

Coming Out à l'oriental: Maghrebi-French Performances of Gender, Sexuality, and Religion

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In this article, I examine issues of gender, sexuality, and religion for North African (Maghrebi)-French men in contemporary France. I introduce performance artist-photographer “2Fik,” one of the Maghrebi-French research subjects from my 2010 fieldwork, and examine excerpts of his particular coming out story to his parents and situate it in relation to recent work on homosexuality in the housing projects of France’s banlieues [suburban neighborhoods] (Chaumont, 2009; Naït-Balk, 2009). The interviewee’s narrative interweaves a variety of discourses and imagery that help distinguish his experience from those found in those publications as well as in recent scholarship on sexuality, citizenship, and transnationalism (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2000; Hayes, 2000; Leap & Boellstorff, 2004; Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000; Provencher, 2007a). I argue that 2Fik’s story and photography provide him a unique voice that draws on feminist and queer perspectives—informed by both reformed Islam and contemporary Western values—to “decline” (Rosello, 1998) and rewrite longstanding stereotypes of Islam in France. In fact, by acting as a “citizen-photographer” (Möller, 2010), 2Fik successfully declines stereotypes including the absent Muslim father, the veiled woman, and the symbolic violence associated

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with heteronormativity and traditional masculinity in Maghrebi-French families.

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My aim in this article is to expand beyond the current scholarship on trans-nationalism, sexuality and citizenship by examining issues of gender, sexuality, and religion for North African (Maghrebi)-French men in contemporary France. To date, the scholarship includes work on same-sex identified men and women in a variety of locales around the globe—Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, North America, and South America (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2000; Hayes, 2000; Leap & Boellstorff, 2004; Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000; Provencher, 2007a). In this article, I build on this research by examining the experience of French citizens of Maghrebi descent, who remain largely invisible therein.

This article is divided into four sections. First, I provide a brief look at two recent publications that have appeared to account for the experience of same-sex identified Maghrebi-French citizens who have grown up in the underprivileged French suburbs known collectively as *la banlieue*. Next, I introduce one Maghrebi-French research subject, performance artist-photographer “2Fik” (pronounced “Toufik”),¹ from my 2010 fieldwork, and situate his story in relation to these other accounts. Then, I examine excerpts of my interview with 2Fik, and in particular his coming out story to his parents. 2Fik’s narrative interweaves a variety of discourses that help distinguish his experience from those in the indicated work on transnationalism, sexuality, and citizenship. I also include and analyze a series of 2Fik’s photographs in order to help contextualize his words and the performative nature of his public identity. Finally, I argue that 2Fik’s story provides a unique voice that draws on feminist and queer perspective, which are informed both by reformed Islam and Western values to “decline” many longstanding stereotypes of Islam in France. These include the absent father, the veiled woman, and the symbolic violence associated with heteronormativity and traditional masculinity in Maghrebi-French families. I borrow Rosello’s (1998) term “declining the stereotype” that she defines as “a way of depriving it [the stereotype] of its harmful potential” (p. 11). This declination actively involves “complicated gestures of rewriting” and “strategies of recontextualizing” (p. 18). Rosello shows us that in order to decline a stereotype, the process involves a “necessary mimetic energy” that still draws on the original stereotype. She writes: “what I call ‘declining’ is an ambiguous gesture of refusal and participation at the same time. The trace left by declining posture is a complex

piece of writing where both the stereotype and its critique cohabit so intimately that no safe barrier can be erected between the two" (p. 13). Hence, as we will see, 2Fik declines some of the stereotypes associated with traditional forms of Islam, and, in the process rewrites them as well as the underlying ideologies of the Muslim family and the notion of Islam on the broader French cultural landscape. It is not my goal to generalize these findings as they relate to gender, sexuality and religion in France for all Maghrebi-French sexual citizens.² Nevertheless, 2Fik's story suggests the potential for new tactics of queer resistance to emerge from within Maghrebi-French cultures.

RECENT WORK ON MAGHREBI-FRENCH SEXUALITIES

As I have written elsewhere, popular news and entertainment magazines and French television have covered stories about Maghrebi-French sexual citizens over the past decade (Provencher, 2007b; 2008). The national gay monthly magazine *Têtu* now includes somewhat regular news stories on these issues,³ and France's cable station Pink TV, for example, broadcasts shows like "Etre gay en banlieue" [Being Gay in the Suburbs]. Nevertheless, very few studies have provided in-depth written accounts of gay and lesbian Maghrebi-French citizens, and those that do tend to highlight the tribulations of these individuals as they confront the violence of the French *banlieue*.

In *Un homo dans la cité*, for example, Naït-Balk (2009) provides the first, book-length, autobiographical account of a self-identified Maghrebi-French gay man who grew up in "la cité" [the projects] of the Parisian suburbs (i.e., Aulnay-sous-Bois). Naït-Balk is the director of the Paris gay soccer team *Paris Foot Gay* and hosts the gay-themed radio show *Homo micro* on *Fréquence Paris Plurielle*, 106.3 FM. His story highlights a very common experience among Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French children who live under the constant surveillance of other family members in *la banlieue*. His book also underscores the importance of *la solidarité du clan* [the solidarity of the family] as a collective unit in *la banlieue*, and points to the ever-present mother who takes care of and controls the children, often in the absence of the father. Naït-Balk eventually leaves *la banlieue*, moves to city-center Paris, and is able to *assumer son homosexualité* [come out], especially when he begins listening to other coming out stories on the gay radio station *Fréquence Gay* and playing soccer with like-minded men. Nevertheless, the reader is struck by a narrative filled with residual shame undergirded by the pressure that comes from being raised in a Muslim tradition where virility, marriage, fatherhood, and the authority of the (eldest) male child reign supreme. Consequently, his narrative largely downplays "pride," or coming out as a gay man in the Paris gay district of the Marais, and often dwells on *la coquille de la honte* [the shell of shame] and his need as a youngster to

raser les murs [stay below the radar] in *la cité*. Naït-Balk also refers to his sexuality as *mon secret* [my secret], *haram* (in Arabic) [sin], and *hcbouma* (in Arabic) [shame]. Moreover, his story includes a very painful but brave admission of the tragic rape he experienced in *la cité* and it is this particular event that captures the attention of the French media when *Un homo dans la cité* hits bookstores.

Chaumont (2009) publishes a similar account in his *Homo Ghetto*, which was published almost simultaneously with Naït-Balk's book. Chaumont provides a journalistic account of approximately 12 gay men and lesbians from various North African and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds (including a chapter on Naït-Balk) who grew up in France's projects. Chaumont is a journalist for two French radio stations- *Beur FM* and *RF1*- and the co-director, with Fadela Amara, of the political group *Ni putes ni soumises* that fights for the voice of Maghrebi-French women in politics and society. He also served as an advisor for Naït-Balk as the latter wrote *Un homo dans la cité*. Like Naït-Balk, Chaumont's snapshot of these individuals underscores the absent father while the mother takes on the role of both parents.⁴ He also draws distinction between the modernity of the city-center (Paris) and its counterpart (la banlieue) where *la surveillance est quotidienne* [surveillance is daily]. Like Naït-Balk, he paints a bleak picture of the projects, which he describes as *nos cités malades* [our ailing projects] and indeed, this prompts many gay and lesbian citizens of the projects to flee. He also highlights the schizophrenic existence or "double life" of these sexual citizens who have been sensationalized accordingly during the past several years in the French media. They supposedly do not fit into either *la banlieue* as homosexuals or into the gay city-center of the Marais as French minorities of color. As we will see in the rest of this article, performance-artist 2Fik also escapes spaces like many of the ones documented in this recent work. At the same time however, his story resists and rewrites many of the stereotypes that have emerged in these recent accounts.

PRESENTING "2FIK": A FOUR-ACT PERFORMANCE

2Fik is a 31-year old French citizenship of Moroccan descent who has lived in France, Morocco, and Canada at different stages in his life. Upon discovering his photography in April 2010, I initially wrote to 2Fik via e-mail to explain my interest in interviewing Maghrebi-French men about their sexuality.⁵ Although 2Fik currently lives and works in Montreal, Canada, he returns to France somewhat regularly to visit his family and this gave us the opportunity to meet during my fieldwork in Paris in June 2010. At the very beginning of our semistructured interview, 2Fik independently divided his life story immediately into four different periods of eight-year segments.

Hence, I divide the paragraphs in this section into four separate “acts” to reflect the manner in which he structured his performance of self.

Act I

Between 1979 when 2Fik was born and until age 8, he lived in the Paris suburbs (Nogent-sur Marne; Grigny) and then city-center Paris with his mother, father, and older brother. His Berber parents had moved to the Paris suburbs from Morocco in 1974 when French president Giscard d’Estaing opened the doors to immigrants. 2Fik’s father, a *boulangier-pâtissier* [baker-pastry chef], opened and ran several bakeries in the suburbs and city-center while 2Fik’s mother raised their two sons. The interviewee does not dwell on this particular eight-year period other than to explain how the family moved several times during this first segment of his life.

Act II

At age 8, 2Fik’s parents decide to move the family to Morocco. He talks about how his mother and father never discussed with him and his brother their plans to move nor gave their sons previous notice: “Un jour, je me lève, je vois un camion bleu et je dis ‘ouai, c’est quoi ça?’ et ‘ben demain, nous partons au Maroc,’ et ‘ah, ok’ et le lendemain réveil à 4 ou 5 heures du matin, les meubles dans le camion, et nous allons de Paris à Casablanca en voiture” [One morning, I get up, I see a blue van and I say “hey, what’s that?” and “well tomorrow we’re leaving for Morocco,” and “oh, ok,” and the next morning wakeup at 4 or 5 a.m., the furniture in the van, and we head from Paris to Casablanca in the car]. 2Fik speaks repeatedly during our interview about the parents’ seemingly impromptu decision to pack up their sons and head to Casablanca. This narrative repetition suggests a lingering preoccupation with parental authority associated with a return to the *bled* [“small town”] in North Africa where surveillance and the symbolic order of gender roles reign supreme (Nait-Balk, 2009). 2Fik talks about how the small-town feel of Morocco made him deeply aware of the distinction drawn between public and private spaces he knew in Paris. Upon arrival in Casablanca, his family lives in a large house with their extended family including grandparents, aunt, uncles, and cousins. 2Fik comments on the strong female presence and surveillance in this setting: “Là-bas, à Casa, je n’avais plus seulement une mère. J’en avais plusieurs” [Over in Casablanca, I didn’t have just one mother. I had several] (Chaudey, 2006, p. 90). He continues: “La famille élargie dans le même bâtiment . . . c’est un espace semi privé semi commun, assez difficile à gérer” [The extended family in the same building . . . it’s a semi-private semi-public space, difficult to manage]. Nevertheless, despite the surveillance and lack of private space, 2Fik is still

able to explore his homosexuality by having a three-year relationship with his younger Moroccan male cousin.

Act III

At the age 15, 2Fik and his brother return to Paris to live on their own and continue their academic pursuits with occasional visits from their parents. Between the ages of 16 and 19, 2Fik lives independently in an apartment provided by his parents because his brother had moved in with a girlfriend. 2Fik comes into his own at school where he becomes a sort of class clown and distinguishes himself from the other students: "J'étais la folle furieuse du lycée, délégué de classe élu tous les ans par des racailles qui, aujourd'hui, ont un casier judiciaire, ou pire, sont en prison!" [I was the crazy queen of the high school, delegated by the class, elected every year by the hoodlums/scum who either have a criminal record or even worse are in prison today!] (Chaudey, 2006, p. 90). Outside of school, he spends a lot of time on the "telephone rose" [telephone sex lines] connecting with other younger and older men and continuing to explore his sexuality.

In 1998, his mother and father make another impromptu decision to return to Paris and 2Fik is required to move back in with them after three years of independence. Nevertheless, he does not relinquish his self-integrity or freedom nor does he shelter his parents from his own belief system and social activities. His father would often ask him when he planned to get married and 2Fik would respond "Je ne compte pas me marier" [I do not plan to get married], a rhetorical strategy he refers to throughout our interview as part of a *coming out à l'oriental* style [an oriental- or Eastern-style coming out]. (I will return to this concept in the next section.) 2Fik also recounts a scene where his father drives him one Sunday evening to the Paris club *Queen* and sees him kiss and greet some drag queen friends. Moreover, 2Fik's first outing happens at age 19 when his parents spot him on TF1 (a major French television station) sitting on a float during his first-ever attendance at Paris's *La Gay Pride*. When he returns home after the broadcast, his father asks "Qu'est-ce que tu faisais là-bas?" [What were you doing there?], and 2Fik responds simply "Mais eux aussi, ils ont des droits, ces gens" [But those folks also have rights].

In 2001, 2Fik is living on his own once again in a small apartment purchased by his father, nevertheless, he speaks of the ever-present "umbilical cord"⁶ in Muslim families and how he goes home on Sundays to do laundry and have dinner with the family. He finally finishes his college degree (BTS), which provides him the opportunity and freedom to make a change in his own life. It is also during this time that 2Fik invents his first female performance character "Alice" (Figure 1) who makes appearances in gay venues throughout Paris.



FIGURE 1 Alice (color figure available online).

Alice becomes the first persona that 2Fik invents that will speak out in a way that is distinct from the “oriental style” he mentioned previously. As 2Fik states: “Tout ce que je n’osais pas faire en homme, je le faisais en Alice . . . Elle parle, Alice. J’en avais marre d’être réduit à un cul ou à une bite” [Everything I didn’t dare to do as a man, I did as Alice . . . Alice speaks. I had had it with being seen sexually only as an ass or a cock] (Chaudey, 2006, p. 90). In fact, Alice is indicative of all of 2Fik’s multifaceted characters that question, blur, and queer stable identities: “Alice est pédé, d’accord. Mais Alice est aussi un travelo, arabe, musulman” [Alice is a queer, ok. But Alice is also a drag queen, an Arab, a Muslim] (p. 90). Interestingly, 2Fik was raised during his early years with a strong female presence, and he eventually turns to a feminine voice through Alice to question gender and religious authority. Indeed, it is this “French-Lebanese” female character with her structured black locks and bright red lipstick who will accompany 2Fik to Montreal, Canada where he will expand his cast into eight characters who become his “surrogate” family while living abroad.

Act IV

In September 2003, at the age of 24, 2Fik decides to leave Paris when he applies for a job in Montreal, where he currently works for a community housing project. He speaks about his boredom during his first winter in Canada and a developing interest in photography because of



FIGURE 2 2Fik's characters (color figure available online).

this. 2Fik constructs several new female and male characters, dresses up as them, and takes pictures of himself in these roles. As seen in Figure 2, this includes a variety of characters from Middle-Eastern, Maghrebi, European, and Canadian backgrounds that simultaneously draw on and parody traditional identities. In clockwise order, starting in the top left, these include: Alice (French Lebanese), Manon (100% pure Quebecker), Benjamin (Arab Quebecker), Fatima (Moroccan), Francine (Anglo-Canadian), Abdel (Moroccan), Sofiane (Moroccan), and Marco (Italo-Moroccan).

These “8 personnages, 8 histoires, 8 facettes” [8 characters, 8 stories, 8 facets], draw on gender, sexual, religious and even national norms in interesting ways. For example, Francine holds a typically French name although she is an Anglo-Canadian, and Fatima exhibits a mischievous smile while being a devout Muslim living in Quebec. During the interview, 2Fik talks

about how creating these characters and taking pictures of them allows him to establish a critical distance from himself and gives him the ability to do a self-psycho-analysis through a critique of his characters. Indeed, each of these eight characters reflects part of 2Fik's own intercultural, hybrid, and flexible self that draws on the use of "flexible language" as we will see below. I borrow this term from Leap (2003) who defines it as: "text-making . . . that draws on a broad accumulation of linguistic and other symbolic resources" (p. 417). Indeed, 2Fik highlighted his own ability to adapt and be flexible in new situations. While living in Casablanca, he learns Arabic in Morocco at eight-years old in a classroom full of three- and four-year olds. He also decides to enroll in a Jewish middle school in Casablanca taught in French with classes offered also in Arabic and English because he wants to eventually return to Paris and knows this will prepare him for attending French university. 2Fik's flexibility is also evident in the way he code-switches constantly between French and English during out interview that is indicative of many Montreal-based bilingual speakers. Finally, he stresses the importance for him to *sortir du soi* [get outside of oneself]. He states: "J'ai pas d'accroche avec les espaces" [I do not identify with any particular places], "Je suis pas fan des règles à suivre" [I am not a fan of following rules], and "la zone du bien-être, c'est plus mon espace physique, c'est plus mon espace social, ça devient moins mon vécu" [the comfort zone is no longer where I belong physically or socially, it becomes less and less my reality]. Indeed, these life experiences and personality traits help 2Fik craft his public personae who embody gendered, sexualized and religious differences, and as we will see below, the way he speaks with his Muslim family about his own adult life and emerging public identity. "Consciously creolized and hybrid subjects may be skeptical about the virtues of creolization and hybridity, but they may also have been forced to developed strategies that people who think of themselves as naturally belonging to the dominant group . . . would be well advised to learn" (Rosello, 1998, p. 10). 2Fik's bicultural status allows him to think critically about Muslim and Maghrebi-French subjectivities and in the process he is able to successfully ". . . steal the negative image and put it to a different use" (p. 41).

Over time, 2Fik begins to share these images with friends and they eventually land him a published interview and a five-page layout of his work back in Paris with *Têtu* magazine in October 2006 (Chaudey, 2006). Upon return to Montreal that same month, 2Fik learns that Christiane Charette, one of the main announcers at *Radio Canada*, has read the *Têtu* article and contacts him for a radio interview, which is eventually broadcasted to over 1.5 million listeners. Indeed, 2Fik's interviews in the media reflect what can be considered the emergence of a successful performance artist in the Francophone world and a public, semi-globalized coming out. He explains how his work begins to move from the underground into the mainstream and how he must begin to manage a public global persona

because of his photography. Concerning digital photography, Möller (2010) argues: “[it] may . . . help marginalized groups of people to participate globally as subjects in the production and dissemination of images at relatively low cost and relatively uncontrolled by governments. These groups may increasingly produce their own images, thus representing themselves rather than being represented by others” (pp. 505–506). 2Fik’s work as a citizen-photographer allows him to participate globally in the reconfiguration of Islam and Maghrebi gender and sexual norms. For this reason, he realizes he cannot allow his social and political artwork to progress without telling his parents about this performance of selfhood.

SPEAKING OF THE VEIL: COMING OUT À L’ORIENTAL

During 2Fik’s return visit to Paris the year following the published article in *Têtu* and the interview on *Radio Canada*, he decides to pack a USB key with a PowerPoint presentation of his photographic work to share with his parents in order to explain his life and emerging success. 2Fik stresses he will adopt an “impromptu” approach similar to that of his parents that marked him as a child. He states:

Example 1

001 Je voulais juste les informer que leur fils fait ça sans leur dire ben
 002 comme eux ils font un truc sans me dire, c’est à moi aussi de faire ce que
 003 je veux. Vous m’avez foutu dans le camion sans me prévenir, laisse-moi
 004 te foutre dans un camion photographique sans te prévenir. Chacun pour
 005 soi et Dieu pour tous . . . HAVE A TASTE OF YOUR OWN MEDICINE⁷, c’est
 006 exactement ce que j’ai fait à mes parents.

001 I simply wanted to inform them what their son is doing without telling
 002 them well like them, they’ll do something without telling me, I can also
 003 do what I want. You threw me in a caravan without warning me, let me
 004 throw you into a photo caravan without warning you. Each one for
 005 himself and God for all . . . HAVE A TASTE OF YOUR OWN MEDICINE,
 006 that’s exactly what I did to my parents.

In this excerpt, 2Fik stresses the importance of his own agency separate from that of his (Muslim) parents and draws on the familiar story of the blue moving van and the family’s move to Casablanca to make his point with his parents. During our interview, he explains the importance of speaking to one’s audience by using terms they understand, especially when speaking about a delicate or taboo issue like homosexuality for a traditional Muslim

family. Nevertheless, this will not entirely be his approach with his parents and during our interview he stresses this when he code switches and says in English “have a taste of your own medicine” (Example 1, line 005). In this manner, 2Fik distances himself linguistically and culturally from his parents in this story by taking a step back and speaking in English and preparing himself to face potential rejection when he speaks to them about foreign concepts (i.e., cross-dressing, gender bending, and critiquing hypocrisy in Islam through performance art). Indeed, he is preparing a “photographic van” that will still shock his parents.

During that memorable evening, 2Fik begins a discussion with his family of his photographic work to which they respond: “On ne savait pas que tu fais de la photo, ils ne comprenaient pas” [We didn’t know you did photography, they didn’t understand]. 2Fik’s family remains largely unaware of his life in Montreal, and the photography is just one part of the larger picture they will have trouble grasping. He believes however that by projecting images of his work on his parents’ computer screen for the entire family to see that there would be no turning back for anyone. He begins by showing them the two photographs (Figures 3 and 4) entitled “ABSOLUT Hatred” and “Adultery.”

Figure 3 depicts Abdel (left) and Sofiane (right), two Moroccan brothers, who argue over dinner while drinking from the bottle marked “ABSOLUT HATRED.” Abdel (age 31), a practicing Muslim, points accusingly and “shoots” his younger brother Sofiane (age 22), the defiant and nonpracticing Muslim and hip-hop aficionado, who sports a bloodstained sweatshirt and offers the middle finger in opposition to his older brother. It is noteworthy that this photograph draws on the stereotype of the older, responsible (tie



FIGURE 3 ABSOLUTE Hatred (color figure available online).



FIGURE 4 Adultery (color figure available online).

wearing) Maghrebi-French male sibling who is charged by the family with watching out for a younger brother; this sibling tension is depicted in such feature-length French films as *Bye-Bye* (1995) and *Vivre me tue* (2002) (Pratt & Provencher, in press). Hence, sibling rivalry and masculine domination are fairly common and well-known universal themes in the Maghrebi-French context and so viewers may recognize this as a somewhat familiar image. In contrast, Figure 4 depicts a highly polemic scene where devout Fatima (left) watches from a shadowy corner the sex scene between her husband Abdel and the Anglo-Canadian Kathryn⁸ who exposes her bare buttocks. 2Fik recounts how his family responds when he shows them these two images:

Example 2

001 Mon frère était là, sa femme, qui est une catholique, noire, de la
 002 Réunion, est là, ma petite sœur, mon père, ma mère, la famille . . .
 003 Poououffffff (explosion). Hiroshima . . . Hiroshima [3 seconds], euh, Je
 004 commence à expliquer les photos, la première photo [Figure 3], c'est les
 005 frères qui s'engueulent Abdel et Sofiane, ok, drôle, fun, intéressant, ils
 006 posent des questions, wow. Deuxième photo, *l'Adultère* [Figure 4]. La

007 scène où il y a Kathryn qui se fait gentiment prendre par Abdel avec
 008 Fatima qui voit la scène . . . gros scandale sur l'image, et pas le message.
 009 J'adore. Mon père qui dit "2Fik pourquoi tu nous montres tes fesses, tu
 010 n'as aucun respect pour nous, neh, neh, neh, neh, neh." Je dis "Papa est-ce
 011 que tu peux regarder le message avant. Avant de réagir à l'image." Il me
 012 dit "ouai, mais tu aurais pu faire un livre." "Ouai, mais tu ne sais pas lire
 013 et avec un livre . . . tu préfères un livre, mais tu ne peux pas faire des
 014 images." Et donc, les photos sont devenues une façon pour moi de faire
 015 un *coming out* continuuel avec mon père . . . et ma mère par rapport à mon
 016 homosexualité surtout mais aussi par rapport au fait que je suis devenu
 017 agnostique parce que j'ai quitté la religion musulmane. Et, et donc à
 018 chaque fois, je me permets de leur rappeler que "oui votre fils ne se
 019 mariera pas, votre fils a des points de vue politiques, votre fils est
 020 devenu militant et vous ferez avec." Et c'est avec la notion là c'est
 021 comme ça que je fais avec les photos avec les parents et avec les gens
 022 du Maroc.

001 My brother was there, his wife who is Catholic, black, from Reunion
 002 was there, my little sister, my father, my mother, the family . . .
 003 Pooouufffffft (explosion). Hiroshima . . . Hiroshima [3 seconds], uh, I start
 004 explaining the photos, the first photo [Figure 3] is the one of the brothers
 005 arguing Abdel and Sofiane, ok, funny, fun, interesting, they ask questions,
 006 wow. Second photo, *Adultery* [Figure 4]. The scene where Kathryn is on
 007 top of Abdel, and Fatima who is watching the scene . . . big scandal
 008 about the image and not the message. I love it. My father says
 009 "2Fik why do you have to show us your buttocks, you have no respect for
 010 nah, nah, nah, nah, nah." I say "Papa could you look at the message first.
 011 Before you react to the image." He says to me "yeah but you could have
 012 written a book." "Yeah, but you do not know how to read but with a
 013 book . . . you prefer a book, but you cannot do photography." And so
 014 photographs have become a means for me, a continual *coming out* with
 015 my father . . . and my mother concerning my homosexuality above all else
 016 but also concerning the fact that I have become agnostic because I have
 017 left the Muslim religion. And, and, so each time, I allow myself the
 018 opportunity to remind them that "yes your son will not get married, your
 019 son has political views, your son has become militant and you'll have to
 020 deal with it." And it's with that notion, it's like that way I proceed with
 021 my parents and with people in Morocco.

In Example 2, 2Fik sets the scene for the listener by describing the Maghrebi familial setting comprised of all family members gathered together, and highlights its somewhat conservative nature by including the description of his sister-in-law, a "Catholic black woman" from France's Reunion Island

(Example 2, line 001). His photography has an explosive effect that takes his family a few seconds to digest, as he highlights the shock with sound effects (Example 2, line 003) and draws an analogy to Hiroshima, which suggests the outbreak of war between his polemic global persona in the Francophone media and the conservative/traditional family unit. While his family is able to laugh and recognize a typical scene of sibling rivalry between Abdel and Sofiane in Figure 3, his father struggles more with the nudity of his son in the feminine role of Kathryn in Figure 4 (Example 2, line 009) and the visibly transgressive sexual practices of the married, practicing Muslim Abdel. 2Fik expresses his pleasure (Example 2, line 008) in giving his parents a dose of their own medicine. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, 2Fik understands this as part of his continual coming out *à l'oriental* to his parents and in particular to his father whom he names several times in his story, and who participates actively as a speaker. In my previous work, I explain how French gay male speakers will declare their same-sex desire to their parents with heteronormative and recognizable first-person sentences such as “Papa, maman, je suis amoureux d'un garçon” [Dad, mom, I'm in love with a guy] (Provencher, 2007a). In contrast, 2Fik's coming out *à l'oriental* involves polemic photographic imagery instead of the spoken work or first-person pronoun “I” that his parents and other Moroccans can recognize as part of their own language and understand. For 2Fik, he considers this visually performative act perhaps the best effective means to come out both as homosexual and agnostic (more on this below).

2Fik continues with what he describes as his coming out *à l'oriental* or an Eastern-style coming out. Once his parents begin to understand his work as a performance artist, 2Fik little by little gains the ability to discuss in greater detail characters like Fatima (Figure 5) with his parents. According to 2Fik's Facebook page,⁹ Fatima (age 22) grew up in a small Moroccan town, and after an arranged marriage to Abdel, finished her university studies before immigrating to Quebec to join Abdel. 2Fik describes her as *curieuse, naïve, de bonne foi et croyante* [curious, naïve, sincere and a practicing Muslim]. Nevertheless, since living in Quebec, she has gained a new sense of the couple, has become friends with Alice and Manon and hence becomes interested in feminism and fashion, and even begins to question her own cultural traditions. This is evident in the visual traits 2Fik gives her: “On la reconnaît à son voile rose et à la curiosité qui pétille dans ses yeux” [You can recognize her by her pink veil and the curiosity that sparkles in her eyes]. Over time, 2Fik familiarizes his parents more and more with his characters and, in the next excerpt, he talks about how his father helps him to go looking for new veils for Fatima.



FIGURE 5 Fatima (color figure available online).

Example 3

001 “Papa, il faut que tu viennes avec moi au Souk, je dois acheter des
 002 voiles pour Fatima.” Et il m’a accompagné. Ma mère et ma sœur aussi.
 003 Et en fait on s’est retrouvés . . . et il y avait même ma cousine, qui était là et
 004 on s’est retrouvés tous ensemble au Souk pendant que moi j’étais en
 005 train de choisir une voile intégrale pour un de mes personnages. Et mon
 006 père qui me dit, “ah non, le noir, c’est trop glauque, prends le bleu c’est
 007 une belle couleur.” Ou bien qu’il me dit “ah ouai, la voile aux carottées,
 008 j’aime bien. Et oui le jaune, j’aime le jaune. C’est une belle couleur ça
 009 pourrait aller pour Fatima.” Ce que j’aime bien dans l’histoire, c’est ça,
 010 c’est burlesque à mourir, quoi, d’une certaine façon. Il se retrouve à
 011 m’aider dans le choix des accessoires pour un personnage féminin, donc
 012 il intègre le fait que son fils se travestisse pour ces photos, donc il
 013 relativise je pense un peu plus la notion de s’habiller en femme donc
 014 pour moi c’est aussi relativiser mon homosexualité. Et ça j’ai l’occasion
 015 de le faire avec lui et je suis content. Voilà. Ou c’est comme la dernière
 016 fois où j’ai dit à mon père, “ouai, j’ai acheté un paire de talons de
 017 Christian La Croix, c’était en réduction” “ah bon, comment tu fais pour
 018 marcher avec?” mon père qui me dit et je dis “c’est dur, mais ça va” et
 019 après on continue à parler de la pluie et le beau temps. C’est d’intégrer
 020 mon homosexualité comme quelque chose qui n’est plus d’exceptionnel
 021 mais qui est de l’ordre du normal. Donc, là mon père, si je dis, “ouai je
 022 suis parti faire une performance où j’ai fait à Nice devant 300

023 personnes,” il dit “ah cool, t’as pas eu trop de mal?” “non ça va” je trouve
 024 ça parfait et c’est ça mon but. C’est que mes parents ne soient plus
 025 choqués par l’idée du déguisement, du travestissement ou par les
 026 photos. A la rigueur, qu’ils soient choqués par le message, ça ne me gêne
 027 pas, on aurait un débat par la suite. Mais, qu’ils ne soient plus choqués
 028 par l’acte parce que le fait d’accepter l’acte de déguisement, l’acte de
 029 travestissement, en homme, en femme, en jeune, en vieux, ou quelque
 030 chose comme ça, c’est déjà un gros pas par rapport à la culture dont ils
 031 viennent.

001 “Papa, you have to come with me to the Souk, I have to busy some
 002 veils for Fatima.” And he went with me. My mother, my sister also. And
 003 in fact we all went . . . and even my female cousin, she was there and we
 004 went all together to the Souk and I was in the process of choosing a
 005 full veil for one of my characters. And my father says to me, “oh no, the
 006 black is too gloomy, take the blue one, it’s a nice color.” Or perhaps he
 007 would say to me, “oh yes, the checkered veil, I really like it. And yes, the
 008 yellow, I like the yellow. That’s really a nice color to go with Fatima.”
 009 What I like in this story, is that, it’s absolutely burlesque, you know
 010 in a certain way. He was there helping me to choose accessories for one
 011 of my feminine characters, so he integrates the fact that his son cross-
 012 dresses for his photos, so he accepts I think a bit more the notion of
 013 dressing as a woman so for me it also a question of gaining insight on my
 014 homosexuality. And then I have the opportunity to do it with him and
 015 I’m happy. *Voilà*. Or it’s like the last time when I said to my father
 016 “yeah, I bought a pair of heels from Christina LaCroix, they were at a
 017 reduced price” “really, how are you able to walk in those things?” he
 018 says to me and I say “it’s hard but it’s ok” and afterward we keep talking
 019 about the rain and the nice weather. It’s about integrating my
 020 homosexuality like something that is no longer exceptional but that
 021 is part of the normal order of things. So, at that point, if I say to my
 022 father, “yeah, I went and performed where I did in Nice in front of
 023 300 people,” he says “oh cool, you didn’t have too much difficulty?” “Non
 024 it’s ok” I think that’s perfect and that’s really my goal. It’s so my parents
 025 are no longer shocked by the idea of disguise, cross-dressing or by the
 026 pictures. At most, they may be shocked by the message, that doesn’t
 027 bother me, we’ll debate it all afterward. But, in the hopes that they will
 028 no longer be shocked by the act because the fact they accept the act of
 029 disguising oneself, the act of cross-dressing, as a man, a woman, a
 030 youngster, an old person, or something like that, that is already a really
 031 big step in relation to the culture they come from.

This story is striking for several reasons. Like in the previous exchange where 2Fik sets a scene where the whole family gathers around the parents’

computer screen, in this latest excerpt, 2Fik underscores how the outing to the Souk becomes an affair for the entire Maghrebi family. Moreover, as in the previous excerpt, where 2Fik highlights the active discussion with his father about posing nude and the image's message, in this current excerpt, we see how his father continues to participate actively in the construction of an evolving father-son relationship. In contrast to my previous research where French sexual citizens come out to their parents and then the topic of sexuality is rarely repeated after the original statement of disclosure, 2Fik's experience illustrates how the Maghrebi speakers (parent and child) successfully continue a dialogue ("un-coming out continuel") and co-construct the son's public persona. In other words, the father cooperates as a co-participant in 2Fik's representation of self. It appears to be an almost equal exchange between 2Fik and his father, including in a public space like the open-air market, where the speakers communicate in a back-and-forth manner in which each one listens and responds to the other's previous statement.

As mentioned above, 2Fik speaks about how doing this type of performance art allows him to establish a critical distance from himself and the ability to do a self-psycho-analysis through a critique of his characters. Indeed, this same vision extends to his father who can do the same in relation to his son's identity and gain a more intimate understanding of his son in the process. Hence, this story of photography and performance art disrupts traditional notions of *filiation* (parent-child relations) in the Maghrebi-French family, and debunks the long-standing stereotype of the absent father mentioned above. 2Fik has a productive relationship with his father that evolves over time and this allows his father to participate as an active agent in this particular story and in his life.

2Fik considers this a highly meaningful exchange where they communicate effectively about a variety of related topics including Fatima, his cross-dressing, and his homosexuality. Moreover, the images and characters provide a backdrop to which his parents can react and a continual exchange or debate can occur. It is also noteworthy that 2Fik returns to his larger message about speaking to his parents about hybridity and queerness when he mentions disguising oneself as "a man, a woman, a youngster, or an older person." He is introducing his parents to his work on cultural hybridity, and engaging them in meaningful ways about his attempts to decline several stereotyped roles in Maghrebi-French families.

It is important to note that 2Fik does not seem himself however as anti-Islam. In contrast, he states: "Je ne critique surtout pas l'islam à travers ces photos. Je critique l'hypocrisie de certaines personnes qui pratiquent mal" [I am certainly not critiquing Islam through these photographs. I criticize the hypocrisy of certain people who practice poorly] (Chaudey, 2006, p. 90). He suggests: "... cette religion doit se moderniser, elle est inadaptée à la société actuelle. Il faut 'updater' le Coran" [... this religion needs to modernize, it is maladapted to the current society. We have to

update the Koran] (Chaudey, 2006, p. 90). At the same time, however, 2Fik's photography and experience with his family allow him to decline stereotypes associated with Muslim families and Islam in France.

Through his performance art, 2Fik begins to provide a modern voice based on an accumulation of flexible language about gender and religion in France. As we learn during the interview, 2Fik has been influenced by the feminist movement in contemporary Quebec including the presence of a strong female boss in his current employment situation. Nevertheless, 2Fik's own sense of femininity and feminism is derived from a set of experiences while growing up among Maghrebi women. For example, as a youngster in Morocco, he was always in the kitchen, surrounded by women and hence he developed a keen sensibility about gender differences. Interestingly, he tends to construct a self-identity in relation and reaction to his own mother who represented a traditional *école de féminité arabo-musulmane* [school of Arab-Muslim femininity], who allowed her husband to make decisions for her, including wearing a veil to her son's wedding. He reacts to this by taking the stance: "je ne suis pas le victime" [I am not a victim]. On a related note, he hopes he will be able to help his younger sister whom he keeps in close watch as she develops into a mature and bi-cultural (i.e., Maghrebi-French) woman. 2Fik wants to provide "backup" to her as she develops by teaching her to be "A BITCH qui bosse plutôt qu'une femme soumise" [A BITCH who works instead of a submissive woman].

Through Fatima, 2Fik is also able to decline and recycle the stereotype of the veiled woman by presenting a curious, sparkly-eyed character that wears a variety of differently colored veils and discovers a new sense of self-expression and femininity. In turn, his parents come to understand his homosexuality through 2Fik's critique of what he sees as the hypocrisy about gender and sexuality in the Muslim faith. As he states:

Example 4

001 . . . au lieu de mettre en avant mon homosexualité, je mets en avant le fait
 002 que l'hypocrisie par la religion n'a pas de sens. Parce que c'est comme ça
 003 que je pense qu'il faut gérer les dossiers. Il faut prendre . . . pour que la
 004 personne comprenne ta situation, il faut que tu prennes ses référents à
 005 elle. Je ne veux pas me balader avec un RAINBOW FLAG . . . personne ne va
 006 le comprendre, "qu'est-ce qu'il fout avec un arc en ciel?" C'est la première
 007 question qu'ils vont se poser. Non, dis-leur que tu ne te marieras pas et
 008 tu n'auras jamais d'enfant que c'est pas ton truc. Là, ils comprennent.
 009 [Laughter] Tu sais ce que je veux dire? Tu ne peux pas communiquer
 010 avec les gens avec tes mots à toi. La communication c'est un message qui
 011 se lance et un message qui revient. Il faut que tu tiennes compte de ton
 012 destinataire. Et c'est là ce que je fais, et je le fais régulièrement avec mes
 013 parents.

001 . . . instead of emphasizing my homosexuality, I emphasize the fact that
002 hypocrisy in this religion makes no sense. Because it's like that that I
003 think you have to balance the books. You have to take . . . in order that the
004 person understand your situation, you have to make use of their own
005 references. I don't want to walk around with a RAINBOW FLAG . . . no one
006 is going to understand, "what in the world is he doing with a rainbow?"
007 That's the first question they're going to ask themselves. No, tell them
008 that you will not get married and you will not have children, it's not your
009 thing. Then they'll understand. [Laughter] You know what I mean? You
010 cannot communicate with people using your own lingo. Communication
011 is a message that is sent and a message that comes back. You have to
012 take account of your listener. And that's what I do and I do that regularly
013 with my parents.

In this final excerpt, 2Fik again uses English (Example 4, line 005) when talking about the rainbow flag, which is a global gay signifier that will be foreign to his parents. Instead of using this particular image, 2Fiks insists on reverting to a language and set of imagery that his parents can understand, and the veil stands in as his rainbow flag throughout his story. This coming out *à l'oriental* or Muslim-style liberation of gender and sexuality is best illustrated in the final image to this article, "Arabesque," where 2Fiks dons a black bikini and pink veil and frolics in the woods while waving a pink-colored, streaming banner (see Figure 6).



FIGURE 6 Arabesque (color figure available online).

This image visually reinforces 2Fik's argument that any sort of communication with his Muslim parents has to occur *on* and *in* their own terms. Moreover, as we have seen throughout this article, his photographs allow him to act as a "citizen-photographer" (Möller, 2010) to affect social change where traditional notions of sexuality and religion are concerned. Möller defines the term "citizen-photographer" as "someone who does not take photographs only for the purpose of personal and private, seemingly unpolitical gratification or solely for commercial purposes. Rather [they], professional and non-professional alike, understand their activities as political acts in search for social change" (p. 501). 2Fik's words and imagery are an excellent example of how the citizen-photographer can help to re-imagine Islam for the Muslim family, for his younger sister, and a new generation of French citizens of Maghrebi descent to come.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined 2Fik's inspiring life story and photography in an attempt to illustrate what he describes as a coming out *à l'oriental*. As we have seen, 2Fik flexibly accumulates an assemblage of linguistic and visual images (Leap, 2003) to explain his sexuality to his parents in terms they understand that do not rely on references to rainbow flags or the closet and to perform those identities. His story is an example of creative work of declination that works "at the site" and "in the textual moment" (p. 417). 2Fik's story declines the stereotypes associated with the veiled woman and the heteronormativity and gender norms of Maghrebi-French families. Moreover, in this particular story, 2Fik's father plays both a supportive and active role in the life of his homosexual Maghrebi-French son. By "declining" these stereotypes, 2Fik provides commentary on and often subverts prevailing ideologies and, in the process, helps to reconstructs Maghrebi-French identities. He also becomes an active agent for change within his family and within the larger Maghrebi-French community. In other words, 2Fik's photography helps "to disclose and denaturalize established positions as well as to change and diversify discursive patterns" (Möller, 2010, p. 513). In sum, 2Fik acts as a citizen-photographer to embrace ambiguity and to question norms of gender, sexual and religion in order to chart new feminist- and queer- paths for the next generation of French citizens of Maghrebi descent.¹⁰

NOTES

1. The interviewee has given the author permission to use his artistic name "2Fik," which is pronounced similarly to his real name.

2. This article is part of a larger book-length project that will examine how Maghrebi-French sexual citizens draw from a variety of Western and non-Western discourses when negotiating their sexuality in a largely secular country like France.

3. See, for example, *Têtu* 154 (April 2010) special issue on “Les Beurs.”

4. Tarr (2005) and Provencher (2008) also note the role of the absent father.

5. I would like to thank Dr. Stephanie Cox for pointing out 2Fik’s work and introducing him to me.

6. Indeed, recent cinema also deals with the longstanding umbilical cord in Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French families. See Malik’s story in Mehdi Ben Attia’s *Le fil* [*The String*] (2010).

7. The use of capital letters represents moments in the French-language interview where the interviewee code switches voluntarily to speak English.

8. Kathryn is the ninth and latest character 2Fik has created. She is Alice’s intern and refuses to speak French.

9. See <http://www.facebook.com/pages/2Fik/164140444028>

10. Visit 2Fik’s Web site at <http://www.2fikornot2fik.com>

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