Parental Silences and Agency:

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According to the “paradigm of gay liberation and emancipation,” the telos of the “coming out teleology” is to verbally disclose one’s (homo) sexuality, which presumes that silence is not agentive.¹ “In this problematic definition of queerness,” Puar argues, “individual agency is legible only as resistance to norms rather than complicity with them, thus equating resistance with agency” (23). Engaging with life history narratives of twelve women who are intimately and sexually involved with other women in contemporary Cairo, I explore the meanings of silences between these women and their parents. I analyze their mothers’ ways of knowing of their intimate relationships without being told, exploring how they show, also non-verbally, their love and acceptance for their daughters. I look at how these women are not willing to sacrifice family ties, standing in contrast to the gay liberation narrative’s insistence that one choose individualism over family. By looking at ways in which “silence is in fact a part of the discourse,” I explore modalities of agency that are non-verbal or ambiguous in nature.² Rather than equate agency with resistance to social norms, with coming and speaking out, I explore the variety of agentive modalities that help fashion and constitute the experiences and subjectivities of women who have intimate relations with women in Cairo, particularly the ways in which silences conform to social norms of modesty about intimate relations outside of marriage. Manalansan argues, “American cultural landscape premised on a specific kind of cultural, physical, and emotional distancing from the family is the same one on which gay identity is founded” (22). In parallel, in Cairo, women’s silences about their relationships with other women also conform to social norms. Taken on their own terms, these silences parochialize normative constructions of homosexuality that view speaking and being “out” as universally desirable and liberating.