challenges and redefines historical narratives. Then, I will focus on the aesthetic strategies the artist uses to transform mourning into a radical act of resistance and memory. The second part of this paper explores Lenain's use of queer and liminal aesthetics, and ephemeral moments to resist the colonial narrative, reinvent identity, and immortalize diasporic and queer utopias through the transformative power of art. By constructing new images that articulate a previously silent past, Lenain's work encapsulates the ideals of queer utopia and futurism, allowing for an imaginative critique of present social realities. Through the interplay of mourning and utopia, resistance and loss, Lenain's series not only reimagines queer Muslim and diasporic identities, but she also offers a vision of memory and identity as reparative, resilient, and profoundly transformative.

1. Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed

1.1. From intimate memory to collective memory

To introduce her series, Camille Farrah Lenain explains:

'Made of Smokeless Fire' has become a necessity for me, a tunnel for examining the trauma of silence surrounding queer lives. With secrets tied in loss of memory due to immigration and a colonial past, the project has begun to not only feel like an homage to Farid, but to queered and racialized bodies – bodies in liminality. (2022)

Made of Smokeless Fire is created not only from the desire to create a work that brings visibility but also from an inner necessity to verbalize and display “what has not been addressed”. Through her delicate photography, Lenain pays homage to her uncle Farid, a French Algerian man who was HIV positive and passed in 2013. Farid’s story becomes interwoven with multiple others that reflect experiences of queerness and cultural heritage. Thus, the creative process asserts itself as being primarily explorative and commemorative, and then reparative in nature. So, the movement from individual memory to collective memory represents a passage from personal grief to shared commemoration.

The memory weaved through this portraits series does not only take part in a collective memory but also in a political one. José Esteban Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia* (2009) argues that queerness has a future-oriented potential—drawing on past and contemporary artists—to challenge the present and inspire a renewed queer political vision. For Muñoz (2009), “memory is most certainly constructed and, more important, always political” (p. 35). It is about producing new images of a silent past, one that must be invoked and resurrected by multiplying perspectives. The memory work undertaken aims to challenge the transmission of a singular narrative, one that, in this case, exclusively values the achievements of straight cis men, over a narrative that was unable to come to light – indeed, over multiple narratives that have yet to emerge. It is very unlikely for a gay man’s narrative to have a “positive” impact on the collective narrative, especially in a contemporary North African context. This series is a way to palliate to the lack of memory for people living in marge of heteronormativity and hegemonic cultural codes.

Furthermore, this work is not only about memory but also invites the viewer into the intimate realm of Lenain’s experience of mourning. Lenain uses Farid’s private photographic archive, some childhood and teenage identity card portraits (figure 1) and a collection of images in which we are penetrating Farid’s intimacy, Farid with his family, Farid sleeping, Farid’s partner – Thierry—mourning him, Farid dressed in drag, adorned with makeup alongside a friend (figure 2).

Through archives, Lenain pays homage to her uncle, and through portraits, the artist crafts a narrative composed of multiple testimonies and faces or silhouettes, each contributing to a political and collective memory of racialized queer existence. The aesthetics of silence and absence (which are developed in the next section) serve as a profound narrative tool in visual art, intertwining the personal with the collective, and the visible with the invisible. They evoke a complex interplay of presence and loss, exploring the spaces left behind by the absent body, and the muted voice. This aesthetics are not merely a stylistic choice but an engagement with memory, grief, and reparation.

From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahenain.com/mosf>)



Figure 1. Archive photo of young Farid on Mediterranean Sea background.



In *Made of Smokeless Fire*, like in works like Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique* (2012), Nan Goldin's *Sirens* (2019) or even Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* (1980), silence and absence become a medium to articulate grief and memory. However, in Barthes's treatment of his mother's death in *La chambre claire*, Barthes only evokes his mother as total absence. Neither her image, nor anecdotes are provided (Barthes, *La chambre Claire*, p. 177). *Made of Smokeless Fire* shares with Barthes and Sophie Calle's works "un désir d'apparition dans la disparition, une volonté de créer une présence spectrale, une tentative de faire apparaître ce qui a été, de redonner le monde à la vie, mais en tant que disparu" (Mavrikakis, 2006, p. 127). Because of the power Barthes attributes to photography, the image of the dead is a transgression for him:

[...] l'immobilité de la photo est comme le résultat d'une confusion perverse entre deux concepts: le Réel et le Vivant: en attestant que l'objet a été réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu'il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle; mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé («ça a été»), elle suggère qu'il est déjà mort. (Barthes, 1980, p. 123–124)

This archive, composed of moments captured on film, embodies what Roland Barthes termed the "Ça a été" in *La Chambre Claire* – an acknowledgment of existence that grounds each photograph in a specific time and place (Barthes, 1980, p. 124). Each image is evidence of the existence of something at a certain time and place: the image is proof that something has existed (Bertron, 2012, p. 20). By displaying the archive and what is left of that past, the artist conveys the existence of the reality she is exposing, its complexity in the multiplying perspectives: Farid and his loving family, Farid dressing as a drag queen, queer, Farid as a child, a teenager, and always North African, Farid's partner, Thierry. The visual archive becomes proof that Farid indeed existed as a gay North African man and thrived, despite social invisibility. By grounding the viewer in these intimate moments, Lenain invites us to witness racialized queer life in an unfiltered and deeply personal way.



From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahlenain.com/mosf>)

Figure 2. Archive photo of Farid dressing up with a friend.

In accessing these images, viewers connect with Farid's life not just as an isolated story but as part of a larger, collective narrative of marginalized queer identities. In this sense, Lenain's work moves beyond individual commemoration toward creating a collective space where similar, otherwise silenced memories can find voice and legitimacy. This use of Farid's archive thus becomes a gesture of homage not only to him but also to queered and racialized bodies more broadly, as Lenain asserts to introduce her series. This archival engagement serves as an act of reclamation, offering a counternarrative to the dominant, exclusionary histories that have erased or overlooked queer experiences, especially within North African contexts. In this way, *Made of Smokeless Fire* can be seen as a remedy for the trauma of erasure – a work that palliates the loss of memory caused by colonial histories, immigration, and the societal silencing of queer lives. This work resonates with the decolonization of collective memory. Lenain's work becomes a site for healing and visibility, creating a voice for memory that acknowledges vulnerability and calls for solidarity.

All in all, by gathering a large range of viewpoints and voices, «Made of Smokeless Fire» expands individual memory into a collaborative memory that invites multiple interpretations, holding space for a more inclusive narrative. Through «Made of Smokeless Fire», what begins as a private homage to Farid extends outward, ultimately forming a celebration of a whole community subjected to similar experience of silence and solitude. This reclamation of space in the collective memory serves as a defiant assertion of identity and visibility, directly opposing the traditional, heteronormative, and often colonial frameworks that have historically constrained the narratives of racialized LGBTQIA+ people.

1.2. Mourn what is gone, celebrate what has existed

Camille Farrah Lenain's photographic series *Made of Smokeless Fire* employs a range of aesthetic strategies to evoke silence and absence, creating an intimate visual narrative that resonates with emotional depth. These strategies work together to communicate the subtleties of invisibilization – the process of becoming/making one invisible – and the quietness within the mourning process. This series contains a restorative force: it suggests the reconstruction of an absent body that has lived in silence by making visible a multiplicity of bodies that have undergone similar socio-cultural hostility. The artist shows each of these individuals and makes sure their voices are heard. In his article for PetaPixel, journalist Jeremy Gray writes: "Lenain works hard not to bring preconceived notions or ideas to her conversations and photos. Only after she speaks with someone does she determine each part of the image, including the environment, pose, composition, and lighting" (2024).

The aesthetics of silence allow the work to speak through what is left unsaid, while the very act of immortalizing this community and their words transforms that silence into a voice that demands recognition. This reconstruction of the body through portraits and testimonies bridges the personal and the collective, transforming private grief into a shared history, silence into voices. In doing so, it also engages with the liminal condition of this community – a threshold state in which queer Muslim diaspora exists between discretion and visibility, belonging and marginality. This point of tension thus becomes a site of possibility, a site where silence, for instance, is not a mere indication of absence of speech, but is a strategic space for the negotiation of meaning, community, and identity. Moreover, this silence becomes part of an aesthetics of liminality, an expressive mode shaped by thresholds and grounded in the navigation of in-betweenness. In *Made of Smokeless Fire*, such liminality is rendered visible through a visual language that resists a stable resolution: images that oscillate between presence and absence, testimonies that blur the boundary between the personal and collective, the hidden and revealed. In this framework – influenced by both queer and postcolonial theoretical theories – aesthetics becomes a site for negotiation as well: colonial legacies of visibility, normativity and representation are dismantled, and nationalist, religious and heteronormative binaries are fragmented, even ruptured.

1.2.1. *The lens capturing the smoke*

The title of the project carries itself a heavy cultural significance and is a strong statement: “Made of Smokeless Fire” is a reference to djinn, a creature in Islam, which is made of smokeless fire and can change their form and nature. In North African Muslim culture, it is common to believe that queer people are possessed by djinns. A gay man whose gender expression leans toward more effeminate manners would be believed to be possessed by a female djinn, which would explain the man’s attraction to men, and vice versa for women. The title thus suggests a paradox – something that burns with intense emotion but leaves no visible trace of the fire, the smoke. This metaphorical tension is reflected in the imagery, where intangible emotions, like the feeling of invisibility, are captured in ways that make them feel almost imperceptible yet powerful.

Firstly, the photographer often focuses on solitary figures, isolated in minimalist environments. This compositional choice strengthens the idea of solitude and internal reflection, enhanced by the captions. In figure 3, Saya is photographed alone in their room, standing on a bed covered by the typical winter bed cover we find in North African middle-class households. This detail grounds the image in a specific sociocultural context and connects the private space to a collective cultural memory, allowing viewers to infer aspects of the subject’s identity.

From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrah.com/mosf>)





Figure 3. Saya, Paris 2022.

"I thank God every day that I'm not straight. When you love someone outside of a norm, you step out of that norm. It's a relationship to love that goes beyond something. It's a relationship to love with a capital L, it surpasses something. You love the person, not what they're supposed to be."



Figure 4. Lalla Rami, Boulogne, 2020.

"It is through the eyes of others that you can tell that I am a trans, Moroccan and Muslim woman, or whatever the fuck you see. But from me to myself, I'm just a badass girl named Lalla Rami."

From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahlenain.com/mosf>)

The absence of other people or distractions in the frame allows the viewer to focus solely on the emotional weight of the individual, emphasizing the sense of isolation surrounded by personal items giving away information about the identity of the subject alone. The use of tight or close-up framing draws attention to the faces and expressions of the subjects, allowing for an intimate connection with their internal experiences and reinforcing the universality of these emotions. On the other hand, the use of a minimalistic environment allows room for individual and cultural specificity.

In fact, most subjects choose to play with cultural elements that embody North African cultures. In doing so, they "queerly" perform their cultural identity and beliefs: belly dance foulard, traditional rug, a Quran or a praying bead. For example, in her portrait (figure 4), Lalla Rami, a trans Muslim Moroccan artist, poses on the floor in a



Figure 5. Manel, Paris 2021.

"What I really miss is having role models—on TV, in the movies, in TV shows, in mangas... Finding yourself represented nowhere is very hard. To see that you're not represented anywhere is very hard. It's a little violent what I'm going to say, but it's something I've felt since I was very young...: I didn't expect to live beyond my twenties; I had this quiet conviction that I would die young. I thought that "normal" people who are heterosexual, those people, they find themselves represented in all the media, they manage to project themselves. For me, everything was a permanent blur. In any case, I still made it to 35, even though I didn't think I would live past twenty..."

sassy "vogue" pose. She wears a belly dance foulard, the female belly dancer's main accessory, and a fez hat, as traditionally worn by Arab and North African men. The result shows an individual who vogues, evoking the queer culture, which does not make them less Moroccan in their traditions, as they embrace that part of their identity by unapologetically wearing these traditional clothes. This use of cultural props is widely used by Mous Lamrabat in his photography book "Mousganistan" (2024) for instance in which he invites us into a trip in the diasporic dimension of his identity. The Belgo-Moroccan



Figure 6. Djalil, Lyon, 2022.

"It's like a knot in your stomach, as if you were burning from the inside, as if you felt your heart blazing, and then you say to yourself – what is going on?"



From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahlenain.com/mostf>)

photographer plays with cultural elements to create images where Moroccan and western culture create a unique fashion and utopian world. Similarly, the French Moroccan photographer Mehdi-Georges Lahlou puts props on the foreground in his photoseries between 2009 and 2013: those images include mainly elements from Islamic and North African cultures such as the hijab (the headscarf), prayer beads, watermelons, semolina, mint etc. To return to the analysis of Lalla Rami's portrait within Lenain's series, by creating photographs full of cultural elements, the subject chooses to deconstruct the colonial imagery by performing her own portrait. She reclaims her photographic position from object into a subject and challenges the tradition of orientalist portraiture.

Furthermore, Lenain uses soft, diffused back lighting throughout the series, which creates a gentle, almost ethereal atmosphere. Shadows play a prominent role, often obscuring parts of the subjects or their surroundings, sometimes even blurring them completely, taking us to the liminal position of the subject. Jeremy Gray (2024) reports that: "[I]n some cases, people don't want to be identifiable from the images, so there are compositional challenges to overcome there, as well. There's a very special skill in being able to capture a person's being and soul without showing their face". In their portrait for instance, Manel (figure 5) is photographed in semi-darkness, like a *chiaroscuro* painting, one foot in light, the other in the shadow. In other portraits, it is not only a shadow game but also reflections on windows, strong back lighting, blurring or smoke. In Djalil's portrait (figure 6) the focus is on the background, a typical French social housing, and Djalil is blurred, undressed, turning his head towards the building. The use of such aesthetics adds to the quiet, reflective quality of the photographs, playing with open vulnerability and unbreakable resistance.

1.2.2. *Silent frame, loud words*

The work's visual and narrative spaces are filled with intentional absence, representing not only Farid's loss but also the silence forced upon countless others who have been marginalized and erased. The silence, in contrast, isn't just visual; it is an emotional and sensational space that suggests absence, emptiness, or the unspoken. Each portrait foregrounds "what is", while the silent images of nature and other still elements point out "what is not (anymore)". This can manifest in abrupt and well-focused landscapes, figures that seem almost ghostlike, or compositions that emphasize contemplation. The minimalistic approach creates a sense of withdrawal, allowing silence to reverberate between the images, leading to an internal, almost spiritual reflection.

The absence of the body in some images as in Figures 7 and 8 often shifts the focus to its traces – objects, gestures, and the surrounding environment. In Lenain's series, elements like hands, doves, or natural landscapes evoke the absent body,



Figure 7. Sans Titre, Paris, 2022.

Figure 8. Sans Titre, Paris, 2022.

crafting a visual grammar of mourning. Interludes of silence punctuate the narratives, creating space for unspoken grief and allowing viewers to dwell in the weight of absence. Here, silence does not refer to the lack of sounds but rather as a contemplative aesthetic strategy that evokes a sense of stillness. Silences follow words and vice versa, creating a slow and nostalgic effect to the series: minimalist visual materials, muted tones, within a liminal site. Those images, often captioned “Sans Titre” followed with the place and date of the shot, slow down the rhythm of the viewing of the series with a sense of quietness. Each image feels like a minute of silence that leaves space to another voice, another story. Lenain’s engagement with Farid’s silence becomes an act of reparation, where the multiplicity of voices addresses the unspoken.

Yet, in this series, the text is not a mere caption under the image. It is a narrative. This double use of image and text around which Camille Farrah Lenain articulates her work offers a “dialectique autour des notions du visible et du dicible” (Macel, 2003, p. 21). According to Juliette Bertron, photography let alone is not as efficient in conveying the deep-rooted pain inside each subject, which mitigates the emotional commitment of the viewer: “image et texte se complètent et correspondent, sans que l’un ou l’autre ne soit jamais relégué à une fonction secondaire ou illustrative”. (Bertron, 2012, p. 16) Similarly as Nora Noor’s photoseries “Queer Nass” (2021), we are far from the concept of photographic silence: these portraits are loud images, protected by a shield of pow-

From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahlenain.com/mosf>)



Figure 9. Refuge, Marseille, 2023.

erful quote revendicate and protect a “me” and a “we”.² Nora Noor’s “Queer Nass” explores the multifaceted identities of queer North Africans through eleven monochrome portraits. “Queer Nass” is positioned as a keyword in resisting and deconstructing colonial narratives. In *Queer Nass*, the photographs are the main support, and already represent a storytelling in the very performativity of the subjects. Likewise, in *Made of Smokeless Fire*, each image holds heavy meanings, stories and emotions. In parallel, each quote is a poignant story, feeling or thought shared with the viewer. Each word resists silence and free interpretation. In fact, all quotes are meaningful or at least indicative of the essence of the object. I write “object” as I specifically refer to the photographs of buildings. Yet these places names evoke staple places of queer Muslim culture in France. In figure 9 for instance, the artist took a low-angle shot of a wall of a Refuge in Marseille, with hanging sheets. It is not clearly mentioned which shelter it is, nonetheless, given the context of the series, it might be where the artist and the queer Muslim group

retreated or an LGBTQ+ Refuge in Marseille. In fact, there is not only the foundation “Le Refuge” which provides shelter and support for young LGBTQ+ people in difficult situations because of their sexual orientations; but there are also the retreats organised by the CALEM Institute, which has been founded by Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed. Dr. Zahed is a French Algerian anthropologist and humanities researcher, an openly gay imam who accompanies queer Muslim people in their cultural and spiritual journey through therapies, activities, retreats and academic enrichment. The picture does not act as a precise illustration of the simple word caption, and vice versa. Yet, the image holds great meaning for a whole community within.

² In *Queer Nass*, the photographs are the main support and already represent a storytelling in the very performativity of the subjects. Additionally, the quotes not only justify a “me” but also revendicate it and protect it

Through these strategies, silence transforms into a site of ethical engagement, resisting oversimplification or spectacle. It demands the viewer to pause and engage with each story, fostering a deeper reflection on loss, memory and the invisible. Through these strategies, Lenain allows grief to be experienced as a quiet, internal process, making the series both intimate and profoundly resonant. By bridging the gap between the visible and the unspeakable, *Made of Smokeless Fire* reconstructs fragmented, invisible bodies and muted voices, transforming absence into a powerful presence. In this sense, silence becomes both a medium and a message, a visual and affective strategy that reflects the discrepant and plural realities of diasporic queer lives. Through this, Lenain not only honours the past but also creates a space for future reparations. Thus, the aesthetics of liminality do not simply reflect a state of transition, it produces a way of seeing and feeling that honours fragmentation, opacity, and the unresolved.

2. Diasporic Dreams: Navigating Queer Utopias and (Spiritual) Resilience through Photography

Again, in her introduction in Figure 10, Camille-Farrah Lenain says: “With secrets tied in loss of memory due to immigration, to a colonial past, to learning new codes and languages, this work has begun to not only feel like an homage to Farid, but to queered and racialized bodies – bodies in liminality”. The artist encompasses the queered and racialized bodies within the concept of liminality.

The concept of liminality, traditionally rooted in anthropological studies of rites of passage, has evolved into a significant framework for understanding experiences of identity, space, and belonging; “liminality is also defined by the uncertainty of its unfolding, characterized by virtuality and immanent possibility”. (Deleuze, 1985; Masumi, 1992, as cited in March L., 2021) March Loren elaborates further:

Liminality as a concept brings together queer ways of thinking through unboundedness, spillage, fluidity, multiplicity, and processes of contingent, non-linear becoming, as well as the relations of power and regulation that seek their stability or closure. It can ground these in everyday lived realities (March, 2021, p. 455).

For diasporic and queer bodies, liminality is not merely a temporary state of transition but often a permanent condition that reflects the complexities of existence in between spaces – geographical, cultural, and corporeal (March, 2021, p. 456). This section explores the intersections of queerness, diaspora (migration), and AIDS, drawing on mainly liminality as a conceptual lens to examine the perpetual processes of becoming that define these experiences.

This is a love letter to you, Uncle Farid. And here are the questions I was never able to ask you: Did you ever believe in Allah? Did you ever try to come out to your parents? How did the news feel, in your body, when you were diagnosed with HIV? Were you able to feel fully queer, and fully Arab, in France?

I received only silence from my family. My mother and aunts avoided engaging with these questions, and I wasn't sure if it was because they didn't know, or if the grief was still too present. So when in 2019, I heard about the first openly gay imam practicing in Marseille, I went to him with all of my questions. Like my uncle, Ludovic Mohammed Zahed is French-Algerian and HIV positive. He invited me to a queer inclusive group retreat in Marseille, and I started photographing their experience as I was sharing my uncle's story.

"Made Of Smokeless Fire" is an exploration of LGBTQIA+ identities within Muslim culture in France, which are often underrepresented and simply ignored. This project is an homage to Farid who passed away in 2013 - and more recently, to Amina who left us in March 2024. France has the largest proportion of Muslims in the Western world, estimated at 8.8% of the population, or 5.57 million. But still, islamophobia is omnipresent. At the intersection of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and racism, LGBTQIA+ people of Muslim culture are actively fighting against these inequities, while redefining their own cultural and religious heritage.

Since 2020, I have partnered with France-based grassroots organization which support LGBTQ+ migrants and Muslims, such as CALEM, AOZIZ, Nta Rajel and Mille et une Queer. I have encountered numerous participants who have shared their experience : although some have had to cut ties with their family, others have reinterpreted the Qur'an, found ways to heal with their parents, nurtured welcoming and safe community spaces in France. There isn't a single story. I use a trauma-informed approach, emphasizing feedback, slow processes, conversation, and empathy to create portraiture and written narratives of each participant.

This body of work has become a necessity for me, a tunnel for examining the trauma of silence surrounding queer lives. With secrets tied in loss of memory due to immigration, to a colonial past, to learning new codes and languages, this work has begun to not only feel like an homage to Farid, but to queered and racialized bodies - bodies in liminality.

Figure 10. *Made of Smokeless Fire*, Camille Farrah Lenain, 2022.

This section takes its lead from José Esteban Muñoz's major book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) and the concept of liminality and queer futurity. In his book, the author's vision of queer futurity challenges the oppressive and pragmatic present by embracing the potentiality of a liberated future through ephemeral instants rhythmed by queer aesthetics and performativity. Lenain's work translates into photography the utopian aspiration to counter and even overstep normative coercions as it navigates the issues of resilience, spirituality and identity. *Made of Smokeless Fire* embodies elements of resistance against multilayered oppressions through its queer aesthetics merging images and words, captures of ephemeral moments inscribed out of normative space and time, intersectional identities and focus on community. By engaging both works into a dialogue and weaving it in with the concept of liminality, not only we gain a deeper understanding of how contemporary photography can serve as a powerful tool in the fight against discrimination but also it allows envisioning and actualizing a world where diasporic and queer utopias are not just imagined but materialized in the *here* and *now*.

2.1. Diaspora as a Permanent State of Unboundedness

Unlike traditional rites of passage, where liminality serves as a temporary phase between two stable states, the diasporic condition resists resolution. Diaspora embodies a continuous negotiation of identity, space, and belonging, where individ-



Figure 11.

uals and communities exist in a state of constant “becoming”. It is a condition of perpetual transition: even after generations, diasporic communities may still occupy this space of liminal existence, constantly adapting and shifting between their homeland’s memory and their current environment. This persistent liminality disrupts linear understandings of identity formation and belonging, instead framing them as fluid, hybrid processes. Linear time, as Muñoz (2009) states, is straight time (p. 25). Diasporic communities, even after generations, remain in a state of flux, balancing the memory of a homeland with the realities of their present environment. The diasporic condition can thus be a permanent form of liminality.

This disruption and lack of linearity can be found in the displaying mode of the «Made of Smokeless Fire» exhibition in New Orleans in Figure 11: the framed photos are hanging, with the captions on the back, facing each other, surrounded by white walls with the Mediterranean Sea in the background and Farid’s pictures on it.

Moreover, a very significant symbol of the diasporic North African feeling of in-betweenness is the Mediterranean see. The Mediterranean, both as a geographical space and a cultural symbol, serves as a powerful metaphor for liminality. For (North) African migrants and diasporic individuals, it is a site of crossing, a threshold between worlds, marked by danger, hope, and memory. Indeed, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea is a significant passage in the diasporic return to the homeland and in the migration process from Africa to Europe. Farid’s portraits, set against the backdrop of the Mediterranean, capture this in-betweenness. His childhood image in Figure 1, framed by the sea, becomes a window into the complexities of diasporic and queer identities – a portal that disrupts binaries as public and private, interior and exterior, hollow and shallow.

While liminality often suggests uncertainty and ambiguity, it also holds possibilities for new forms of creativity and adaptation. Diasporic individuals and communities often create new, hybrid cultures, drawing from multiple traditions to form unique



Figure 12. Le Coran de Rizlaine, Paris, 2022.

ways of living. This cultural fluidity can be empowering, as it allows for the reinvention of identity and tradition. In fact, the diasporic in-betweenness fosters the creation of hybrid cultures – reinterpretations of tradition and identity that are neither fully “here” nor “there”. Dr. Dina Georgis, expert in the fields of postcolonial and sexuality studies asserts:

Arab sexualities are in transition; though hard to define, they have an affective life. If we turn our attention to affects and their vicissitudes, we may learn how queer Arabs are negotiating in unexpected ways the interconnectivity of cultures and places. In other words, they are not doomed to two choices: abide by and assimilate to hegemonic modern sensibilities or retreat to a fantasy of static tradition. (Georgis, 2013, p. 237)

From reimagining religious symbols, such as the Qur’an (figure 12), in new cultural frames to generating new artistic, and linguistic forms, the diaspora becomes a space for creativity and resilience. This liminality is what allows diasporic people to create their own spaces of meaning and identity.

2.2. Intersecting Futures: Queer Utopias and the Photographic Liminality of Identity

Liminality, with its emphasis on potentiality and becoming, aligns with José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity. Rejecting linear and “straight” time, queer futurity imagines alternative possibilities for existence and community. Liminality, as a space of paradox and transformation, holds the seeds of utopia – a realm where new identities, relations, and worlds can emerge. This potential is particularly evident in the cultural production of liminal communities. Through art, storytelling, and collective memory, these communities create spaces of meaning that defy normative structures. For Muñoz (2009), utopia allows for the envisioning of spaces free from the limitations of heteronormativity and institutionalized discrimination. He writes: “[U]topia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS



Figure 13. Thierry, Farid's Partner, Saint-Maurice, 2023.



Figure 14. Le MicMan Club, where Farid has met his partner, Paris, 2023.

pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35). The artist embodies this forward-looking spirit, using the power of collective memory to envision futures that acknowledge, protect, and honour queer and racialized bodies. In *Made of Smokeless Fire*, the utopian aspect emerges through the invocation of Farid's past – an homage that critiques present realities by pointing to potential futures where queer identities are heard, seen, celebrated and openly remembered. Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, invites us to look into horizons of being: “[I]ndeed to access queer visibility we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (Muñoz, 2019, p. 22).

This utopian approach underscores Lenain's commitment to “the not-yet-here (future) and the no-longer-conscious (the past)”, situating the series within a vision that is both retrospective and aspirational (Muñoz, 2019, p. 83). This articulation of



From *Made of Smokeless Fire*, by L. Camille Farrah, 2022. (<https://www.camillefarrahlenain.com/mosf>)

queer utopian memory offers a radical departure from present limitations (normativity), “a critique of the present, of what is” by “casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (Muñoz, 2019, p. 35).

“To critique an overarching ‘here and now’ is not to turn one’s face away from the everyday”. Roland Barthes wrote that the mark of the utopian is the quotidian and that everything that is quotidian is utopian (Muñoz, 2019, p. 22). In figure 14, the artist took a picture of the MicMan Club in Le Marais (Paris), which is now permanently closed. It was not only an iconic and welcoming place for the queer community in Paris; but also, the place where Farid and his partner met. The picture of this place holds a meaning beyond the personal, it holds a collective memory, hope and, thus, utopia. In Figure 13, the image suggests nostalgia but also hope: a gay couple that used to be, the picture of Farid, and his partner sitting in a very basic, quotidian setting. In his masterpiece on utopia, Muñoz relates a similar experience and describes it as “a looking back at a no-longer-conscious that provides an affective enclave in the present that staves off the sense of ‘bad feelings’ that mark the affective disjuncture of being queer in straight time” (Muñoz, 2019, p. 24).

Lenain’s work aligns with the sentiments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in his article on queer Muslim futurism, who reports what Jassem Hindi, a Syrian artist based in Berlin, said to him: “futurism should be a collective effort in order for it to be a positive one” (Bhutto, 2018, p. 448). Lenain’s series is not just a solitary act of memory-making; it is an invitation for others to join in the reimagining of queer and racialized futures. The images of Farid and the others within the series create an interconnected web of identities that refuse the isolation often imposed upon queer lives, travelling with images of nature and buildings to observe silence and dive deeper into the queer Muslim and racialized experience. *Made of Smokeless Fire* exemplifies how queer utopian memory can be a form of resistance, a challenge to oppressive narratives, and a bold affirmation of queer existence.

Conclusion

Made of Smokeless Fire is, in Lenain’s words, a love letter to her uncle Farid. The series is also an act of love towards a whole community as it retraces the existence of the forgotten through what has been – the archives -what is – the photographs and reporting of the queer racialized experiences—and what could be – the hope in the words or the omission of it, the interconnectedness despite the solitude, the body recreated in its whole through community. *Made of Smokeless Fire* transcends individ-

ual memory, transforming personal mourning into a shared act of remembrance that is at once intimate and collective. It navigates the complex interplay between futurity and mourning, resistance and loss. By exploring queer Muslim identities, Lenain's work does not merely document these lives; it reimagines them within a framework of hope and continuity, resonating with José Esteban Muñoz's vision of queer futurity. This notion posits queerness as a horizon, a utopian ideal that transcends present suffering to envision a transformative future.

The series turns mourning into a form of resistance, where personal loss becomes a collective call to remembrance and visibility. Lenain's portraits emphasize futurity by creating a visual lexicon that resists erasure, grounding it in both the private archive of Farid and the collective experience of racialized queer bodies. Each photograph is a testament to survival and resilience against the backdrop of societal invisibilization. The imagery asserts a form of visual resistance, reclaiming space for queer identities that have been historically marginalized. The artist thus offers a vision of memory that is both reparative and transformative.

Ultimately, *Made of Smokeless Fire* works on many levels as it bridges these dualities – futurity, utopia and mourning, resistance and loss – by transforming the personal into the political. The interplay between these themes creates a powerful dialectic in Lenain's work. Futurity and utopia offer a vision of what could be, rooted in resistance to the oppressive present. Meanwhile, mourning and loss ground this vision in the reality of what has been endured, and shame becomes a transformative force that is publicly reclaimed and recontextualized as part of a shared identity. Together, these elements form a narrative that honours the past while passionately advocating for a more inclusive and liberated future.

While writing this article, I found out that Lamine (figure 15) has passed. Lenain addressed this tragic event to PetaPixel:



Figure 15. Le pigeon de Lamine, Marseille, 2022.

The day the award was publicly announced on all the social media and websites and platforms and everything, so it was all announced around 9 AM that morning of March 8th. And later that day I was excited to share all this news and hearing all the feedback from people, and it was a moment of celebration and sharing it with the participants of the project. [...] But later that day, around 5 PM, I found out that one of the people that I photographed passed away had passed away that morning. [...] It was a pretty big shock, although I knew this person was suffering so much from all the discrimination that comes with their experience of being Algerian in France and of being an immigrant and of being queer with their family and of questioning their own faith. (Gray, 2024)

The artist updated the series to honour Lamine's memory beside Farid's. In their portrait, Lamine holds a white pigeon and says in their caption:

The pigeons are a gift from my mother because we made peace not long ago. For a while, I was really at odds with my family. My mother started having a lot of health issues, and I decided to sort things out while she's still alive. I don't want her to die in the midst of a conflict, because her death will be a snapshot of that moment in time, frozen for eternity. (Lenain, 2022)

White pigeons, like doves, are a timeless symbol of peace, hope, and freedom. Their significance transcends cultures, embodying endurance in the face of adversity and resistance. In the religious tale of Noah's Ark that can be found in the Bible and the Quran, a dove bearing an olive branch marked the end of the flood, a poignant metaphor for resilience and renewal.

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