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ARAB YOUTH OCCIDENTALISMS: IMAGES OF THE WEST AND THE NEGOTIATION OF GENDER RELATIONS IN SYRIA AND JORDAN

ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in pre-civil war Syria and present day Jordan, I discuss the imageries of the West which young adults in these countries deploy in articulating their views and positions on gender relations. I suggest that Occidentalist images of Western gender relations are evoked both to justify local norms that limit gender interaction and regulate dating, as well as to negotiate them. On one hand, the segment of the youth who emphasize their Muslim identity are re-inventing 'authentic' Islamic traditions by evoking contrasting images of the West as promiscuous and excessively individualistic. On the other hand, those who position themselves as 'open-minded' contest local gender segregation practices by deploying imageries of an idealized Western freedom and modernity. The article contributes to the current discussions on modern Middle Eastern subjectivities by pointing out the Occidentalist imageries that play a role in the local definitions of modernity and tradition which are deployed in subjectivity formation.

Keywords: Occidentalism, the West, Arab youth, gender relations, courtship practices, Middle Eastern subjectivities, cultural authenticity

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the phenomenon of Arab Occidentalism among Syrian and Jordanian young adults. Syria and Jordan are two neighboring, predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim countries in the Middle East. The analysis is primarily based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in pre-civil war Syria, and complemented with more recent observations among local and Syrian youth in Jordan. The main focus of the article is in the images of the 'West', and the way that Arab youth in these countries deploy them in articulating their views and positions on gender relations. I suggest that the images concerning the West are used both to justify local gender related practices, such as gender segregation norms which regulate dating, as well as to negotiate these practices. In Syria and Jordan, gender practices have gone through profound changes during the past few generations due to rapid urbanization and national modernization programs. The ruling regimes in both countries

have effectively provided education for their citizens, including women, who currently comprise around half of university students in these countries, and also participate in the work-force (Wieland 2006, 71; Adely 2012; Jansen 2006). In addition, most young people these days have access to a wide variety of transnational media representations, ranging from Hollywood movies and Egyptian and Turkish soap operas to social media memes and marital counseling TV-shows inspired by the ideology of the Islamic revival.[1] These varied influences have also affected local marriage practices, especially in urban, middle-class contexts. Even though interaction between the sexes is still restricted (to a varying extent, depending on families and communities), during the past half-century it has become common for young people to meet potential marriage partners in public places such as college campuses or at work (Booth 2002), and most of them uphold an ideal of marriage based on conjugal love (Wynn 2003; Barakat 2005; Hoodfar 2009; Inhorn 2007; Schielke 2015). Unlike the traditional men's cafés where women are not welcome, contemporary public places such as shopping malls and Western style coffee shops provide venues for dating.

Yet, regardless of obvious changes in courtship practices and marriage ideals, many young Syrians and Jordanians emphasize the importance of holding onto local traditions (*taqālīd*) when they describe their views on these issues, and they particularly consider marriage practices as a sphere of life unaffected by Westernization.[2] I propose that to understand this discrepancy, it is important to look at the specific way that the concept 'tradition' is used in these local contexts. I take as a starting point the notion that local discourses[3] on cultural authenticity are often more about re-inventing tradition in relation to the Other rather than actually preserving it (Hobsbawm 1992; Carrier

1995; Antoun 2001). As Conklin and I have pointed out (Conklin and Nasser El-Dine 2015), the definition of the 'authentic' Muslim tradition[4] is to a great extent fluid, as it is not dependent on the actual practices of previous generations, but is articulated vis-à-vis the Other, the imagined West (see Said 1979; Massad 2007). This is why it is crucial to take a closer look at the images of the West which are deployed in this process, and this article is dedicated to this task.

I deploy the concept 'Occidentalism' in accordance with Robbert Woltering's (2011: 26) definition of the term as 'both the activity of constructing an image of the West, and the result of this activity (the image itself)'. Occidentalism, like its counterpart Orientalism, is by definition related to processes of Othering, defining images of the self vis-à-vis imagining the Other (Woltering 2011: 26). Hence, like Carrier (1995), I pay special attention to the way that the Occidentalist, 'stylized' images of the West, are related to the local processes of re-inventing tradition. Unlike the definition of Occidentalism by Buruma and Margalit (2004) as hostile stereotypes concerning the West, Occidentalism understood this way does not presume either a negative or positive content of images before empirical analysis. However, as Occidentalism is by definition a process of Othering, the Occidentalist images usually tend to be stereotypical, and they essentialize *cultures*[5] as separate entities (Carrier 1995). My Syrian and Jordanian interlocutors, in their everyday language, commonly use the term '*mujtamaʿ sharqī*' ('Eastern society / culture') to refer to Arab / Muslim societies as a whole versus an implied '*mujtamaʿ gharbī*' ('Western society / culture'). Therefore, the terms 'Arab culture', 'Islamic culture', and 'Oriental culture' are often used interchangeably, and in a similar manner, 'European', 'American'; and 'Western culture'.

According to Edward Said (1979), this manner of conceptualizing Western and Oriental 'cultures' as dichotomous, essentialized wholes dates back to the Orientalist discourse which emanated in the context of 19th and 20th-century European colonialism in the Middle East. In fact, modern European notions of 'culture' and 'civilization' as reified and timeless essences emerged originally in this context. The concepts of 'Western culture' and 'Oriental culture' were defined in terms of the antinomy of 'modernity'/ 'tradition', which Arab intellectuals consequently absorbed into their self-representation of Arab culture (Massad 2007: 1–3).

This article contributes to the previous studies that have addressed Arab Occidentalism by examining everyday articulations of young adults, instead of the discourses of intellectuals (Woltering 2011) or literature, media, and cinema representations (Eid 2015). In addition, it provides new insights by concentrating specifically on images of gender relations in the West. This approach is justified considering how significant a role gender related issues play in contemporary representations of Islamic cultural authenticity. According to Woltering (2011: 159), since the end of the Cold War imageries of the West in Egypt[6] have been increasingly addressed in terms of 'culture', as most of them are produced by Islamist authors concerned with authenticity. Gender and sexuality issues were originally deployed to define the differences between Western culture and Oriental culture in European colonial discourse (Said 1979). The colonial authorities justified their rule by invoking the quest to modernize Arab societies, hence representing local gender segregation practices, such as veiling, as symbols of women's oppression and signs of the backwardness of Muslim culture (Ahmed 1993). Consequently, over time, Islamist thinkers and movements started to oppose 'Western influences' in their

own societies by conversely celebrating and consolidating these practices as the 'authentic traditions' of Muslim culture (Ahmed 1993; Moghadam 2005; Nader 2012; Sadiki 2004). Post-colonial secular nationalist regimes, such as the Ba'ath party in Syria, continued to associate liberal gender policies with modernization and development (Rabo 2005). As a result, in today's Arab societies, the state and other political actors use women as symbols of both modernization and cultural authenticity (Adely 2012; Sparre 2008; Yuval-Davis 1997; Rabo 1996). In Jordan, for example, the ruling royal family has, in its project of building a modern state, struggled to find a balance between presenting itself as 'liberal' to its Western allies, and building the legitimacy of its rule on Islamic / Arab authenticity (Adely 2012; Rabo 1996: 172).

During recent decades, scholars of Islamic studies have produced insightful ethnographic accounts that point out how the concepts of modernity and tradition also play a role in everyday levels subjectivity formation in the Middle East (Deeb 2006; Ozyegin 2015; Kraidy 2005). They have questioned modernity as an exclusively Western phenomenon and the Western, humanist notion of an autonomous, liberal subject as the only valid form of modern subjectivity by paying attention to the formation of *modern Muslim subjectivities* (Jung et al 2014; Mahmood 2005). The focus in these studies has, however, been to a great extent on pious subjectivities among participants of Islamic women's movements which have flourished since the Islamic revival (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Hafez 2011). An exception to this is Gul Ozyegin's (2015) book that examines the production of self among upwardly mobile Turkish young adults through the lenses of love and sexuality. She notes that her interlocutors use the tradition / modernity opposition in

a self-reflexive way, in which 'the conduct and feelings of the self are continuously assessed for their modernity or traditionality' (ibid. 55). Due to the centrality of this dualism in the constitution of their subjectivities, she claims, the tradition / modernity opposition can not be abandoned theoretically or overlooked in analysis. I have come to similar conclusions in my own analysis, and furthermore, I argue that in order to understand the local definitions of modernity and tradition deployed in subjectivity formation, it is insightful to take a closer look at local Occidentalisms, as these are often formed together.

In the following analysis I discuss the Occidentalist imageries of Western gender relations that my Syrian and Jordanian interlocutors deploy to formulate to two distinct modes of subjectivity: the *muḥāfiẓ* (conservative) subject position and the *munfatiḥ* (open-minded, liberal, or tolerant) subject position (first presented in Conklin and Nasser El-Dine 2015). These are the terms young people most commonly use in everyday (and interview) discussions when they position themselves in relation to practices of gender relations, such as the limits of interaction between non-related women and men, and the degree of intimacy in relationships before marriage. The distinction encompasses other related dichotomies, such as 'conservative / liberal' and 'traditional / modern'. The youth who identify as *muḥāfiẓ* emphasize preserving what they define as the authentic local / Islamic traditions[7] regarding gender segregation. Respectively, by positioning oneself as *munfatiḥ*[8] young people challenge these limitations on gender interaction, often by evoking the idea of an idealized Western modernity. I have chosen this distinction instead of, for example, the often used Islamic / secular binary (see Woltering 2011), because even though among

my interlocutors *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity is very often formulated by deploying notions of Islam, the term can also be used to describe persons who are not particularly pious (*multazim dinīyyan*).[9] Furthermore, at least half of those of my interlocutors who position themselves as *munfatiḥ* are also believing Muslims, in addition to some atheists and Christians. It must also be noted that even though the term *muḥāfiẓ* literally refers to *preserving* local / Islamic gender practices, the youth are often, rather, re-inventing these practices in processes that Lara Deeb (2006) calls 'authentication' of Islam.[10] As is common among contemporary, young, middle-class Muslims in Middle Eastern societies, my interlocutors are influenced by the modern formulations of transnational, revivalist Islam, which is not always as conservative as it presents itself; modern Islamic subjectivity formation involves a great deal of individualism and choice (Hasso 2011: 114), and is partly responsible for producing desires that often challenge local power formations, like family hierarchies (ibid.; Rabo 1996: 171).

Even though the *muḥāfiẓ* and *munfatiḥ* subject positions are dichotomous in the sense that they are articulated and only have meaning vis-á-vis each other, by following a poststructuralist approach on subjectivity formation (Moore 1994), I do not view these subject positions as mutually exclusive. In fact, young people themselves also position themselves and others on a continuum between the two poles, and deploy the positions flexibly in their everyday lives according to the situation (see Le Renard 2013; Kraidy 2005: 127). Individual positions can be influenced by one's family background and local community,[11] yet some take a leap to the other extreme, and one's positioning can also change during the life-course. Hence, when I refer in this text to '*muḥāfiẓ* youth' and '*munfatiḥ* youth', I do

not refer to fixed identities, but rather to a situational deployment of the subject position in question.

The following analysis is primarily based on thirteen in-depth interviews I conducted during ethnographic fieldwork in the Syrian cities of Damascus and Latakia between the years 2005–2006. In addition, since 2012 I have conducted one and a half years of fieldwork in the Jordanian capital Amman among local youth (including Jordanians of Palestinian origin)[12] and Syrian youth who are residing in Jordan in exile. My fieldwork in Jordan has concentrated on the way that these youth experience pre-marital and marital relationships, and it has been valuable for the contextualization of this article. My personal position for conducting the fieldwork is that of a half-Finnish, half-Syrian youngish woman.[13] Most of my interlocutors are between the ages of 16 and 35 and mainly of middle-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds, and the majority of them are college educated; they include representatives of different ethnic and religious groups (Kurds, Alawites, Druze, and Christians), although the majority of them are Arab Sunni Muslims. Most of my interlocutors were not yet married when I interviewed them, but many had experience of being in a relationship. Even though there are some societal differences between Syria and Jordan (Rabo 1996), and there is a time gap between the fieldwork periods conducted in these two countries, I find there to be so much resemblance in the discourses concerning the West that it is difficult to point out any distinctive differences according to the context. It must be noted that the current civil war in Syria has affected marriage practices in many ways (for example the cost of marriage has decreased as there are more women than men in the marriage market). Yet, in my recent observations among Syrians who reside abroad in exile, I have not noticed a remarkable shift in the Occidentalist views.

THE WEST AS TOO LIBERAL: MUḤĀFIẒ YOUTH POINTS OF VIEW

As mentioned, regardless of the profound changes in prevalent courtship practices in their urban, middle-class communities, my Syrian and Jordanian *muḥāfiẓ* interlocutors insist on defining the marriage practices which they follow as 'traditional'. By the concept 'traditional marriage' (*zawāj taqlīdī*) they usually refer to a modified version of an arranged marriage, in which a potential couple first gets to know each other under parental supervision, and relatively soon are urged to decide if they want to proceed to making the relationship official by getting engaged. Even though many youth who identify as *muḥāfiẓ* get to know potential marriage partners on their own, and they date in public places before introducing the matter to their parents, they think that there must be limits to this interaction and its primary goal should be marriage (instead of dating for its own sake). Engaged couples can date quite freely in their relatives' homes and public places, yet it is rare that they spend time together privately, and the degree of physical intimacy is limited. For example, kissing is a controversial practice. Even though embracing these types of limitations on gender interaction is a defining factor for their *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity, these youth strongly emphasize the value of marital love and the importance of being allowed to get to know a potential partner well enough before deciding to marry. Hence, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth subtly negotiate the practice of traditional marriage by stretching the concept (Conklin and Nasser El-Dine 2015). The actual historical practice of an arranged marriage, still common when my interlocutors' grandparents' generation was marrying, is nowadays rare in their social surroundings and, in fact, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth describe this practice as a backward

(*mutakhallif*), corrupted custom which is not in accordance with their authenticated Islam (see Le Renard 2013). Instead, they conceptualize their version of love marriage as a *return* to truly Islamic traditions (as in the prevalent Egyptian Islamist discourses on family, see Abu-Lughod 1998). Therefore, Conklin and I have argued that when the *muḥāfiẓ* youth refer to 'local traditions', they often do not refer to the actual practices of previous generations (Conklin and Nasser El-Dine 2015), but to practices which in their view are 'not influenced by the West' (see Carrier 1995). Yet it is easy to see a lot of commonalities between the marriage practices which they support and present-day Euro-American marriage practices, for example the emphasis put on the value of conjugal love. To explain this discrepancy, I will next take a look at what Syrian and Jordanian *muḥāfiẓ* youth view as typical for Western gender relations, and how these images are central in the constitution of the *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity.

When my *muḥāfiẓ* interlocutors compare gender relations in Muslim societies and the West, the main difference for them is that in Muslim societies the contact between the sexes is regulated and premarital relationships are not allowed, while in the West, there are no limitations of this kind, and intimate relationships are not exclusive to the context of marriage. For example, Nawal,[14] a religious 24-year-old Syrian Sunni woman interviewed in Latakia, describes this difference by explaining that, unlike in the West, the relationships in her community[15] begin *after* marriage. Furthermore, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth conceptualize gender relations in Muslim societies and the West as oppositional, based on whether there are sexual relationships outside the context of marriage or not. In their image of Western relationship culture, the aspect of un-restrictedness of premarital relationships is highlighted, and

relationships in the West are described by using a discourse, to which I refer here as the *discourse of the promiscuous West*. The West is often used as synonymous with the complete absence of restrictions on sexual encounters. For example, Zafer[16] (24, male, Syrian, Alawite) describes the definition of the West held by many in his community: 'Western means doing whatever you want, especially in sexual relationships, sexual matters.' In a similar tone, Zidan[17] (27, male, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) summarized the views of his circle of friends, including those who have visited Western countries, by saying: 'There are no morals; the culture is too liberal or even worse than that. What comes to sex, anything that you could want is possible there.'

Very often, my interlocutors articulate the discourse of promiscuous West by deploying a stereotypical image of a *sexually available Western woman*. Sometimes it is even assumed that because there are no sanctions for Western women in engaging in casual sexual encounters, they indeed are potentially willing to have sex with almost any man (a presumption that I, labeled as a Western woman, sometimes encountered when dealing with, for example, the taxi drivers in Amman). For example Wael,[18] a 24-year-old Syrian man who had explicitly Islamist views, said that in the West, 'women walk in the street almost naked' and 'men can satisfy their needs immediately with any girl'. Probably viewing Western women in this way is a result of projecting the interpretation models concerning women's dress and conduct common in their local societies to draw conclusions based on the dress and behavior of Western women. In urban Syria and Jordan, even those women who do not wear a *hijab*, or other form of Islamic dress, rarely show their legs, shoulders or cleavage in public, and when they do, it is generally interpreted as a deliberate expression of being sexually available. A woman who

dresses in such a way, or otherwise does not keep her distance when interacting with men[19] faces the risk of being labeled a *sharmūṭa* (a slut or a prostitute)*,* a woman who has no honor because she has loose morals and exploits her sexuality for material gains.

In addition to the stereotypical image of Western women as sexually available, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth often describe intimate relationships in the West as promiscuous; they assume commitment to a romantic relationship to be rare and infidelity very common. This interpretation of Western relationship culture might be related to the way that in Syria and Jordan intimate relationships are quite sharply divided between serious and casual. *Muḥāfiẓ* youth who identify as pious Muslims, in particular, strongly reject engaging in relationships that are just for having fun, and they consider only those relationships that have a goal of marriage as 'serious'. Therefore, knowing that marriage is insignificant to many Westerners, and they may even live together and have children without marrying, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth tend to assume that most relationships in the West are non-serious. This view of Western gender relations is perhaps also visible in the local deployment of the English terms 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend'; they are usually used to refer specifically to casual relationships, even though the Euro-American usage of the terms signals a level of commitment.

Secondly, conceiving Western relationship culture as promiscuous could be related to different cultural understandings of the concept of jealousy. In addition to being jealous of a romantic partner, the Arabic concept of jealousy (*ghīra*) refers to protecting romantic partners and female relatives—and hence the family honor—by regulating their contact with unrelated men. This refers to protecting these women from actual dangers in public places, but

also the desirous male gaze as such by urging them to conceal their bodies. *Ghīra* is usually viewed as a very positive concept among the *muḥāfiẓ* youth, as it is conceived as a definite indicator of love, including romantic love. Feeling and performing actions related to *ghīra* is hence an elementary feature in the positive self-identification as an *Eastern man*, *rajul sharqī*. The Westerners' lack of interest in limiting their partners' contact with representatives of the opposite sex is often viewed as a lack of *ghīra*, which is also interpreted as indifference towards one's partner's romantic or sexual interaction with others. Some *munfatiḥ* youth, like Malek (25, male, Jordanian of Palestinian origin, atheist) are also influenced by this view of Western relationships. He described his astonishment when his British girlfriend got angry about his dancing with other women in a bar, because he had assumed that Westerners did not feel jealousy.

The *muḥāfiẓ* youth commonly associate sexual liberty in the West with reckless sexual behavior, which they assume to have had numerous negative consequences. As they are aware that sex in the West is not confined to the institution of marriage, they tend to assume that people there are having sex and children 'randomly'. In the next quote, Nadine,[20] a 24-year-old religious Sunni woman from a relatively conservative Palestinian community in Western Amman, criticizes Western relationship culture in this regard:

> The problem from this thing [sex before marriage], a girl who is 16 or 17-years-old, who is sleeping with a man, or maybe her colleagues in a school, and maybe she will become pregnant by mistake. So, what about the baby, he will come to life, and by the way this is a huge problem in America, in the Western, because they have children

and they are not married yet, and maybe they will marry after ten years. Fine, but why, if you love her, you want to commit to her, start it in a good way, correctly, ok. Build a home, raise your family, and have children as you want, but not like this. Like, it's randomly, I feel like their life is random. I mean, I love this man, but I slept with that one, and I don't know whose baby he is, you know. This problem went through my mind many times, and I see that this is the problem with sleeping with so many men, and maybe it's something allowed for them.

Nadine interprets the tendency to delay marriage in the West as avoiding commitment to a serious relationship in favor of having sex with many different people, which results in having children without knowing who their father is. In my interview data, the rupture in the family structure in the West, which this kind of reckless sexual behavior is assumed to have caused, is often seen to have resulted in other negative side effects, such as criminality. Nadine, who refers to Western movies as a source of her conception, explains the entanglement of these phenomena in the following way:

> So you do this thing [random sexual relationships] and you have babies, and many of them don't have a mother or a father, maybe they are just raised up in the streets, and many crimes in the future will happen because he doesn't have anyone… So I don't feel like it's comfortable, that it is right to have many relationships with men, and sleep with whoever you want to, because of many things.

Frances S. Hasso (2011: 107), writing about a caricatured understanding of Western societies held by some people in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, adds other related phenomena to the list of the threats posed by Westernization, such as abortions, unwed pregnant teens, prostitution, rape, murder, theft, pornography, suicide, and lesbian marriages. The association of sexual licentiousness with crimes, and other side-effects such as diseases, is very likely influenced by the discourses of the new generation of Islamists who, according to Joseph A. Massad (2007), were highly influenced by Western medicine and the resurgent Christian fundamentalism in the 1980s. As in the previous quotes, the 'Islamic' solution and 'cure' to all these problems, like the 'Christian' solution offered in the West, is heterosexual marriage (ibid. 206). Wael (24, male, Syrian, Sunni Muslim), a psychology student with pronouncedly Islamist views, deployed this medicalistic framework to describe gender relations in America. He assumed that the boredom caused by the way that 'there are no limitations on fulfilling one's sexual urges' has resulted in the prevalence of pathological states of sexuality, such as homosexuality (which he defines as unnatural) and sexual desire disorders.

Hence, I claim that the images concerning the West play an integral part in the constitution of the *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity. First of all, the negative images of Western sexual liberty and its side-effects which were presented are integral to justifying the gender segregation practices of the authenticated Islam of the *muḥāfiẓ* youth, as the West functions as a warning example of what happens when these practices are abandoned (Nader 2012). In the next quote, Rawda[21] (23, female, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) explicitly expresses the view that if there were any more liberty in gender relations in Syria, it would become like Europe:

Sandra: So you wouldn't even want there to be more freedom for girls?

Rawda: We don't need it. The girls in Syria already have enough of it, even too much. If there were any more of it, our culture would become like it is in Europe. I mean, for example, the girls would not care about honor and they would make mistakes. One might have a relationship without the knowledge of her family, or maybe someone would harass her. Here we worry / care[22] about the girls [*minkhāf ʿalā banāt*] a lot.

In addition, the Occidentalist vocabulary seems to be deeply entangled with conceptualizations of practices that from *muḥāfiẓ* youth points of view are '*too* liberal' (see Le Renard 2013). For example, the categorization of individuals or families as not caring about local norms of morality and honor is often conceptualized by referring to them as being 'like in the Western culture' or 'imitating the West'. These dynamics are visible in the following quote, in which Nadine explains to me the concept of *dīūth*—a man who is completely indifferent regarding the honor of his wife and female relatives, and does not feel jealousy (*ghīra*) even if other men have sex with his wife:

> In this culture [in her middle-class, *muḥāfiẓ* community in Western Amman], they say the guys must have, must be jealous of their mothers, their sisters, so if we see the opposite, they all say, what's wrong with him, he is *dīūth*?… And with the families that they say are open minded and they just act like in Western cultures, maybe they say that he is *dīūth*.

Considering the negative images of Western gender relations that have been discussed, and

hence the stigma that becoming labelled as being 'like in the Western culture' carries for individuals and communities, it becomes clear why the *muḥāfiẓ* youth want to avoid associating the courtship and marriage practices which they promote with Western practices. However, as mentioned, rejecting Western marriage practices does not mean that they oppose love marriages or enhancement of agency in spouse selection. Quite the contrary; when the authentic Muslim marriage is defined based on its differences to Western practices, the images of the West as promiscuous make it possible to frame monogamous marital love as a feature of Islamic traditions (Conklin and Nasser El-Dine 2015). As in the prevalent Egyptian Islamist discourses on family (Abu-Lughod 1998), the origin of this marriage ideal in the West is intentionally 'forgotten'.

COLD WEST / WARM EAST

Criticism of the excessive individualism of the West is a common feature in many versions of Occidentalism in different locations around the world and throughout history (Buruma and Margalit 2004), and it is also one of the most recurring themes in my interlocutors' imageries of the West. Hence, I will next examine how the images of gender relations and sexuality in the West, discussed above, are in many ways related to images concerning the assumed individualism of the West, which is contrasted with the collectivism of Eastern (Arab / Muslim) culture. The discourses present in my data include a dichotomy in which the following intertwined features are associated with each essentialized cultural entity: *Cold West: individualism, reason, materialism, masculine* versus *Warm East: collectivism, emotion, spirituality, feminine*. This dichotomy evidently resembles the Orientalist discourse, in which the West is represented

as superior as it is associated with features such as reason, development, masculinity, civilization, and agency, while Oriental culture is presented as inferior, representing irrationality, spirituality, backwardness, femininity, biological reproduction, and passivity (Said 1979; see Fanon 1986). However, in the dichotomy of Cold West / Warm East as my interlocutors deploy it, the value hierarchy of the Orientalist discourse is flipped upside down, as the features of a Warm East are associated with positive values and connotations, and the features of a Cold West with corresponding negative connotations. I refer to this dichotomy with the terms Cold West and Warm East, as the other elements in the dichotomy are connected to each other by associations with warm social relations in the East and cold social relations in the West.[23]

To elaborate on the dichotomy of emotion / reason, it is illuminating to look at the everyday usage of Arabic concepts *qalb* (heart) and *ʿaql* (mind, reason, rationality) (see Abu-Lughod 1986). When my interlocutors reflect on their everyday actions and decision-making, they consider it necessary to find a balance between these two. For example, even though in today's Arab societies romantic love is usually framed as a positive affective force in the context of marriage, should a person fall in love so passionately that he/she ends up losing *ʿaql*, it becomes a destructive force that threatens social values (see also Abu-Lughod 1986; Hoodfar 2009; Schielke 2015). In this regard, my interlocutors often criticize Western culture for overtly emphasizing reason at the cost of emotions. Zafer (24, male, Syrian, Alawite) spells out this view, and describes love as rare in Europe:[24]

For me, love is something rare in Europe. Love means emotions… and in Europe, not in all Western civilization, in Europe, they are more rational than emotional. They like to use their mind more than emotions.

In their everyday interactions my interlocutors celebrate being affectionate (*ʿāṭifī*) / using *qalb* and love (*ḥubb*) beyond romance, especially in family and kin relations as well as between friends. Affectionate expressions of longing towards family members and friends are common among males as well as females. A phone call or a Facebook message often starts with the phrase 'I miss you'. My interlocutors often frame this affectionateness, at least in the presence of a 'Westerner' such as myself, proudly as a *sharqī* (Eastern) quality. Indeed, the frequency of interaction with family and friends is quite intense in most people's lives. I have also noticed that in the local understanding of love and affection, the performative aspects of these emotions is emphasized; what one feels towards others is necessarily represented by one's actions. First of all, caring for someone causes longing and an impulse to contact them. For example Hala[25] (22, female, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) said: 'When I have a baby, I can't be without him because I love him very much, so when he is a teenager or adult, I need to see him every day, every day, every day.' In the next quote she expresses her concern about some Western practices which she sees as results of a lack of connection between family members:

Hala: Here in Syria the family has a very special character…but in Europe, when you will be maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, you will move into your own apartment, and live apart from your mother, father and sister, there is no…

Sandra: Connection?

Hala: Connection, yes. But here you are all the time with your family. When you have a job, you can leave your family, but every day you call them and see them. And when you are married, every day you call your mother and father, and see your family. But in Europe no, there is a lot of work maybe, am I right?

It can well be true that family relations are indeed upheld more intensively in Arab societies (Joseph 1999). However, in the Cold / Warm discourse, as typical in processes of Othering, the difference between self and other is heightened (Carrier 1995: 8) so that the downsides of Western individualism become exaggerated. For my interlocutors, the expression of having a *good heart* (*qalbuhu ṭaiyyib*) refers to a capacity to do things for the sake of one's loved ones, and they equate the intensity of love with the willingness to sacrifice for them. Western people are assumed to be prone to selfishness in light of the way that individuals in Eastern cultures prioritize their loved ones (see Hasso 2011: 107). The assumed promiscuous character of Western relationships is often addressed within this framework. For example, Dorota[26] (24, female, Syrian, Alawite) explains the prevalence of divorce in the West by assuming that Westerners tend only to think of themselves at the expense of their family:

> In the West, most people care most of all about themselves. They think, 'Why should I care if I can no longer live with my spouse?' They leave him or her even if they have two or three children. Here people don't do that; they think about their children before they consider a divorce. This is one of the differences between these cultures.

Dorota also assumes that Westerners have a general tendency to jump from one relationship to another instead of valuing commitment to one serious relationship. The explanation which she gives for this in the next quote is also framed in terms of the imagery of the Cold West. In her view, people in the West commonly suffer from an emotional void which is caused by the divorce of their parents. Therefore, while desperately seeking intimacy, they end up with a partner who is not right for them. This results in a vicious cycle, in which promiscuity causes an emotional void, which in turn causes promiscuity:

> If one of the parents leaves, the children are deprived of some things, like tenderness. This emotional void can cause problems if, for example, they want to find someone because of that. Boys want a girlfriend by any means, even if they are not in love, because they feel like something is missing; they need intimacy. This is happening a lot in the West. People get married and divorce because of this absence of intimacy. They have this emotional void, because they didn't have a mother or a father, and they are looking for someone who could fill it. But this person might not be the right one for them, because they are just looking for intimacy on any terms. This can cause conflicts, if they end up with someone who is not a good match for them. These couples will also have children and then get divorced, and their children will do the same.

According to Riffat Hassan (2005: 199), 'modernity' is in Middle Eastern discourses often conceptually divided into 'modernization' (associated with science, technology and material progress) and 'Westernization' (associated with

promiscuity and a variety of social problems such as deserted children and misuse of drugs and alcohol). Modernization is considered a positive phenomenon, while Westernization is conceived as a threat. A similar distinction is present in the discourses of my young interlocutors. They admire Western societies' accomplishments in the spheres of science, technology, and material progress. In addition, they often mention a dedication to work as a positive feature of Westerners. However, these positive features are often seen as one of the reasons for the 'coldness' of social relations in the West. In a sense, the Cold / Warm dichotomy functions like a scale: possession of the 'cold' features (even if they are positive as such) reduces the 'warm' features to a corresponding degree (see Fanon 1986: 127). Excessive dedication to gaining material benefits is assumed to have a negative effect on social relationships. For example, Hala concluded her previously presented concern for loose family relations in the West by wondering if it is because 'there is a lot of work'.

My *muḥāfiz* interlocutors sometimes associate work as the pursuit of materialist goals, together with other features of the Cold West, with 'too liberal' gender practices. In the next quote, Rawda associates Westerners' drive to work with a hedonistic lifestyle which she equates with everything being 'just about sex'. Here again, an individualistic lifestyle, in which sex is the only goal, per se, and therefore practiced randomly, is contrasted with family values:

> They do not care about building a family, having children, and raising them, about teaching them what is right and what is wrong. They just want to be free, to live, to work, to make money, to do whatever is fun, whatever they want. How should I say it; for them everything is about sex.

Here in our culture sex is not the most important thing, in the sense that you do whatever you happen to do and feel like doing, because the institution of marriage is there for this purpose.

This tendency to associate work with an individualistic, hedonistic, and materialistic lifestyle could be an implicit reference specifically to women who work. In present-day Syria and Jordan, a woman's income is often considered as something that belongs to her personally, as the men in the family are, in the ideal case, solely responsible for supporting the household (Adely 2012). Therefore, a woman's earnings are often viewed as extra income for personal entertainment and vanity products, and perhaps this implicit assumption is projected onto the imagery concerning the West, where it is more common for women to work.

The participation of women in the public sphere is an issue which activates the final oppositional category in the dichotomy: *masculinity* versus *femininity*. In the next quote, Zidan (27, male, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) describes the common view of European women in his social circles.

> The image of the European women is that they are elegant, beautiful and free. They have the intellect and the capacity to participate in decision-making with men. This applies both to the history and the decisions concerning the future of the state. They are influential in politics and in the public sphere. They are the total opposite of Arab women … They say about European women that they are not interested in dedicating themselves to social goals. By this they mean, for example, that the Arab woman loves her children and dedicates all her time to them. She stays up all night for

her children, while the European woman does not. Her own interests and stylishness are more important than the children.

In the quote, Western women are described as possessing agency and *ʿaql* (mind, reason, rationality); they are free and have the capacity to participate in the public sphere, even in high-level decision-making. But this is seen to come at the cost of feminine features. Even though Western women are described as beautiful and elegant, they lack other female characteristics. Indeed, compared to Arab women, they are bad mothers, as they are selfish and put their own interests before those of their children. Once again, the possession of *ʿaql* results in the lack of *qalb* (heart). Paradoxically, however, Western women represent masculine features and feminine beauty at the same time. Perhaps this can also be explained by the logic of Cold / Warm dichotomy: according to Zidan, when he continues his explanation, taking care of one's appearance is associated with individualism, as it is considered to come at the cost of caring for one's children.

> This is why it is said that those married, Syrian women who care for their appearance and stylishness are like European women, or that they imitate them. This is because it is considered that caring for one's appearance is accomplished at the cost of the wellbeing of the children.

As previously discussed, the concept of *qalb* refers both to being affectionate and willing to sacrifice oneself for the sake of one's loved ones. Western women are described as possessing more *ʿaql* than *qalb*, which makes them less capable of mothering, but more capable of agency[27] than their antonym, the Arab woman. Correspondingly, as they are defined as more

emotional than rational, Arab women are sometimes considered to lack the capacity to act independently, which can be used as a justification for restricting their autonomy in public places (see Dahlgren 2004: 135). Rawda presents this argument in the following way:

> Sandra: Do girls have problems with the community controlling them too much?
> Rawda: It is only natural, because girls in general act on their impulses, without thinking, because they are emotional by nature. *Allah* created them to be emotional, and that is why they do not necessarily use their minds (*ʿaql*) a lot. It is secondary to what they feel. They act on their emotions, not on their reason. That is why people here try to control girls, to keep them at their home as much as possible, so that they do not do something that they must regret later…This is what they think about girls, although it is not true of all girls.

Thus, the *ʿaql*, which Western women are described to posses, is a requirement for women's survival in public places, but gaining *ʿaql* also results in losing *qalb* and other feminine features to a corresponding degree (see Fanon 1986: 127). These discourses of my interlocutors resemble a logic that Islamic fundamentalists use in their representations of women's emancipation, which according to them leads not only to promiscuity, but also to women losing their femininity (see Hasso 2011: 129). Barbara Stowasser summarizes Islamic fundamentalists' view of women's emancipation in the following way:

> Women's emancipation is a deviation borrowed from the materialist West where its features are adultery, illegitimate children, venereal disease, and women so

hardened by professional competitiveness that their reproductive organs have gone into a state of recession where they are unable to conceive and have turned into *al-jins al-thalith*, 'the third sex'. (Stowasser 1993: 21)

As demonstrated in the discussion above, the discourse of the Cold West / Warm East and the discourse of promiscuous West overlap in many ways. The identification as an affectionate *sharqī*-person is thus entangled with *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity. My *muḥāfiẓ* Muslim interlocutors also regard the Islamic prohibition of pre- and extramarital relationships as positive from the point of view of protecting collectivist family values by preventing 'Western influences' in gender relations. Nawal (24, female, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) put it this way:

> Marriage in our culture is sacred. There are no relationships outside this frame. This is what makes the family more intact than in other places … This thing protects the family compared to a situation where there are many relationships, many possible father candidates.

Moreover, the spiritual dimensions of Islam as such are sometimes considered to enforce the Warm tendencies in social relations directly, motivating people to care for others and help them. Wael (24, male, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) said:

> Religion boosts our spiritual and emotional side; it makes us more emotional and caring of each other. If we throw away religion, people will just think about their own needs and goals, and they are left on their own; no-one will help others.

After having discussed all these associations that Western gender relations have in the discourses of *muḥāfiẓ* youth, it is easy to understand why they view Westernization as a threat. In fact, most of the *munfatiḥ* youth shared the view of Western social relations as Cold. Yet their discourses concerning Western gender relations are quite opposite to the discourses of *muḥāfiẓ* youth, as will be discussed next.

EMBRACING WESTERN LIBERTY: MUNFATIḤ YOUTH POINTS OF VIEW

Liberal Middle Eastern subjectivities are not covered in recent studies as much as the Islamic ones (Jung et al. 2014); yet, as the ideals of Islamic cultural authenticity and positive identifications as *sharqī* are deployed in the everyday formation of subjectivities, so are concepts such as modernity (Ozyegin 2015, 55) and idealized notions of the West. As discussed, *muḥāfiẓ* subjectivity among my interlocutors is constructed on the basis of holding onto authentic Islamic traditions, which by definition implies opposing Western liberty in gender relations. Identifying as *munfatiḥ* (open-minded, liberal, or tolerant), however, entails explicit questioning of local traditional practices of gender segregation, usually by implicitly or explicitly deploying idealized imageries of Western liberty. The term *munfatiḥ*, or its most common English translation 'open-minded', is used in Syrian and Jordanian everyday language to refer to individuals and life-styles that are more liberal than is commonly accepted in their local societies, and these are often explicitly associated with Western practices (see Le Renard 2013). For example, Nayif (22, male, Syrian, from a Sunni Muslim family, but personally an atheist) described his ex-girlfriend's parents, who did not make an issue out of co-habiting

before marriage, as *munfatiḥ*, and associated it with the fact that they had been living abroad in Western countries. As mentioned earlier, positioning oneself (or being positioned by others) as *muḥāfiẓ* or *munfatiḥ*, is a situational position rather than a fixed one. For example, some youth view themselves as *munfatiḥ* as they are against other limitations to pre-marital relationships, but *muḥāfiẓ* in the sense that they consider premarital sex to be against their principles. Sexual relationships and co-habiting before marriage are conceptualized as extremely *munfatiḥ*, and especially women who engage in these practices are clearly a minority even in the big cities where I conducted my fieldwork.

The *munfatiḥ* youth—just like the *muḥāfiẓ* youth—also commonly emphasize the values of love marriage and securing an intact family in justifying their lifestyle choices. From their point of view however, limitations concerning gender interaction impede finding true love, which they consider to have negative consequences for harmonious family life. Unlike the *muḥāfiẓ* youth, they view the West as a place where romantic relationships flourish as they are not complicated by traditional customs and mind-sets. Common local framings of pre-marital intimate encounters are challenged by attaching moral value to genuine romantic love. For example, Hala (22, female, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) downplayed the interpretation that most people in her society would make about her sharing physical intimacy with her boyfriend by saying, 'The others call me a bitch, but I am not a bitch, I am doing this with someone I love.' In addition, the *munfatiḥ* youth associate Western gender relations with positive features of idealized modernity, such as freedom, independence, and personal growth. As in the West it is possible for both women and men to gain experience from different spheres of life, including gender relations, which represent

opportunities for self-expression and self-improvement. In the next quote, Hala associates European freedom, which allows people to learn from relationships and sex, with education and having a strong personality:

> In Europe, there are no problems in sex and relationships between girls and boys … In Europe [people have a] very good personality, strong and educated. There is no education here. In Europe … you can do whatever you want, maybe in a bad way, maybe in a good way. But when you behave in a very, very, very bad way, you teach yourself. You will learn, but here you can't learn anything, you will be a very foolish person. I don't have any experience from life. When you marry someone, you don't have any experience, because you are always in your house. You can't talk to boys, just to girls. You don't have any experience, maybe in sex, maybe in love, maybe in anything.

The *munfatiḥ* youth also sometimes associate their notion of Western-type liberty, which enables an independent lifestyle and gaining life-experience, with adulthood and maturity, and *ʿaql* (mind, reason, rationality) as a positive feature. This is visible especially in the images of Western women, who, compared to Arab women, are not under the control of their families. For example, Daniel[28] (23, male, Syrian, Christian) questions associating the liberal sexual behavior of Western women with loose morals, and instead sees it as related to the way that they are more like 'adults' compared to Arab women, because they are more independent and responsible for their own lives in general:

> Because they are more free, they are closer to be women than girls…like the girl in Finland, she is like a woman, she is

responsible for her life for a long time, she is more free. She had to think about, like she is more independent. The Syrian girl, she spends her whole life before marriage in her parents' house… so she is not that free, she is still under the control more than the girl in the West. That's why the foreigners are, like it's easier to have a relationship more than the Syrian girls; not because they are sluts or they are bitches or they want sex at every moment, this is not true.

These positive imageries of Western liberty clearly offer a powerful alternative ideological framework to traditional honor conceptions in negotiating the limitations of pre-marital intimate encounters. Projecting identifications as 'open-minded' versus *rajul sharqī* (Eastern man) can also be deployed to negotiate the limits of *ghīra* (jealousy) within a relationship. Sometimes women who would like their partner to be less 'protective' and controlling of their interaction with other men are explicitly urging him to be 'open-minded', hence framing the jealous behavior as *mutakhallif*, the opposite of modern. On the other hand, some of my interlocutors expressed their concern about the selective deployment of a fake open-minded subject position; some men, in their view, just pretend to be open-minded to form relationships with Western women or local *munfatiḥ* women, while deep down they actually are '*sharqī* men', who do not really respect these women and secretly judge them immoral.

The imageries of the West that the *munfatiḥ* youth deploy in their negotiation of courtship practices are perhaps so evocative because they echo the features of modernity already present in the Orientalist discourse (as depicted by Said 1979). The West for them represents agency, freedom, reason, maturity, and development.

Yet discussions with these youth sometimes make me—as an anthropologist who has internalized Said's criticism of Orientalism—slightly uncomfortable, as they also tend to refer to Arab / Muslim culture as synonymous with backward traditions that oppress women, often using quite harsh words. Zafer (24, male, Syrian) for example associated challenging traditional marriage practices with 'using one's brain' and 'becoming more civilized'. Moreover, the *munfatiḥ* youth often express an assumption that Middle Eastern societies can only develop if Muslim women are first liberated from their 'culture' (Abu-Lughod 2013; Ahmed 1993). In fact, many *munfatiḥ* youth associate Western-type liberty in gender relations directly to the progress of society in general. For example, Zidan (27, male, Syrian, Sunni Muslim) assumed that the European society became materially and intellectually productive after premarital sex was no longer prohibited, because instead of trying to figure out how to satisfy their sexual needs, people started to channel their energy towards 'scientific research and thinking' and 'developing industrial processes'. Likewise, Ajar,[29] a 24-year-old Syrian Kurdish man, thought that for Syrian society to develop like the Western societies did earlier (see Hall 1999), the change has to begin with the women. Therefore, according to him, some women have to sacrifice themselves and take on the role of the 'bitch' in the community:

> We need enough time to change these thoughts. Some girls in this society should be bitches … but we have to do that to change the mind [mentality] of those people … Yes it is very necessary girls should take their freedom strongly, I don't know how to express, some girls have to do that … should be killed [laughing, refers to honor-killings] yeah, to change our life,

to change our society. Because I believe, Western people did that, maybe for how many years [ago], but they did that, to change their society, to change their mind [mentality], because the body is not the problem, the problem is the mind.

According to Massad (2007: 194), the Middle Eastern debates concerning sexual liberation or repression are a matter of 'national, cultural, and religious identities—in short […] civilization *tout court*'. Indeed, the *munfatiḥ* youth advocate sexual liberation by embracing Western civilization with its social, intellectual, and material accomplishments, thereby extending the reach of secular Middle Eastern state discourses that promote modernization by empowering women (Rabo 1996; Sparre 2008). In comparison, the *muḥāfiẓ* youth evoke Islamic authenticity just as the Syrian and Jordanian state discourses also selectively do (see Rabo 1996; Sparre 2008; Adely 2012). They demonize Western sexual liberty by associating it with negative, pathological side-effects for society at large, such as rupture in the family structure and prevalence of criminality.

CONCLUSIONS

Edward Said has famously claimed that the Orientalist discourse is hegemonic, which implies that Arabs themselves use it to conceptualize both their own culture and the West, and that it is deployed even in discourses which explicitly oppose the West. Said has thus been criticized for discursive determinism and downplaying the agency of the subalterns in formulating their own selves and the Other (Woltering 2011). However, in light of the analysis presented in this article, Said's claim seems valid to a certain extent. Even though the ideas originally presented in European colonial

discourse have certainly been filtered since then by, for example, Arab nationalist state discourses, revivalist Islamic discourses, and the presence of Western media, Eastern and Western cultures tend to be essentialized in everyday articulations by attaching to them similar features as in Said's depiction of the Orientalist discourse. Yet, in my view, accepting that contemporary Occidentalist imageries have a history does not need to be interpreted as lack of agency on the part of the people who deploy them. Instead, it is important to look more closely at how concepts such as 'tradition', 'modernity', 'Muslim culture', and 'Western culture' are defined and creatively used in the everyday to produce multiple possible identifications and negotiations of local practices.

According to Massad (2007: 193), modern Islamist discourses have successfully set the terms of the debate on gender relations in the Middle East on the axis of Western licentiousness versus adherence to 'true' Islam. Even though my analysis shows that this is true to some extent, it also demonstrates that this does not prevent the negotiation of local gender practices, even among the *muḥāfiẓ* youth. As Hasso (2011) has suggested, undesired and threatening changes in local gender practices are often rejected by conceptualizing them as 'Westernization'. Yet, I would add, the desired changes, such as the adoption of love marriages, can be domesticated by conceptualizing them as a return to 'authentic Islamic traditions'. It is interesting as such, that the originally European ideals concerning marital love (Giddens 1992) are domesticated by deploying the same modern Islamist discourses which, on the surface, demonize Western influences (Abu-Lughod 1998). Even though I have pointed out the similarities in the views of the *muḥāfiẓ* youth and Islamist discourses, I would still like to emphasize the creativity of the youth

in deploying these discourses for their own goals in the negotiation of everyday practices, and also the plurality of the interpretations of religion (Hasso 2011). Similarly, by discussing the resemblances between the views of the *munfatiḥ* youth and the Orientalist discourse, I do not want to represent them as dupes of the colonizers. As much as the Orientalist discourse needs to be challenged, the idealized stereotypical formulations of Western culture can also function as a tool of social criticism of local societies (Chen 1995), and as a positive and powerful resource for radically negotiating local practices by offering a positive identification for liberal youth. Instead of perceiving themselves as immoral (as their local community would portray them), they can present an aura of glorious modernity.

As important as it is to dismantle the essentialized concepts of 'Arab / Muslim culture' and 'Western culture'—to 'write against culture', as Lila Abu-Lughod (1993) puts it—I hope this analysis has shown that this can also be done by investigating the everyday articulations of these concepts. Even though the discourses of Syrian and Jordanian youth may at first seem to reinforce a static understanding of cultures, the way that these definitions of cultures are fixed only on the surface, and can be selectively deployed in negotiating local practices, should be further explored. In addition to deconstructing the Western liberal notion of subjectivity by investigating the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities (Mahmood 2005), I also propose further exploration of liberal Middle Eastern subjectivities, and the deployment of a caricatured liberal modern subject in non-Western contexts.

NOTES

1 Since the late 1970s the transnational discourses inspired by the Islamic Revival have gained more influence throughout Arab societies, and the role of Islam as an important social and ideological force has been expanding in Syria and Jordan as well (Rabo 1996; Sparre 2008).

2 For example, when I asked Manal (24, female, Syrian, Alawite), who was at the time dating a man she was planning to marry, if the West has impacted marriage practices in her culture, she answered: 'No, because we have our traditions and we must follow these traditions, but the impact from Europe can be seen in the clothes, the fashion, in décor, many things, but not in marriage.'

3 By the term 'discourse' I refer to a relatively stable way of organizing and producing meanings concerning a certain aspect of reality. In poststructuralist theory, discourses are understood to construct social reality rather than to reflect it (e.g., Moore 1994). In this article I analyze the discourses present in my transcribed interview data, as well as those produced in everyday situations and discussions with my interlocutors.

4 'The authentic Muslim tradition' is a theoretical concept rather than a term that my interlocutors use themselves. It evokes a distinction not only to the West, but also to those local practices and religious beliefs that have been transmitted from generation to generation but have abandoned the *true* meaning of Islam (see Deeb 2006, 20).

5 As this article is specifically about the *conceptions* concerning 'Western culture' and 'Arab / Muslim culture', I therefore always refer to them as discursively constructed ideas instead of actual cultural entities.

6 Egypt is the most influential producer of representations in the transnational Arab media.

7 My interlocutors often refer to local and Islamic practices interchangeably.

8 Even though the term is used mainly in the context of gender relations, it also refers to a tolerant attitude towards different religions and lifestyles.

9 In addition, some of my Alawite interlocutors sometimes deployed the *muḥāfiẓ* position, even though the position of Alawites as a sect belonging to Islam is controversial. Moreover, even though I did not have any *muḥāfiẓ* Christian interlocutors, I have heard my other interlocutors label some of their Christian friends as *muḥāfiẓ*.

10 According to Deeb (2006: 20), the authentication of Islam is 'a process by which those interpretations of Islam that are considered most trustworthy and legitimate are revealed'.

11 It should also be noted that the ethnic or religious background does not define the subject positions one deploys. For example, even though among my interlocutors, the youth from Arab Sunni Muslim background identify as *muḥāfiẓ* more often than the youth from other religious backgrounds, some of the Sunni youth identify as extremely *munfatiḥ*.

12 The majority of Jordan's inhabitants are of Palestinian origin. In this text I follow the self-categorization of my interlocutors in this regard, and refer to those who identified as 'Palestinians' as 'Jordanians of Palestinian origin', even if they are born in Jordan and hold Jordanian citizenship.

13 Regardless of my 'roots' in Syria, I was born and grew up in Finland, and my father did not teach me much about Syrian culture. I went to Syria for first time in 2003 when I was already a young adult. Then I finally got to know my Syrian relatives and started to learn Arabic. Therefore, I have an outsider's position when studying Arab cultures, and I am also usually positioned as a Westerner by my interlocutors. Nevertheless, living with my relatives in Syria required me to embody the role of a female family member in an ordinary Sunni Muslim family, which has granted me some special insight into local lifestyle. Also, because of being half-Arab, some interlocutors regard me as someone who is more likely to have a sympathetic attitude towards Arabs and Muslims than an 'average' Westerner.

14 Interview with Nawal is translated from Arabic.

15 My interlocutors often refer to their local communities as representing larger-scale Muslim societies. Regardless of the great variation in practices in different Muslim communities, and differing definitions of Islam for individual Muslims, what is often crucial for the way that Muslims themselves conceptualize Islam is that there is only *one Islam* common to all Muslims (Mandaville 2001: 55).

16 Interview with Zafer was conducted in English.

17 Interview with Zidan is translated from Arabic.

18 Interview with Wael is translated from Arabic.

19 In many *muḥāfiẓ* communities in Syria and Jordan, this even includes being too friendly by smiling or chatting with men more than necessary.

20 Interview with Nadine was conducted in English.

21 Interview with Rawda is translated from Arabic.

22 The practice of controlling young women's interaction with men is here conceptualized as worrying and caring about them, as the Arabic expression Rawda uses (*minkhāf ʿalā banāt*) refers to both.

23 The terms 'cold' and 'warm' are sometimes also directly used to describe social relations and individuals in these cultures. For example, Ajar (24, male, Syrian, Kurdish) told me that he was surprised to find out that I am such a 'warm' person, as he previously had the impression that Western people are 'cold'.

24 As mentioned, the concepts 'Western', 'European', and 'American' are often used interchangeably. Yet I do not have an explanation for why Zafer thinks that this is not so much a problem for the rest of the 'Western civilization' as it is for Europe.

25 Interview with Hala was conducted in English.

26 Interview with Dorota is translated from Arabic.

27 The Arabic concept of *ʿaql* also has connotations to maturity.

28 Interview with Daniel was conducted in English.

29 Interview with Ajar was conducted in English.

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