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The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon

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Abstract

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THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PUBLIC: MEDIATING SEX IN POSTWAR

LEBANON

Sara Mourad

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ABSTRACT

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Sara Mourad

Marwan M. Kraidy

This dissertation examines the mediation of non-normative genders and sexualities in contemporary Lebanese public culture since the end of the civil war in 1990. Through a critical analysis of television performances, literary texts, digital media productions, and narrative films and interviews with cultural producers, I demonstrate how media discourses on sexuality engender the public sphere through the construction and contestation of ideal masculinity and femininity. The confessional television talk shows, feminist films, and autobiographical digital and print queer publications collected here are genres that unsettle distinctions between the private and the public, the personal and the political. Through their circulation, these representations produce social discourses that reveal the centrality of sex and gender in the articulation of individual, collective, and national identities. They are public interfaces where the recognition and contestation of social difference unfolds, but they are also cultural artifacts that record and document the otherwise unspoken and invisible violence of normativity on dominated subjects. I conclude that processes of mediation shape the visibility of non-normative subjectivities and give cultural representations their social meaning, revealing what a repressed discourse on sexuality – one I characterize as infrapolitical – can tell us about the mechanics of power in society.

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INTRODUCTION

"The thing I remember as the hardest about my childhood, and I am sure about the whole culture, the hardest to live with, was the fact that we had no life of our own, no privacy, neither physical nor moral. People in the Arab world, and certainly elsewhere in the Third World, are never really left alone, they live under the scrutiny of everybody around."

<div align="right">

Etel Adnan, 1986, p.13

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In an essay titled "Growing Up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon," Lebanese-American poet, novelist, and painter Etel Adnan remembers her childhood and adolescence in Beirut of the 1930s and 1940s - when the country was under French mandate - formative years in which she came to writing, which in turn opened the door for her to travel to France to attend college there. An only child to a Syrian Muslim father and a Greek Christian mother, Adnan's solitude fuelled her creativity. Watching French and American movies and writing, she recalls, provided an escape from the constant and unflinching gaze of her overly protective mother, and a hiding place from familial surveillance which embodied a "whole culture's" scrutiny. "Developing private thoughts was my first rebellion, my first emancipation," she writes (p. 13). In a context of pervasive social scrutiny, the ability to evade the social gaze is critical for those who – like Adnan – break the mold of normative masculinity and femininity. Adnan's queerness manifested itself early on in her cross-gender identification as a child: "Being dressed as a boy made me feel very happy" (p.9). Recalling a pair of short black pantaloons and a white satin blouse sewn by her mother, she notes that the outfit "must have reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl, nor a boy, but a special being with the magical attributes of both" (p.9).

Her sense of marginality, of being neither here nor there, was compounded by her mixed religious background: "I got used to standing between situations, to being a bit marginal and still a native, to getting acquainted with notions of truth which were relative and changed like the hours of the days and the passing of seasons changed" (p.11). As a young girl growing up in late thirties Lebanon, Adnan had few life options ahead of her. "A little girl," she writes, "was a daughter, a school girl, and a future wife. She was never considered as an autonomous being whose life could turn out to be something other than what was considered to be the social norm" (p.12). In her autobiographical account, Adnan paints a picture of the norms that prescribed the spaces she had access to, the roles she could play, and the aspirations she could have for herself as a woman. These norms, as she explains, dictated conjugal heterosexuality as the ultimate destiny of young women like herself, and manifested themselves primarily through her mother's paranoid policing of an undutiful daughter whose path had deviated from all that was familiar. The daughter's desire to become an engineer and her later quest to get a university degree in literature were deemed to be "immoral" demands on her part (p.16). And when she professed her disinterest in getting married, she was accused of "preferring to be adventurous and irresponsible," and she was often made to understand that she was in danger of losing her mind (p.18).

Adnan's autobiographical account of her formation as a woman writer paints a picture of the power and weight of normativity in outlining the horizon of possibility for Arab men and women. But it also demonstrates the personal material, psychic, and creative labor performed by those whose bodies, desires, and lifeworlds do not fit

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prescribed social narratives of appropriate gender behavior. As such, her essay provides a fitting point of entry into this dissertation, which takes, as its objects of study, representations of non-normative gendered subjectivities and the social orders they conjure as they enter into collective, public consciousness. "The Boundaries of the Public: Mediating Sex in Postwar Lebanon" sketches the connections between sex, media, and the public realm through an examination of cultural artifacts that, in their circulation, trouble the distinction between "private" and "public" as separate spheres of human action. By doing so, these artifacts – and the representations of sex and gender they mediate – push the limits of the sayable in public and constitute analytic sites to probe the fraught and shifting relationship between the "personal" and the "political" in contemporary Lebanese society. By considering the gender and sexual discourses that media representations put in motion, this dissertation probes how the distinction between "private" and "public" is constructed and contested in contemporary Lebanese public culture in order to understand the pivotal role of these categories in the maintenance and interruption of a patriarchal and heterosexual normative social order.

The dissertation positions visibility as a central category of analysis, looking in particular at the appearance of non-normative genders and sexualities in a variety of cultural productions and how such appearances push the boundaries of publicity. By examining the relationship between visibility and publicity in televisual, cinematic, digital, and print representations, I am particularly interested in identifying what queer theorist José Esteban Munõz (1999) has referred to as "moments of counterpublicity," where non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal discourses find

expression in the public sphere. In the following chapters, I examine the visibility of the abnormal in the media to probe the shifting boundaries of the public realm. Theoretically, I am interested in exploring visibility's relationship to publicness, and how this relationship is shaped and reshaped by media genres, platforms, and technologies. In my dissertation, I consider media genres that trouble the distinction between "private" and "public," that make the personal available for public recognition and contestation. These include voyeuristic television talk shows, feminist films, and autobiographical digital and print publications (see tables below). So I look at the media to understand normativity as a social force, considering how media representations are instrumental for the collective imagination and contestation of what is normal gender behavior. I tackle the following questions: How do we make sense of the appearance of new discourses of gender and sexuality in Arab societies today? What do socio-cultural battles over the status of women and sexual minorities tell us about the boundaries of the public – about who and what can appear in public? What role do media technologies play in reconfiguring those boundaries? And what effects does such a reconfiguration have on people whose life narratives, experiences, and bodies have been historically marginalized – if not wholly excluded – from public imagination?

The new visibilities of women and sexual minorities in the Middle East and the language of gender and sexual rights through which they circulate transnationally have pushed postcolonial scholars to consider the political stakes of a discourse of gender and sexual oppression in the region. Middle East scholars, working within the epistemological framework set up by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), have

demonstrated how discourses of gender and sexual rights have been integral to the elaboration of Euro-American imperial discourses which construct women and sexual minorities as victims of their backward cultures. The construction of "women" and "gays" as victims in need of emancipation and rescue in Western human rights discourses, they argue, perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes and, in a post 9/11 global geopolitical landscape, serves to justify military interventions. While this discourse of salvation assumed a particular meaning in the context of the War on Terror, whereby Muslim women needed to be saved from the grip of radical Islam, the Western imperative to save women from their cultures can be traced back to the European colonization of the Middle East and North Africa. In "Algeria Unveiled," Franz Fanon (1967) exposed how the French constructed the female veil donned by Algerian women as a signifier of civilizational inferiority and an index of the oppression of Muslim women. By staging public spectacles of unveiling, French women sought to uplift their sisters from the shackles of tradition. For Fanon, the French obsession with the veil had nothing to do with women's emancipation and was symptomatic of a deep-seated racism towards the colonized indigenous populations who refused to be subjugated. The veil, as he shows, signified Algeria's resistance to colonialism and the Muslim woman – who can see without being seen – embodies the subversion colonial relations of domination by refusing to be the willing object of the colonizer's gaze. In her influential essay, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others," penned in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) probes the persistent, now American, fascination with the figure of the

oppressed Muslim woman. This fascination, evident in the extensive media coverage of the plight of "our sisters of cover" – to borrow George W. Bush's formulation – is symptomatic of the centrality of liberal "rights" discourses in the perpetuation of American hegemony on a global scale. This is the logic that justifies the invasion of Afghanistan under the pretext of liberating its women. Whether it is the War on Terror in Afghanistan or the War of Independence in Algeria, the narrative of salvation has largely depended on the invisibility of women's bodies in its construction of Muslim women as hapless victims in need of emancipation through bodily exposure. The popularity of a discourse of gender and sexual liberation that subtends imperial and neo-imperial politics therefore hinges on the continued equation of the veil with opacity and invisibility, and of unveiling with an emancipatory politics of gender equality. The ocular logics that structure the discourse around Muslim women's liberation acquires a new meaning in contemporary Euro-American societies, now dealing with the Muslim woman not as a stranger in foreign lands but as a citizen and subject of the postcolonial, liberal state. As Joan Scott (2009) has shown in *The Politics of the Veil,* controversies around the passing of legislation banning the wearing of headscarves in public institutions was symptomatic of France's racist colonial history and its inability to deal with the changing fabric of society. The prohibition of the veil, as she demonstrates, is a protection against "the disturbing difference of Islam, an Islam whose difference is cast in terms of a difference of sexual practice" (p.121). In "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," Joseph Massad (2002) transposes the argument around the centrality of sexual difference as a marker of civilizational

difference from women and onto gay subjects. He coins the now widely-used term, the "Gay International," to refer to Western LGBT organizations that universalize a discourse of gay rights, creating new gay subjects that they then purport to save. In the era of the War on Terror, such discourses of women and gay human rights provide the moral pretext for military intervention abroad, but also a political opportunity to enlist gays in patriotic discourses, facilitating their assimilation into mainstream society, what Jasbir Puar (2007) has called homonationalism. These discourses, as many of these scholars have pointed out, are constitutive of imagined civilizational differences between "East" and "West," "Islam and modernity." However, the exposure of the hypocrisy of Western discourses of human rights should not be the end of critique. In the multiplicity of discourses circulating in contemporary Arab societies, women and sexual minorities appear in a far greater number of guises than just that of the victims of culture. The dichotomies of tradition and modernity, East and West—even if they are deployed in critique—are therefore insufficient to understand these new visibilities.

While this body of literature has shown how the status of women and sexual minorities operates as a cross-cultural marker of civilizational difference which serves to buttress the fictions of "East" and "West" as separate and contained geographies, I am interested in examining how discourses of gender and sexuality both cement and trouble the imagined separation between private and public, and to what effect. My work accounts for discursive shifts through an examination of the relationship between public and private, or more precisely, by taking into account how transnational cultural flows reconfigure the boundaries between private and public. It

is my contention that to understand the postcolonial condition, one must have an in situ understanding of the immanent political operations of the locations in question. In the following chapters, I consider the social undercurrents and transnational cultural flows that are reconfiguring the relationship between the "personal" and the "political" – the "private" and the "public," to understand, in more concrete terms, the emergence of new discourses and social formations that imagine subjectivity beyond heteronormativity. These include new media technologies, the transnational circulation of information, and the multiplication of mediated forms in which such information is communicated that have implications for our understanding of subject-formation and cultural production in a postcolonial world. In this regard, a media studies approach can fill some of the analytical oversights that have allowed for the theorization of the social visibility of non-normative subjects as necessarily symptomatic of an overdrawn process of Westernization. Such an approach allows us to account for transformations in communication and media technologies that carried implications for the performance of identity, practices of resistance, and the authorship and flows of cultural production; in other words, transformations in regimes of social visibility. I am less interested in analyzing stereotypical visibilities of Middle Eastern women and sexual minorities and their circulation transnationally, and more invested in understanding how conditions of visibility are transformed, locally, particularly when it comes to the sensitive subject of sexuality. Thus, my methodological aim – elaborated in the "Method" section – is to shift from a diagnostic approach that employs a paranoid mode of reading to expose the imperial ideological underpinnings of discourses of gender and sexual rights, to a thick

description of the mode of communication through which these discourses circulate in public. Local cultural productions where such discourses take shape display the forbidden through fugitive gestures of disguise, masquerade, and anonymity, metaphorical language, and humor, demanding that we adjust our understanding of visibility as a spectrum rather than a binary. I characterize these communicative tactics as "infrapolitical," borrowing political scientist James Scott's (1990) term, to show the "dialectic of disguise and surveillance" (p.4) – which pervades relations of racial, class, and gender domination – can help us identify ephemeral and fleeting forms of resistance and account for the crises of hegemony over the definition and regulation of the boundaries of public life.

The dissertation considers gender and sexuality in social rather than individual terms – as sites of collective identification, countercultural production, and anti-normative politics. In this regard, it takes Gayle Rubin's provocation, in her 1984 essay "Thinking Sex: Towards a Radical Theory of Sexuality," penned in the ferment of the U.S feminist sex wars, to explore "the political dimensions of erotic life." In her pathbreaking essay, largely credited with establishing the field of sexuality studies, Rubin called for the elaboration of new theoretical tools and optics that would allow us to consider what she called "the fallacy of misplaced scale" that burdened non-normative sexual practices with the weight of other social anxieties. Rubin proclaimed, in the essay's memorable opening line, "the time has come to think about sex." Beyond the productive tension it provoked around thinking sex separately from gender, Rubin's exhortation was also about moving the discussion of sexual politics "beyond single issues and single constituencies, from women and lesbians and gay

men to analyses that could incorporate and address with more intricacy the cross-identifications and multiple subject positions that most of us occupy" (2010, p.40). This led her to identify, in a 2010 essay reflecting on the original reception of "Thinking Sex," a certain "protoqueerness" to the text: the way it conceptualized the "outer limits" of acceptable sexuality not in terms of fixed identities, but as marginal positions vis-à-vis a conjugal, heterosexual norm. By enumerating and grouping different erotic practices under the signs of "good sex" and "bad sex," Rubin offered a new taxonomical model to think sex beyond the homo/hetero binary. Rather than assume the referents of the non-normative and investigate subject positions like "gay" or "lesbian," the dissertation is similarly interested in probing the contours of that category in its specific Lebanese context. Therefore, while "non-normative" encompasses gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, it is not limited to them. It is the norm, rather than any pre-determined identity, that orients the analytic gaze of the dissertation. This has allowed the inclusion of practices like extramarital female sexuality, for instance, under the rubric of the "non-normative."

The Public in the Media

In an episode of "*Mouthi' al-Arab*" (Arab Anchorman, June 5, 2015), a television competition show for young Arab talents seeking careers in television, one of the contestants interviewed a Lebanese woman about her experience as a victim of domestic abuse.[1] In her televised testimony, on pan-Arab satellite channel Abu Dhabi

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[1] Abu Dhabi TV is based in the United Arab Emirates. Khalife's intervention can be accessed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXczICYnl_8&list=PLQAKNM4bsxIIdpNlt5uE871LsOqDZn-cE

TV, the woman described her husband's violence and the trauma it caused her son who had witnessed it. Lebanese television anchor Tony Khalife, one of the three judges evaluating the contestants' performances on the show, seized the opportunity to stage a response to women's rights organizations that had accused him of promoting sexism and misogyny on his television show:

> I categorically refuse our constant portrayal as a masculinist society, as if we are Arab people that have nothing but beating the woman, humiliating the woman, and offending the woman. Woman is our mother, our sister, and our daughter. What I object to in this issue is the exploitation of woman's plight - and this is addressed to civil society organizations – for the purpose of building commercial organizations that take advantage of a woman's suffering by raising foreign funds, making tons of money off of each film they produce that shows a woman's suffering [Audience Cheers and Applause]. Madam, your son's humiliation and trauma is for him to hear you talk today before millions of viewers, and not from your abuse by your husband in front of him [He stands up]. When your son today hears you speak out in front of millions about how his father used to beat you in front of him, this is humiliation for him, not when his father hit you in his presence [Audience Cheers and Applause]

This segment lays bare the symbolic power of shame in inscribing the limits of public discourse. As Khalife's intervention makes clear, talk about domestic abuse is a source of shame for the family. Along with the advocacy work of women's rights organizations lobbying for the criminalization of domestic violence in Lebanon, the victim is accused by the prominent television anchor of tarnishing the image of Arab societies by turning women's private suffering into public spectacle.

By shaming mediated self-disclosure rather than domestic abuse, Khalife normalizes gendered violence by scandalizing its representation in public, conjuring a private realm where knowledge about such violence must be guarded in the name of family honor. Normalization, or the labor of "the eternalization of the arbitrary" (p.2)

as Bourdieu (2001) put it, is achievable in part through an imposition of silence on those who deviate from socially-prescribed norms of behavior. When it comes to gender, the virtues of privacy are often invoked by social conservatives to proscribe the erasure of critiques of patriarchy and masculine domination from the public realm. Alternative life narratives, desires, and intimacies are thus condemned to invisibility. Ironically, Khalife, has made a career out of publicizing intimate matters. He rose to fame hosting television shows that promised to put the private life of Arab singers and movie stars on display. He also introduced a new genre of investigative television through his show "*Lil Nasher"* (For Publication), which secured high viewer ratings through a sensationalist display of marginal and abnormal social behaviors and situations.[2] Khalife, in fact, has been a forerunner in creating media genres that put private life on display. While his shows thrived on blurring the boundaries of private and public life, Khalife became vocally critical of the growing media visibility of domestic violence against women. In 2007, Kafa (Enough), a "feminist, secular, Lebanese" civil society organization "seeking to create a society that is free of social, economic and legal patriarchal structures that discriminate against women" (About, 2015), proposed a project for a law to protect women against family violence. The project brought together 64 non-governmental organizations that submitted a draft law to Parliament in 2009.[3]

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[2] *"Lil Nasher"* inspired similar shows on other stations such as Joe Maalouf's *"Inta Horr"* (You Are Free) on Murr Television (MTV).

[3] For more on the new Domestic Violence Law, see Human Rights Watch (April 3, 2014). "Domestic violence law good, but incomplete." https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/03/lebanon-domestic-violence-law-good-incomplete; Massena, F. (December 31, 2014). "Lebanese women not safe despite domestic violence law." *Al-Monitor.* http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/lebanon-law-domestic-violence-women.html

For Khalife, organizations like Kafa exploited abused women for commercial profit by forcing them to file complaints against abusive husbands. This infringement on family privacy by a women's rights discourse, he notes, was about money, not politics. Privacy, in this regard, consecrates a familial domain that must be shielded from invasive public scrutiny. But privacy is also, as the quote in the epigraph by Lebanese-American novelist, poet, painter, and writer Etel Adnan (1986) shows, freedom from public scrutiny and the social and psychic constraints it engenders. It is a necessary space for self-actualization beyond the moral and physical restrictions of the dominant order enforced by social institutions like the family. Articulated as such, privacy is "the right for each individual to decide the extent to which 'his thoughts, sentiments, and emotions shall be communicated to others'" (Thompson, 2011, p.60).[4] Together, the woman's testimony on domestic abuse and Khalife's condemnation of women's rights organizations reveal the leakage of the "private" into the public realm and the moral crises it engenders. While the increased social visibility of domestic violence as a result of civil society campaigns and legal advocacy work constitutes a prominent example of the politicization of gender in postwar Lebanon, it must be understood within the context of a changing media landscape where all sorts of boundaries – between the national and the transnational, the local and the global, the private and the public – have been reconfigured.

This dissertation examines the mediation of non-normative genders and

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[4] For the marginalized and oppressed, "the point is not to preserve their privacy but rather to strengthen the public as a site open to interconnections and contestations" (Brighenti, 2010, p.119).

sexualities in contemporary Lebanese public culture since the end of the civil war in 1990. It reveals the intimate dimensions of postwar citizenship through a focus on the expression and representation of stigmatized queer and female sexualities in public. Through a critical/cultural analysis of television performances, literary texts, digital media productions, and narrative films, I demonstrate how bodies, desires, and intimacies that have been historically excluded from the public realm have been re-articulated through new discourses on gender. The confessional television talk shows, feminist films, and autobiographical digital and print queer publications under study are genres that unsettle distinctions between the private and the public, the personal and the political. They are public interfaces where the recognition and contestation of social difference unfolds. But they are also cultural artifacts that record and document the otherwise unspoken and invisible violence of normativity on dominated subjects. By tracing the processes of cultural production, representation, and circulation by which gender and sexual difference is made to signify as a matter of shared and public concern in a variety of cultural genres, the dissertation shows the psychic and social effects of familial and social scrutiny on those who deviate from norms of gender and sexual behavior.

The confessional talk show, feminist film, and queer autobiographical writing examined in each chapter are genres that formally and thematically challenge the public/private binary by making the violence it conceals visible. They reveal the structuring force of normativity in everyday life, depicting its operation in intimate, familial, and public spaces. As public interfaces, the televisual, filmic, and digital media under consideration reflect how dominant gender ideologies and the

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hierarchies subtending them shape practices of representation, but they also make the experiences of the marginalized and dominated visible in the public domain. As a "regime of visibility," the public domain exists "at the point of convergence and in the zone of indistinction between material and immaterial processes, whereby an immaterial meaning is created through acts of material inscription and projection" (Brighenti, 2010, p.110). Collectively, these media texts illustrate how material processes of media production are central for the politicization of gender. By inscribing and projecting gender as an alienating social identity, one that is structurally determined by the hierarchies of patriarchy, they demystify masculine domination as an "extraordinarily ordinary social relation" (Bourdieu, 2001, p.2). If politicization is the introduction of power where it was assumed not to exist before, these media artifacts – through the representations they put forth but also the collective practices of reading and interpretation they give rise to – introduce power to a putatively private sphere of human action: to familial ties, conjugal relationships, and sexuality. In so doing, they participate in the creation of shared social meaning around the personal as a site of regulation, pleasure, and suffering. Media are symbolic objects for collective imagination and contention of gender, as a relationship of power and a site of collective identification.

The following is not a study of media production or media reception, nor does it strictly adopt an interpretive approach to media as texts. Rather, it is an attempt to describe television, film, and writing as surfaces of mediation where our being with others increasingly takes shape and where, as Nick Couldry (2002) has argued, private experience is shared and "looped through" zones of public disclosure (p.116).

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The best way to describe my objects is as zones of disclosure, which in their contraction and expansion, tell us something about the limits of public discourse, and the effects of those limits on the reproduction of gender as a relation of domination. Media, in this regard, enable and animate the collective symbolic production of gender in discourse, and the creation of its cultural and political meanings. An analysis of media as zones incorporates the social in its analytic pull. It is only by thinking of media as zones for the mediation of gender that we can understand the confessional and ethnographic drive of television talk shows, the feminine/feminist authorship of Nadine Labaki, and the "civic narcissism" (Papacharissi, 2002) of feminist queer publications. As "public feelings genres," to borrow Ann Cvetkovich's term (2002), television talk shows, Labaki's films, and the autobiographical writings of feminist queer collective Meem, revolve around the avowal, before an audience, of personal experiences of shame and social alienation borne from the failure and/or refusal to re-enact norms of masculinity and femininity. As such, they are part of "a whole public environment of therapeutic genres dedicated to witnessing the constant failure of heterosexual ideologies and institutions (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p.556). In many countries, queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) explain, people testify to their failure to sustain or be sustained by institutions of privacy, such as the heterosexual marriage or the nuclear family, in different media forms such as the talk show. In the genres under examination, speaking out about gender-based violence and injustice as well as the difficulties of inhabiting alternative ways of living and being acquires a therapeutic value, providing space for emotional catharsis, feedback, and reflection. But in the zones of disclosure they constitute, these genres

also interrupt and complicate dominant social narratives about manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femininity, publicness and privacy. As cultural productions, television shows, films, books, and electronic magazines make the stigma and shame of non-normative sexual attachments and gender roles available for public recognition and contestation. They inscribe and project non-normative bodies, desires, and agencies and thus determine their visibility in contemporary Lebanese public culture.

What makes culture public? The dissertation is also an inquiry into the relationship between the two parts of the term "public culture," keeping as open as possible the definition of what constitutes publicness "in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p.9). For John P. Thompson (2011), the public "has been reconstituted as a sphere of information and symbolic content that are detached from physical locales" (p.55). Thus, media are integral for the understanding of the modern public sphere, but also of the constitution of publics and counterpublics. As Paolo Carpignano (1999) has argued, because the public sphere is inherently mediated, it is necessary to scrutinize how this media space is materially, technologically, and socially shaped. I examine mediation as the process through which culture accrues social meaning. Mediation makes culture public, I argue, inasmuch as it involves something more than the transmission of information, encompassing as it is communicative processes that reproduce, contest, and transform social meaning. It is the total sum of practices of production and consumption of symbolic inscriptions, and their circulation in time and space. With its practices of

collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, media, Arjun Appadurai (1996) has noted, provides the condition for the emergence of what he calls a "community of sentiment," a group that "begins to imagine and feel things together" (p.8). Thus, I am interested in media less as institutions and more as shared symbolic spaces where and around which we think and feel collectively. Media provides the common cultural material through which we establish our sense of self and sociality.

As a social interface, media is at the epicenter of public life. By altering the nature and modes of social interaction, media technologies transform the meaning of being in public, giving rise to what Thompson identifies as forms of "mediated publicness" (2011). What we think of as the public sphere today, he argues, has become "a complex space of information flows where 'being public' means 'being visible' in this space, being capable of being seen and heard by others" (p.63). New forms of mediated visibility, Thompson contends, are shaped by distinctive properties of communication media such as camera angles, editing processes, and organizational interests, but also by the new types of interaction that these media enable (p.57). The transformations brought forth set the stage for the flourishing of a "new kind of intimacy in the public sphere" through "intimate forms of self-presentation" (Thompson, 2011, p.57-58). These are instances of what Nick Couldry (2003) identifies as "media rituals," where non-media people perform for the media, for example by revealing intimate truths before unknown millions on TV shows. In such performances, Couldry explains, the media themselves "'stand in' for something wider, something to do with the fundamental organisational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of a society" (p.3). The media, in

other words, stand in for the public.

In his analysis of everyday media practices, Couldry (2003) draws on Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power to argue that such practices preserve the dominant symbolic order by reproducing "the myth of the mediated center," that is the need and desire to go to and *be in* the media. Couldry is not interested in the details of what individuals disclose through mediated interactions but rather in the formal elements that give them shape. As he explains, "too close a focus on the content of individual disclosures risks missing the most puzzling aspect of this whole landscape: its links to the ritually reinforced notion that the media provide a 'central' space where it makes sense to disclose publicly aspects of one's life that one might not otherwise disclose *to anyone*" (p.116). This "mediated intimacy," as Thompson (2011) describes it, can be perceived in cultural genres like the talk show or the personal blog, where information about the self is voluntarily shared with unknown others. While they recognize such mediated intimacies as a common feature of the media landscape, both Thompson and Couldry stop short from elaborating the political consequences that such disclosures may carry in their interpellation of new publics and counterpublics into being.

While the media reconstituted the public realm by transforming the conditions and relations of visibility, it has also, crucially, reconfigured the communicative and associative processes through which publics and counterpublics come into being, and without which politics would be unimaginable. A public, according to John Dewey (1927), "consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences

systematically cared for" (p.16). Publics, in this conceptualization, emerge around shared problems and grievances and constitute a necessary feature of democratic political life. If we follow Dewey's definition, all publics are counterpublics to the extent that they emerge against conditions deemed injurious to a group of individuals. Andrea Brighenti (2010) describes counterpublics as "arenas of communication" that correspond more specifically "to communitarian, subcultural or oppositional minorities who importantly intervene in the mainstream, fostering change within, and sometimes even dissolving into it" (p.116). Defined as such, counterpublics can only be thought in terms of their relationship to the mainstream, marked as it is by the "counter-" prefix. In the mediatized world we inhabit, any account of counterpublics that does not engage with the media practices that give it shape and form and constitute the possibility of its existence is lacking. The significance of mediated representations, performances, and practices lies in making gender domination and the social norms upholding it visible, and therefore public. They are political insofar as they create what queer performance scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz (1999) has identified as "counterpublic moments."

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz recalls an episode of the reality television show "The Real World" where Pedro Zamora, a gay and HIV-positive Cuban-American participant, "talked openly" and in a distinctly Cuban Spanish about homosexuality and AIDS with his father. Muñoz (1999) recognizes his own interpellation as a queer subject by the televisual performance of Zamora: "I was struck because this was something new; it was a new formation, a being for others. I *imagined* other living rooms within the range of this

broadcast and I thought about the queer children who might be watching this program at home with their parents" (p.160, emphasis added). For Muñoz, such spectacles – occurring as they are on the wide-scale of television – provide "instances" or "moments" of counterpublicity which are momentary, fleeting, and subtle. This is when the mass public "glimpses" different lifeworlds than the one endorsed by dominant ideology. What started out as a "tokenized representation" in a reality show on a major network became "something larger, more spacious – a mirror that served as a prop for subjects to imagine and rehearse identity" (p.154). Media represents a counterpublic to itself, as when queer activists recognize themselves in the writings of their friends and lovers. These "counterpublic moments" offer a compelling counterpoint to what communication scholars Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1991) call "media events." In their theorization of these "high holidays of mass communication" (p.5), they argue that television enlists a renewed loyalty to society through a simultaneous, pre-planned, and collective watching of rituals of conquest, contest, and coronation. If, as Dayan (2001) argues, these televised rituals enable an experience of "watching with" (p.743), the mundane televisual spectacles, such as the one described by Muñoz, enable a different kind of "watching against" where loyalty and belonging are not renewed but rather challenged and interrupted.

In the following chapters, I explore cultural productions as repositories of personal experiences, "of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (Cvetkovich, 2002, p.7). The unspeakability of lesbian desire in Nadine Labaki's *Caramel* for instance, examined in chapter 2, can be captured both at the

level of its filmic representation, but also through the filmmaker's account of her practice of pre-emptive self-censorship – a habit she acquired as a woman – which informs our understanding of the social visibility of female sexuality and homosexuality and the difficulties of their representation. As cultural artifacts, these productions record and document the otherwise unspoken and invisible violence of normativity on dominated subjects. My aim is not to catalogue local representations of non-conforming genders and sexualities. Rather, I offer a multi-layered analysis of mediation through a close reading of selected texts, which incorporates the meanings attributed to them by their authors and creators as well as the ones that emerge in their circulation. By combining textual and visual analysis of films, talk shows, and print and electronic publications with in-depth interviews with their producers, I trace the practices of encoding, production, and reception that Cvetkovich (2003) gestures, examining normativity through a study of its mediation.

In his best-selling book *Society's Witness*, Zaven Kouyoumdjian (2012), host of the longest-running talk show on Arab television "*Sireh Winfatahet*" (Open Conversation), claims that his talk show contributed in setting in motion a "culture of revelation and confession" among a young generation of viewers that had become more comfortable with and willing to talk about their bodies and their psychological problems because "they had seen on TV people who are like them, talking about what they hadn't dared talk about" (p.11). Open Conversation, along with the two other talk shows I examine in chapter 1 – *El-Shater Yehki*" (Let the Brave Speak out) and "*Ahmar bil Khatt el-Arid*" (Bold Red Line) – invite ordinary people to participate on the show by sharing intimate stories with millions of viewers. Episodes on sexual

deviance and gender non-conformity – such as prostitution, homosexuality, and cohabitation – drive higher viewer ratings and are therefore attractive and lucrative for producers. During these episodes, participants provide first-person accounts of their non-normative desires, attachments, and identifications which are then discussed among experts – Muslim sheikhs, Christian priests, psychiatrists, and lawyers are usual guests. Public opinion on the topic under discussion is often presented in pre-recorded segments where ordinary citizens are polled on the street. In a televized spectacle that claims to capture "social reality" (*al-Waqe' al-Ijtima'i*), television talk shows interpellate viewers as citizens who must be sensitized about society's issues and problems such as sexual and gender diversity and deviance. In scenes of democratic deliberation among experts and ordinary people, the latter often speak through their identities "as Muslims" and "Christians," reinscribing religious sect as the point of access to and expression of citizenship in public.

In her two award-winning feature-length films, Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki works with an all-female ensemble cast to portray the social status of women in contemporary Lebanon. In her distinct but converging treatments of the condition and role of femininity and its relationship to womanhood, Labaki positions herself at the center of her productions, writing, directing, and starring in her own films. Chapter 2 considers her work, and its transnational circulation, through the lens of her authorship as a critically-acclaimed and globally-recognized Lebanese and Arab female filmmaker. By mobilizing the notion of the feminine author – as developed in feminist film scholarship – I examine how Labaki's persona and her public careers, first as a director of popular Arab music videos then as a filmmaker, mediate the

reception of her work. Labaki's identity as a Lebanese, Arab, and Middle Eastern woman on the international film festival circuit, her self-professed ability to speak a "universal language" through masterful depictions of intimate locality is not incidental to the commercial success of her films. While her persona inspires questions on the relationship between gender, representation, and cultural production in the Arab world today, the themes and aesthetics of her films capture the tensions between East and West and modernity and tradition around which the "woman question" in the Arab Middle East has come to be defined.

In the cultural production of the Beirut-based feminist queer collective Meem, discussed in chapter 3, personal trauma is transformed into shared experience, re-purposed for collective identification and struggle against the intersecting forces of masculine domination and compulsory heterosexuality. Through autobiographical writing in *Bekhsoos* (Concerning, 2008-2012), an electronic magazine, and *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail, 2009) a print anthology of short stories, members of Meem documented and registered queer existence, making it accessible for others seeking information and support. Thus, these publications perform what Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) have described as the "entextualization" of queer as culture. While they constitute a public archive of/for this feminist queer community, the collective labor that went into their production – from writing, to interviews, to editing, to design, to publication – was elemental for the formation and development of the community they sought to describe and document. The discursive production of queer and LGBT publics in the Global South is not, as regarded by some postcolonial scholars, evidence of an incitement to discourse by Western gay rights

organizations, famously dubbed by Joseph Massad (2002) as the "Gay International."

As my analysis of Meem's publications demonstrates, the constitution of a queer

counterpublic is deeply embedded in local politics of identity and difference and

intimately connected to other movements for social justice. Queer counterpublics

emerge through the production and circulation of alternative discourses that counter

the dominant cultural narrative of "sexual deviance" (*shoudhoudh jinsi*), which

pathologizes and demonizes non-normative bodies and desires.

In the remainder of this introduction, I situate these cultural productions in

their local and transnational contexts, namely in the postwar and the postcolonial.

While the civil war, which lasted from 1975 until 1990, may not be immediately

present, its history structures the contemporary cultural and political fields and the

discourses of identitarian difference animating them. The war may not be directly

represented, but it nevertheless appears and reappears in the entanglement of sex and

sect across the texts under consideration. Thus, I situate the following cultural

representations in their postwar context, where the "post" functions as a space-

clearing gesture to make room for new identities, new politics, and new forms of

cultural expression that emerge in the aftermath of a civil conflict and are thus

conditioned by its legacy. The "post" is not intended to mark a historical rupture;

rather, it is to establish the continuity of war through the structures it put in place,

ones that endure long after the fighting has stopped. I then locate my intervention vis-

à-vis a body of postcolonial literature on gender in the Arab Middle East, proposing a

move beyond religion to examine sexuality as a gendered practice. Finally, I mobilize

James Scott's notion of the "infrapolitical" to understand how sex has been rendered

in public. There, I consider non-normativity as a thwarting and twisting of norms, rather than their manifest rejection, in the everyday negotiations of the boundaries of public and private life.

Identity and Difference in Postwar Society

An analysis of media discourses about bodies that err from their assigned roles and appearances opens up the question of social difference writ large and the political registers through which it circulates. Importantly, the cultural texts examined here deal with the question of identity and difference in the aftermath of a fifteen-year civil conflict. Taking the legacy of the civil war as background and context, I explore what new discourses on gender and sexual non-conformity tell us about the postwar public - as a site of contention and a space of coexistence and a collective meaning-making. Originally pitting Leftist and Palestinian factions against the ruling Lebanese Christian right, the war devolved into a fifteen-year long protracted sectarian conflict that officially ended with the signature of the Taif Agreement (also known as the National Reconciliation Accord) by members of the Lebanese Parliament in Saudi Arabia in 1989. The Accord institutionalized Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, formalizing the continued presence of Syrian troops – which had entered the country in 1976 and participated in the war – on Lebanese territory. The country was propelled soon thereafter into the Reconstruction era where the horrors of the war were never explicitly addressed. In 1991, Parliament passed a general amnesty law that pardoned all crimes committed before its enactment. The ongoing absence of the civil war from school history curricula and the still unknown fate of the 17,000 kidnapped and disappeared are visible signs of the country's failure to collectively

confront and publicly memorialize its immediate history of civil violence.

This official policy of silence around the war, its causes, effects, victims, and culprits was justified through a rhetoric of common living (*al-'aych al-muchtarak*) that came to dominate postwar politics. Christians and Muslims, Sunnis, Shias, and Druze, were to live in common, in harmony, in the name of national unity. While the monolithic categories "Muslim" and "Christian" flatten and obfuscate the diversity and complexity of religious identification or its lack thereof, they are widely used to describe Lebanon's incendiary religious diversity. The Taif Accord, and the ideology of "common living" it institutionalized, defined social cleavage along exclusively sectarian lines. Sect was reified by the state as the primary social and political identity through which subjects are interpellated as citizens. Parliamentary representation is based on a confessional distribution of seats whereby each religious community has an allotted number of deputies proportional to its size, with equal representation for Muslims and Christians, each granted 64 parliamentary seats out of a total of 128. Political leaders demand and secure their constituencies' allegiance in the name of adequate sectarian representation. The right to be properly represented, as a sect, thus came to define postwar political life, resulting in the public erasure of other lines of social stratification and axes of difference.

According to a 2015 report by the World Bank, the confessional system has incurred significant economic losses for the country as the ruling elites instrumentalize sectarianism as a cover for their accumulation of wealth. The report concluded that the roots of state failure in promoting comprehensive development and creating job opportunities lie in confessional governance: "Lebanon's political

development since independence has been influenced primarily by its evolving confessional system. However, this system, originally established to balance the competing interests of local religious communities, is increasingly seen as an impediment to more effective governance as it has resulted in a paralysis in decision-making and a general hollowing out of the state" (World Bank, June 15, 2015, xi). This has also lead to a hollowing out of public life, whereby citizens are interpellated as sectarian subjects, mobilized around their political representation as religious communities, not around shared socio-economic grievances that cut across sect. In a socio-political context defined by sectarian difference and haunted by its recent bloody legacy, how may we recalibrate our vision of shared social and political space, of common living, to questions of gender? How, in other words, are gender-based grievances unmuted in a national public sphere overdetermined by sectarian politics? Violence against women and sexual minorities, for instance, is accorded secondary status along with class and race-based inequities.[5]

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[5] Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, which number around 250,000 and the majority of whom are women from Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Nepal, are excluded from the protection of the Lebanese labor code. In December 2014 a request was submitted to the Ministry of Labor to form a union for domestic workers. In January 2015, without receiving a response from the Ministry, around 300 workers participated in the inaugural congress of the union which was denounced by the Minister of Labor as illegal. Among the union's primary aims is the abolishment of the *Kafala* sponsorship system which offers no protection or safety net for the migrant worker while giving all the power, and tying her right to stay in the country, to the employer. Domestic workers thus suffer from lack of labor protection, racist and sexist abuse by their employers, and are denied freedom of association and collective bargaining. The most common complaints documented by the embassies of labor-sending countries and non-governmental groups include mistreatment by recruiters, non-payment or delayed payment of wages, forced confinement to the workplace, a refusal to provide any time off, forced labor, and verbal and physical abuse. A 2010 report by Human Rights Watch highlighted Lebanon's poor record of

In the past decade, Lebanon witnessed the emergence of civil society organizations and initiatives that sought to bring gender and sexual-based injustice and inequality into public attention through a non-sectarian political framework. Membership in them was not organized around sect, nor were their demands routed through sectarian channels. In chapter 3 I discuss this through an analysis of the publications of Meem,[6] a Beirut-based collective of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning women that was founded in 2007 to provide a safe space and a community of support for non-heterosexual women and trans persons. Meem emerged in public, along with other groups and collectives, in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, which led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country. Helem,[7] the region's first above-the-ground LGBT organization, was created in 2004. According to its mission statement, Helem "leads a peaceful struggle for the liberation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered (LGBT), and other persons with non-conforming sexuality or gender identity in Lebanon from all sorts of violations of civil, political, economic, social, or cultural rights" (Helem.com, 2015). Helem opened up a space for individuals to organize around the stigma of non-normative gendered and sexual expressions and desires, and produced a counterdiscourse that critiqued and denounced homophobia as a form of discrimination and violence.

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punishing abuse against domestic workers. For more on this see
https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/10/lebanon-recognize-domestic-workers-union
[6] The name "Meem" is derived from the Arabic letter "m" (Meem) which stands for "*majmouaat mou'azara lil-mar'a al-mithliya*" (support group for lesbian women).
[7] The Arabic acronym of "Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders" also meaning "dream" in Arabic.

Like Kafa (enough), Helem adopted an explicit rights-based discourse,
demanding the implementation of legal reforms in personal status laws and the
criminal code to outlaw and punish gender-based violence and discrimination.
Helem's primary goal is the annulment of article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code,
which punishes sexual intercourse "against nature" and is used to prosecute persons
with non-conforming sexualities or gender identities by the security forces.[8] The
law's annulment, according to the organization, would reduce state and societal
persecution against non-conforming individuals (Helem.com, 2015). Over the past
decade, activists and civil society organizations have made strides in legal reforms. In
a landmark ruling in 2009, a judge ruled that homosexual sex is not against nature.
Similarly, in March 2014, drawing on that legal precedent, Judge Naji El Dahdah of
the Jdeide Court in Beirut rejected the case that was brought up by the state against a
transgender woman who was accused of having "same-sex relations." This decision
was also based on a 2011 ruling by Judge Mounir Suleiman, which stated that same-
sex relations were not against nature, and hence could not be prosecuted under Article
534 (Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2014). In 2016, a ruling at the Court of Appeals
in Beirut confirmed the right of a transgender man to change his official papers,
granting him access to necessary healthcare (Safdar, February 6, 2016).

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[8] Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code stipulates that sexual acts which contradict "the laws
of nature" are punishable by up to one year in prison. Article 534, put in place by French
authorities when Lebanon was placed under French mandate after the second World War, is
used incases targeting homosexual activities. Although most Arab countries do not have
specific laws that outlaw homosexuality, authorities usually prosecute sexual deviants
through laws of public morality (*al-haya'a al-aam*). In the highly-publicized Queen Boat
Affair in Egypt in 2002, the Egyptian police arrested 52 men on charges of debauchery.

Thinking Sex After Orientalism

In her pathbreaking essay "Thinking Sex: Notes Towards a Radical Theory of Sexuality," penned in the midst of the feminist "sex wars" of the 1980s, Rubin (1984) argued that it is as a social construct – not a biological entity – that sexuality lends itself to political analysis. A radical theory of sex, as she describes it, "must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression" (p.9). Rubin notes that following Michel Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, academic discourses on sex articulated a denunciation of "erotic injustice" and "sexual oppression" that was situated less in in the freedom of individuals than in analyses of the normative and coercive relations between specific populations and the institutions created to manage them (p.275). In his dismissal of the "repressive hypothesis," which postulated that following a period when "bodies made a display of themselves" (p.3) sexuality had become repressed under modern regulatory regimes, Foucault attended to the ways in which sexuality had been actually produced as a discourse of power. The question, as Foucault (1990) put it, is not "why are we repressed?" (p.8) but rather "why has sexuality been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it?" (p. 11).

Because of his emphasis on the ways that sexuality is produced in discourse rather than on the silences, censorships, and interdictions that govern it, Rubin (1984) explains, Foucault has been vulnerable to interpretations that deny or minimize the reality of sexual repression in the more political sense (p.10). Such interpretations are ones we see at work in an important branch of scholarship on gender and sexual politics in Arab societies. Adopting a Foucauldian approach to power, Lila Abu

Lughod (2002) and Joseph Massad (2002) – leading scholars in the field – formulate a critique of Western projects of saving Middle Eastern and Arab women and LGBT populations from their oppressive societies through an incitement to discourse on women's and gay rights. Gender, and women's bodies more specifically, serve as boundary-markers between an imagined "self" and "other" (Abu Lughod, p.3) and are instrumentalized in the ongoing domination of the East by the West. While Abu Lughod's (2002) "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" set the tone for a post-9/11 postcolonial feminist critique that exposes the complicity of progressive discourses of women's rights in the U.S-led War on Terror, Massad (2002) extends this line of critique to the realm of sexuality, attributing the emergence of a discourse on sexual identity in Arab societies to the "Gay International," a constellation of transnationally-operating Euro-American gay rights organizations. The victimization of particular subjects, both Abu Lughod and Massad show, is produced by an orientalist discourse that cast Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern women and homosexuals as victims of their own cultures and in need of rescue and emancipation.

Thus, the exposure of the complicity of Western discourses of gender rights in the legitimation of relations of imperial domination has become a critical touchstone in an important branch of postcolonial scholarship that builds on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Indeed, both Abu Lughod and Massad have applied Edward Said's contrapuntal reading method to understand the reverberations, in the West, of a discourse of gender oppression in the Middle East. In her critique of the sustained victimization of Muslim women in Western media, anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod (2013) examines a genre she calls "pulp non-fiction," memoirs of Muslim women

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who have escaped their oppressive conditions under Islam and have become famous figures in the West for writing about it. Firsthand testimonies by the likes of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi,[9] Abu Lughod tells us, offer accounts that are "surprisingly pornographic" (p.107), vivid in their descriptions of sexual violence, and lending passion "to the mission of saving women globally" (p.107). In addition to circumcision, Abu Lughod demonstrates how issues like veiling and honor crimes have come to structure the global outlook on the woman question in predominantly Muslim societies, cementing in the process a fixed and monolithic vision of these societies that serves to buttress the West's own sense of moral superiority. "Projects of saving other women," Abu Lughod cautions, "depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority, and are a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (p. 47).

In a similar vein, Joseph Massad (2007) has vehemently argued that the category "homosexual" is a product of the West and that homosexuality as a sexual identity beyond same-sex contact had been implanted in the Arab world by what he calls the Gay International. This constellation of Western-based international gay organizations and their attendant discourse of gay human rights were purportedly transforming Arab individuals from "practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as 'homosexual' and 'gay'" (p.162). He explains, "The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic,

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[9] Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born, Dutch-American author and politician and a staunch critic of Islam. In 2003, she was elected as a member of the House of Representatives in the Dutch Parliament. Her 2004 short drama film with Theo Van Gogh, *Submission*, about four fictional female characters abused under Islamic laws, sparked controversy and led to the murder of Van Gogh in 2004 by a Muslim Dutch citizen. Azar Nafisi is an Iranian-born American writer and professor of English literature, She is best known for her 2003 book *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a Memoir in Books* where she narrates her difficult experience as a teacher in the University of Tehran after the 1979 Iranian revolution.

ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating […]" (p.162). While this line of critique has been crucial in demystifying the power relations embedded in civilizational rescue missions and challenging Western stereotypes of Muslim and Arab women and queers as the hapless victims of their barbaric cultures, it falls short from addressing gendered relations of domination within Arab societies. A focus on the universalization of Western taxonomies through a neo-imperial "incitement to discourse" on gender and sexual rights eclipses the repressive dynamics at work in postcolonial societies.

While focus on the political violence of discourses of victimization eclipsed a critique of masculine domination, the valorization of religion – and Islam in particular – as an object of a gender analysis has precluded a critical engagement with other modalities of performing gendered identities. In *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) challenged Western liberal feminism's conceptualization of feminist agency through an ethnographic account of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, itself part of the Islamic revival in Arab societies in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Through a reworking of Michel Foucault's "ethics of the self" and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Mahmood offered an alternative reading of agency wherein submission to, not transgression of, social norms is understood as an agential act by the pious female subject. Piety, as Mahmood explains, is an ethics of the subject where ritual practice such as praying, reading the Qoran, and veiling is performed by a "docile agent" in her willed submission to a transcendental force. In a similar vein,

Lara Deeb's (2006) *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* contested the putative incompatibility between Islam and modernity by demonstrating how Shi'i Lebanese women understand their public performances of piety, such as participation in mourning constitute and active involvement in community life, as a modern self-making project that breaks from the traditional quietism expected from Shi'i Muslim women in the past.[10]

While such ethnographic and theoretical engagements with the complex ways in which Islam shapes and reconfigures the status and role of women in public life have challenged dominant views on the incompatibility of Islam and modernity, religion and politics, postcolonial feminist critique must not stop at the deconstruction of such binaries and the prejudiced ways of thinking about religion that they give rise to. Religion in Arab societies does not only signify vis-à-vis the West, and must be apprehended as the structuring force it is within Arab societies. How may we re-conceptualize the question of difference beyond the East/West, religious/secular dichotomy that a critique of Orientalism often perpetuates? How does religion shape sexuality, for instance, as a gendered experience? But also, how can we decenter religion as a rubric of gender analysis? As Deniz Kandiyoti (1998) cautions, women should not be studied in terms of an undifferentiated "Islam" but necessarily through the differing and specific political projects of nation-states, including their ideological and strategic uses of Islamic idioms (p.275). Women's bodies not only signify vis-à-

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[10] Veiling is a discursive formation whose apparent unity screens from view the multiplicity of its meaning. Crucially, its local meanings do not necessarily overlap with the way it is understood on a transnational level or in different societies. The veil signifies differently in France than it does in Egypt.

vis the West, nor can discussions of Middle Eastern or Arab gender and sexual politics be circumscribed to a discussion of Islam.

Gender or Sexuality?

As vehicles for the circulation of personal life in public, the cultural genres in question are strategic sites to study the labor of normativity in the social construction and surveillance of gender roles and the social institutions that restrict and repress their expression. As Rubin (1984) has pointed out, popular culture is permeated "with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything from small children to national security" (p.12). This is as true in a Lebanese context as it is in the American one that Rubin is describing. As Gramsci (1971) has noted, "Regulation of sexual instincts, because of the contradictions it creates and the perversions that are attributed to it, seems particularly 'unnatural,'" which explains the frequency of appeal to 'nature' in disputes over sexual behavior (p.294). Such disputes, Rubin (1984) explains, often become "the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity" (p.4).[11] In addition to legal and punitive measures, the perceived menace of sexual activity and erotic variety beyond the confines of heterosexuality and conjugal domesticity justifies and mandates the regulatory function of social institutions like the school and the family.

To return to the opening example, Khalife concludes his intervention by attributing the rise in reported cases of domestic violence against women to the emergence of "women's organizations" and the circulation of their discourse on a

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[11] This is evident in chapter 1, where the protection of children and citizens from unsafe and corrupting sexual knowledge justifies the repression of sexual discourse on talk shows.

local and transnational level. Khalife is referring to civil society organizations, specifically non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which emerged in Lebanon in the mid-2000s. Since their establishment, NGOs working on issues ranging from electoral reform to environmental awareness have applied for funding from American and European donors - international NGOs, embassies, state agencies - to carry out and implement projects that had been approved and sometimes fully designed by foreign, Western donors. One of these organizations, Kafa (Enough), worked on legal reforms to improve the status of women in Lebanon.[12] Since 2007, Kafa has been at the forefront of a national campaign to pass a bill criminalizing domestic violence against women. "The Law to Protect Women from Family Violence" was submitted to Parliament in 2009. On April 1, 2013, the Lebanese parliament passed an amended version of the law that was decried by the National Coalition for Legislating the Protection of Women from Family Violence, as a watered down, toothless version of the original draft. This is most immediately captured in the bill's new title – "The Law on the Protection of Women *and other Family Members* from Domestic Violence"– which not only diluted the original focus on women but also undermined the

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[12] Although the Lebanese state ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, the government expressed reservations on Articles 9 and 16. The rejected articles were related to personal status laws and the nationality rights of women citizens. Thus, despite ratifying CEDAW, the Lebanese state continues to deny women the same rights as men in instances of marriage, divorce, and all family matters and upholds the ban on Lebanese women from passing their nationality to their husbands and children. The personal status law was thus maintained under the mandate of religious rather than civil courts. As Salameh (2014) notes, "people are basically unable to practice social life, relations, and personal choices outside of the license of sectarianism" (p.6). CRTD-A is a civil society campaign that was launched calling for the passing of a new nationality law that allows Lebanese women, married to non-citizens, to pass their nationality to their children.

campaign's insistence on the legal recognition of marital rape by removing a key clause criminalizing marital rape.

The thorny issue of marital rape, included in the original draft of the law, had caused a fanfare since its emergence in public discourse in 2012 ("The Law is your Image!" February 8, 2012), when women's rights groups stirred the issue in the media, eliciting the condemnatory response of incensed political and religious figures (Aziz, July 24, 2013). An infamous (and much satirized)[13] statement by MP Imad el-Hout, member of the parliamentary subcommittee debating the law, captured some of the blowback: "There's nothing called rape between a husband and a wife. It's called forcing someone violently to have sex." More recently Randa Berri, wife of Speaker of the House Nabih Berri and Vice President of the National Committee on Women's Issues, justified the parliamentary reservations about marital rape: "It became evident that it is impossible to *prove* the occurrence of this act in a closed bedroom" (LBCI, March 4, 2014). In her speech during the launching event of the National Campaign to Protect Underage Girls from Early Marriage, Berri declared to the public that marital rape is non-legislatable because it cannot be known. It is lack of proof, verifiable evidence to determine whether a man had indeed raped his wife, that makes it impossible to know rape in the conjugal bedroom. This is the same state that *proves* female virginity and male homosexuality by forcing vaginal and anal examinations on unsuspecting but "suspicious" individuals. The question remains, as feminist legal scholar Nivedita Menon (2004) put it, "Is 'the private' private because the law cannot intervene and influence it?" Or is it alternatively the law that constructs the private by

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[13] http://nothingcalledimadhout.tumblr.com

refusing to intervene, "by closing off the arena as inappropriate for its own intervention"? (p.13).

On Saturday April 21, 2013, the head of the municipality of Dekwaneh, a working and middle class town in the northern suburb of Beirut, ordered the municipal police to raid a gay-friendly nightclub. Three men and one transgender person were arrested, beaten, and forced to undress in order to verify their sexual identity (El-Ali, April 25, 2013; Legal Agenda, December 2, 2013). The bar, Ghost, was shut down few days later and the a report was posted on its door containing the full names and dates of birth of the detained persons, along with the crimes of which they were accused, including prostitution and drug use. The hashtag #DekAbuse[14] was trending soon afterwards and critical responses to the arrests abounded on Lebanese social media (Abdessamad, April 25, 2013). The arrested persons, as it turned out, were working class, Syrian citizens who had fled the war next door. Once juxtaposed, the state's crackdown on gay-friendly establishments in a working class neighborhood and its refusal to trespass the boundaries of the closed conjugal bedroom demonstrate how privacy is an unequally distributed right, whereby the conjugal bedroom of married heterosexual couples is off-limits to the authorities while gay clubs in working class neighborhoods are fair game. In the case of the latter, the right to privacy is suspended in the name of public morality, whereby non-normative bodies are constructed as a threat to the social order therefore requiring official intervention and discipline. Justifying the raid in a television interview, the head of municipality Antoine Chakhtoura described those arrested as "pseudo-men"

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[14] https://twitter.com/search?q=%23dekabuse&src=typd

and accused the club of endorsing sexual activities inside and outside its premises and promoting drug trafficking and lewd and inappropriate behavior (El-Ali, April 25, 2013). The municipality, according to him, had the moral obligation to protect children from exposure to freaks in their neighborhood: "Of course we made them take off their clothes, we saw a scandalous situation and we had to know what these people were. Is it a woman or a man? It turned out to be a half-woman and half-man and I do not accept this in my Dekwaneh" (LBCI, April 23, 2013).[15] On Tuesday, April 23, around fourty LGBT-rights activists and allies gathered in front of the Ministry of Justice in Beirut to protest the raid. "We are asking the public persecution office to act upon the 11 violations monitored by NGOs, among them: violating privacy, arbitrary detention, and stopping Lebanese people from practicing their civil rights," stated Ahmad Saleh, a board member of Helem (Dream), a Beirut-based non-governmental organization lobbying for LGBT and human rights since 2005 (Chehayed, May 1, 2013).[16] While no legal measures were taken against Chakhtoura, the Dekwaneh raid and arrests provided a highly-publicized case on the that refracted the unequal distribution of the right to privacy while also allowing the articulation of new attitudes and discourses on non-normative genders and sexualities.[17]

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[15] Watch the interview here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVcTrkZ4W2Y
[16] Helem, in cooperation with the Legal Agenda, a non-governmental organization working on legal activism and reform, had filed a complaint against the head of the municipality urging the public prosecutor to take the necessary legal action to bring him to justice (Legal Agenda, April 30, 2013).
[17] The raid on Ghost in April 2013 was preceded by a raid by the Internal Security Forces on a gay porn movie theater, Cinema Plaza, in the working class neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud in August 2012, which resulted in 36 arrests (Farrell, August 1, 2012). It was followed in August 2014 by raids on two Turkish bath houses, Shehrazad Hammam in the working class neighborhood of Burj Hammoud and the Agha Hammam in the commercial and residential district of Hamra, allegedly used as meeting points for homosexual men. The

These two social vignettes, on domestic violence against women and public violence against gender non-conforming subjects, map out a connection between gender and sexuality that is a central premise of this dissertation. In "Thinking Sex," Rubin (1984) considered sexuality as a vector of oppression, calling forth the productive separation of gender and sexuality as distinct categories of experience and analysis. This cleavage, as Annmarie Jagose and Don Kulick (2004) have pointed out in an edited special issue of *GLQ* titled "Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender," was subsequently contested by many "who objected to the normalizing capacity of any neat quarantining of the cultural work of sexuality and gender" (p.211). "Is it necessary," they ask, "to preserve a sense of the specificity of sexuality in relation to the study of gender, or a sense of the specificity of gender in relation to the study of sexuality?" (p.212). Responding to the question, transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker (2004) notes that while the field of queer theory – born out of a union between feminism and sexuality studies – has opened up a anti-essentialist and post-identitarian critical space to consider the constitution of non-normative subjectivities, it had largely adopted a lens that "privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heternormativity" (p. 214). Stryker's observation acquires added meaning once we consider the categories of gender and sexuality

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Internal Security Forces arrested 27 men in the Agha Hammam raid (Benoist, August 13, 2014). Five Lebanese advocacy organizations, Helem, Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE), M-Coalition, Marsa Sexual Health Clinic, and the Lebanese Medical Association for Sexual Health (LebMASH), condemned the arrest in a jointly-published statement, branding it as "homophobic practice that aims to police the sexual rights and liberties of the individuals involved" (AFP, August 13, 2014). For more on the 2014 arrests, see Littauer, D. (August 15, 2014). Lebanon launches police raids targeting gay men. The Huffington Post. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dan-littauer/lebanon-police-raids-gay-men_b_5678120.html

transnationally and beyond a Euro-American context. Rather than posit a priori a distinction between the two, I found it more productive – in framing the object of this study – to use "sex" to refer to the interpenetration and mutual constitution of the experiences of gender and sexuality as axes of social difference, loci of new social formations, and salient objects of cultural representation. "*Jins*," the Arabic word for sex, refers both to sex acts as well as gender. I chose to hold on to rather than resolve the multiple referents of the word "*jins*" – translated back to English as "sex" – as it allowed me to capture a certain distance from heteronormativity, across my case studies, that cannot be exclusively conceived on the basis of either sexuality or gender. I consider gender and sexuality together, under the sign of sex, to examine how sexuality constitutes a vector of gender normalization and insubordination, and how gender serves to regulate and discipline erotic charges and limit the horizon of sexual possibility.

Even as they constitute analytically distinguishable categories, gender and sexuality are often hard and impossible to separate if we are to understand the nature and labor of normativity in the production of disciplined subjects and citizens. As an instrument of power, shame disciplines deviating subjects by repressing their self-expression in public. A sexual orientation is shameful, in the case of the arrested men of the nightclub, as it is outwardly indexed in a failed performance of masculinity: gay men are perceived as "pseudo-men." Speaking out about abuse is shameful, for the victim of abuse, because women are not supposed to air their dirty laundry in public as the moral imperative to protect the sanctity of the family supersedes their need to vocalize their suffering. As a "bodily emotion" (Bourdieu, 2001, p.38), shame

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emerges from the failure to perform appropriate masculine and feminine roles. It is the embodied effect of symbolic power through which the dominated, "often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed" (Bourdieu, 2001, p.38). Gender is regulated through the surveillance of sexual conduct, and sexuality is controlled through norms of masculine and feminine desire and embodiment. Indeed, gender categories are what enable desire to take shape and find its aim (Stryker, 2004). As anthropologist David Valentine (2004) argues, gender and sexuality are heuristic categories that respectively describe the social meaning through which we figure out who is masculine and feminine and what those gendered bodies do with one another in the realm we call sex. In the dissertation, I consider this difference from heterosexual norms without assuming the primacy of either sex or gender as ontological categories of experience. As Valentine (2004) has argued, while the analytic separation of bodily sex, social gender, and sexual desire has helped in the analysis and validation of non-normative identities and experiences, to claim as empirical fact that gender and sexuality "are separate and separable experiences results in a substitution of an analytic distinction for actual lived experience" (p.217). Homosexuality, extra-marital sexuality, and cross-sectarian heterosexual attachments are all, to different degrees, "non-normative" and "non-conforming."

Under conditions of masculine domination, women, trans-identifying persons, and gay men – as I will show in the following chapters – are targets of socially-sanctioned verbal and physical violence on the grounds of their inappropriate or excessive femininity. To speak of femininity beyond women and masculinity beyond

men dislodges gender from a biological determinism that obfuscates its socially-constructed meanings, but it also calls into question the separation of gender and sexuality as categories of analysis. This separation characterizes the literary analyses of same-sex desire in Arab cultures that have set the terms of academic debate. Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's 1947 novel *Midaq Alley* is a recurrent object of study as the first Arab novel to depict homosexuality. The novel is a portrait of the transformation of public life in an Egyptian neighborhood upon the onset of colonial modernity. Kirsha, the owner of the alley's coffee shop, is a married family man who loves and lusts over younger men. His character stands as the literary evidence of the historical tolerance of same-sex desire in Egyptian and Arab societies (Lagrange, 2000; Massad, 2007; El-Ariss, 2013; Hadeed, 2013, Allen, 2013). Set in the early 1940s in a traditional alley in an old neighborhood of Cairo, on the eve of the Second World War, Mahfouz's masterpiece – which has inspired multiple television and film adaptations – depicts the changing lives of the residents of the alleyway that gives the novel its name. In the social realist style that characterized his early writing career, Mahfouz traces, in detail, the transformation of morality and public order under the simultaneous forces of British colonialism, war, and modernization. Kirsha is among the novel's many characters who are negotiating an incongruence between their erotic and material desires and the prevailing social norms. Frederic Lagrange (2000) describes him as " just another typical character of the popular *hara* [alley] of Cairo" (p.178) noting the social acceptance of homoerotic desire in pre-colonial Arab societies. For Joseph Massad (2007), Kirsha's character is liminal, standing at the threshold of the pre-colonial pederast and the postcolonial homosexual. His sexual

proclivities only become a subject of scandal once avowed in public, that is, when his latest flame, a local youth, becomes a regular in his café. The scandal takes place when Kirsha's wife storms into the coffee shop one night, attacking her husband's lover and shaming him in front of neighbors, customers, and passersby. In Massad's reading, it is Kirsha's public display of desire rather than the desire itself that incurs scorn, violence, and ultimately his oldest son Husayn's intervention to bring his father to his senses:

> Clearly, for Husayn, his father's sexual practices are not the cause of shame or embarrassment at all if they remain within the realm of the private and are not advertised publicly. People knowing what his father's practices are is one thing while his father becoming open about them is another (Massad, 2007, p.275).

The problem is not, Massad explains, that the neighborhood *knows* Kirsha's desires, but that he thinks he can openly court young men before the eyes of the community without facing censure. It is the "stark publicity" of private and intimate practices that provokes social scorn (p.276). Faced with her husband's refusal to change his ways, Kirsha's wife Umm Husayn seeks the help of the alley's wise mediator and man of faith, Radwan Hussainy, pleading with him to talk to her husband. During his meeting with Kirsha, and upon asking him to pray for God's forgiveness for his misdeeds, Kirsha – annoyed by the encroachment on his private life – politely tells Hussainy that "you have your religion, I have mine!" According to Massad, in his act of self-defense, Kirsha invokes "the traditional tolerant impulse of folk Islam where each will be judged according to his/her religion or to his/her interpretation of religion,"

adding, "This metaphorical positing of sexual practice as tantamount to professing a religion is important in that it signals Kirsha's refusal of one uniform religious judgment of his sexual practice, and his refusal of one religious authority's right to pass such judgment" (p.275). If, like Massad, we read fictional characters as social actors whose lives reflect social reality, we must understand their speech and behavior within the social context in which they unfold, without overinvesting in questions of interiority. In his counter-deployment of a dominant and moralizing religious discourse, Kirsha is not necessarily making a claim about religious hermeneutics. Rather, this scene, like many others in the novel, stages the characters' strategic navigation of the moral order in their pursuit of illicit desires, where radical subversion is not always, and not necessarily, a desirable outcome. When we factor in the secrecy that animates the lives of most of the characters, it becomes evident that scandal, gossip, and surveillance are structuring power dynamics of the social order. By locating same-sex desire within the broader narrative of the novel, examining Kirsha's predicament alongside the alley's other characters, we realize that it is scandal itself that constitutes the thematic and narrative focus of Mahfouz's novel, structured as it is around dynamics of secrecy and revelation.

In his reading of Alaa al-Aswany's Egyptian novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2002), Allen developed the notion of "queer couplings" to note that it is only by reading two characters together, against each other, that their queerness or deviance may be fully revealed to us. I propose to do so by reading Kirsha's sexuality alongside that of another major character. Hamida is engaged to be married to Abbas the alley's barber. After her fiancé's departure to join the British army to make

enough money to marry her, the ambitious young Hamida is seduced by a strange man who promises her infinite wealth and pleasure. Enthralled by the prospects of a life of status and leisure away from the alley, Hamida willingly follows him and becomes a prostitute, leaving the misery of the *hara* behind. Introducing Hamida into our reading of Kirsha yields new observations. Kirsha's struggle with the publicity of his desire is not exceptional; in fact, the dissonance between the characters' interiority and their public selves characterizes the story's individual plotlines. While Massad identifies colonial modernity as the root cause of the transformations of the alley's moral order, he stops short from qualifying the change and noting its effects in the reconfiguration of the private and public spheres. Instead, Kirsha's scandal is construed as a symptom of the entry of Western sexual epistemology into the Egyptian social imaginary. This is exemplified, for Massad, by Mahfouz's use and spelling of the word "H-O-M-O-S-E-X-U-A-L" in English, by one of the characters, to describe Kirsha's newly publicized sexuality. The appearance of a name, an identifiable category, evidences for Massad the infiltration of Western taxonomies into the local socio-cultural fabric and thus the fulfillment of an imperialist will to a particular sexual knowledge.

The question, though, is this: how far can we refuse the reification of difference without preventing the mark of difference from appearing in public? Taken to its logical extreme, the refusal to name same-sex bonds in order to prevent their reification as identities does, indeed, prevent the mark of difference from appearing in public, thus foreclosing the possibility of social transformation through the performance of difference. Indeed, what lacks in Massad's theory of sexuality is an

engagement with the social. If same-sex eroticism, in Massad's account, is contained within an internal realm of desire, unavailable to language and representation, what do we make of gender identities that cannot or refuse to be contained within a private realm? In his fixation on genderless sex, Massad unwittingly reproduces the taken-for-granted analytic distinction between "gender" and "sexuality," thereby replicating its analytical blind spots. This is evidenced in his reading of the story of Afsa, a queer character in the play *Rituals of signs and transformations* by Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannus. For Massad, it is when Afsa decided to "come out," adopting an effeminate look and style publicly, that society condemned him: "The fact that al-Afsa lived in a society that for the most part respected the private […] and did not condemn what it did not know, was unsatisfactory" (p.367). El-Afsa's effeminacy is regarded as a sign of sexual excess and not a manifestation of non-normative gender expression by Massad. As Smith argues in her analysis of what she calls the "deafening silence" surrounding being gay in Morocco, "the entrenched taboo is that gayness cannot exist or, if it does, then it must remain unspoken and concealed behind a gendered identity that is compatible with accepted social mores" (p.46). Normative gender identity is thus produced in concealing and silencing deviant sex. And the concealment of deviance is successfully achieved through authorized expressions of masculinity and femininity. But, evidently, this model of "private" or "privatized" sex acts only works for those who can and want to publicly conform to gender norms: effeminate men, alternative masculinities, butch women, transgender people are all excluded

Thus, even if we accept Massad's claim of the existence of a pre-colonial tacit Arab tolerance of same-sex desires, what I call following Liu and Ding a "reticent tolerance" (elaborated in chapter 2), bodies and desires deemed excessive, flagrant, that simply refuse to be privately contained lie beyond the scope of this conditional social tolerance predicated on the public erasure of deviating, queer, and dissenting bodies. Assuming this erasure as a transhistorical cultural trait forecloses the possibility of the social transformation of gender relations that often requires the public display, performance, and recognition of difference. Evidently, this model of "private" or "privatized" sexualities only works for those who publicly conform to gender norms: effeminate men, masculine women, and trans individuals are all excluded from Massad's genderless discussion of sexuality. Inserting Hamida sexuality into the analysis of Kirsha's homoeroticism, therefore, serves to redress this gender blindness, reintroducing the question of gender, and of women, in a discussion on the relationship between sex and power. If the previous overview on the visibility of deviant desires in modern Arabic literature has focused on male homoeroticism and homosexuality, it is because non-normative female sexuality – indeed female sexuality in general – remains less visible and rigidly regulated than its male counterpart in public. As a queer coupling, Kirsha and Hamida – the homosexual and the prostitute –move us beyond the specific question of same sex-desire and the identities that may or may not emerge through it, and into a consideration of the appearance of non-normative gender roles and sexualities in public.

The Infrapolitics of Sex

Shame is an important mechanism of power in this regard and is differently deployed by social actors, such as moral entrepreneurs and sexual deviants, in ways that reproduce or disrupt social norms of sexual behavior and expression. As Dina Georgis (2013) has shown, "*Ayb*, the word for shame in Arabic, which is closely linked to what is deemed morally wrong by society, is commonly used in everyday conversation in the Arab world. When children are told that their behavior is *ayb*, they learn early on that that behavior is censored by the outside world, which is not forgiving of moral violations" (p.64). As Rubin (1988) has pointed out, "Families play a crucial role in enforcing sexual conformity. Much social pressure is brought to bear to deny erotic dissidents the comforts and resources that families provide" (p.22). In Lebanon and the Arab world, families and the extended networks that emerge around them constitute the primary site of gender and sexual control and regulation. In her work on intimacy within Arab families, Suad Joseph (1999) explains that notions of the self do not conform to the individualist, separative, bounded, autonomous, constructs subscribed to in much of Western psychological theory (p.2).[18] Arab societies, she argues, valorize rather than pathologize the embeddedness of self and other, where embeddedness does not necessarily preclude individual agency.

But this vital and sustaining relationality, she points out, can also become conjoined with gendered and aged structures of domination that are moralized by

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[18] For more on the Lebanese family, see Samir Khalaf (1968), "primordial ties and politics in Lebanon," *Middle Eastern Studies, 4*(3); Edwin Terry Prothero and Lutfy Najib Diab (1974), *Changing Family Patterns in the Arab East*. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press; Akram Fouad Khater, Inventing Home:

kinship norms and rules (p.2). A "patriarchal connectivity," formed through the intertwinement of relational modes of selfhood and patriarchy, leads to the internalization of demands of compliance with gendered and aged hierarchies (p.14). In her examination of a discourse of "family crisis" in contemporary Arab societies, Frances Hasso (2011) notes how this incendiary discourse reinforces hegemonic values and inhibits productive discussions about the complexity of social changes that emerging marital and sexual practices such as singlehood, increased individuation, divorce, delayed marriage, secret marriage, and exogamy point to (p.16). But, as Georgis (2013) notes, "Any violation of conventional life, especially if it's public in nature, including a marriageless life, divorce, adultery, or any type of sexual scandal, threatens the social fabric" (p.243). As such, in a discourse of crisis, changes in women's subjectivities and desires around gender, marriage, and sexuality are often underestimated, and their demands for more equitable practices are attributed to mimicry of the West (Hasso, 2011, p.125; 129). In both scholarly research and popular culture, Joseph (1999) argues, the centrality of family in the Arab world has been so axiomatic that there has been relatively few attempts to problematize the psychodynamics of family life, leading to its placement in a "sacrosanct place" beyond critique and reproach (p.9). The result is that most profound insights on the interior dynamics of family life come from literary and fictional accounts (Joseph, 1999, p.9).

In his examination of the representation of sexual deviance and madness in contemporary Arab fiction, literary scholar Tarek el-Ariss (2013) identifies the family as a crucial site of bodily and sexual regulation, a coercive counterpart to the

regulatory institutions of modern power examined by Foucault (such as the prison and the clinic). As Rubin (1988) has argued, "Popular ideology holds that families are not supposed to produce or harbor erotic non-conformity. Many families respond by trying to reform, punish, or exile sexually offending members" (p.22). The family, el-Ariss explains, wields its social and political authority to suppress deviant and excessive desires and confine sexuality within the bounds of heterosexual marriage (p.128). Through acts of emotional and physical violence ranging from gossip, beatings, murder attempts, incarceration and institutionalization, and forced marriage, the family - and the neighborhood by extension – regulate sexual practices and gender presentations deemed socially-inappropriate (p.132). In his reading of *Thieves in Retirement* (2002) by Egyptian novelist Hamdi Abu Golayyel, El-Ariss describes the main character's family's continuous attempts to suppress and eliminate his homosexuality and effeminacy, to make them and him "disappear" (p.134). The forced institutionalization of Sayf, the homosexual son, as ordered by his older brother highlights "the complicity of the modern institution – the psychiatric clinic – with the traditional *hara*'s [alley] enforcement of social and sexual norms" (p.134). In order to restore its legitimacy and counter the ill repute incurred by the son's effeminate appearance, the patriarchal family enlists the power of the modern institution of the mental asylum to eliminate the mad, queer son (p.134).[19] El-Ariss (2013) compares the scene of Sayf's abduction by the "madmobile," in front of the entire neighborhood, to the spectacle of ritualized punishment that Foucault describes

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[19] El-Ariss (2013)also sheds light on the ways in which traditional discursive practices, such as neighbors' gossip, produce homosexuality as an antisocial and subversive behavior and the source of a family's shame (p.133).

in *Discipline and Punish* as "the site of deployment of the premodern power of the sovereign" (p.134). This public display of the queer son's disappearance restores the family's honor, "aligning the premodern institution of punishment and justice [the family] with that of the modern state" (p.135).

While the forced disappearance (*ikhtifa'a*) of the body of the effeminate homosexual frames the process through which homosexuality is disciplined (El-Ariss, 2013, p.136), *takhaffi* on the other hand, as El-Ariss explains, refers to tactics and strategies of disguise and concealment adopted by the deviant subject in her navigation of a censorious public realm. Upon his release from the asylum, the forms of *takhaffi* (disguise) adopted by Sayf – namely the public façade of heterosexual marriage – allow him to fulfill his deviant desires in secret, far from the neighborhood, and are thus accepted by his new wife and family. "What is imagined as a traditional form of homosexuality, which coexists with marriage," el-Ariss contends, "is exposed to its moment of coercive production in Abu Golayyel's novel […] Sayf disappears through a power structure that involves the family, the neighborhood, and the state " (pp.136-137). In light of the asylum's failure to "cure" him, the doctor's note to Sayf's family, recommending his immediate marriage, reverts to "an 'old fashioned' cure that seeks to neutralize homosexuality's visibility by making it disappear in the arranged marriage" (p.138).

This moves the discussion on sexual identity beyond the binary of invisibility and visibility as it conceives visibility not as an emergence from an originary maw of darkness, but as an ongoing articulation and re-articulation of the appearance of non-normative bodies in public. This reframing of visibility is necessary in order to re-

politicize what has been defines as cultural difference. In his analysis of the 2002 Queen Boat Affair, when Egyptian police raided a gay nightclub, located in a boat moored on the Nile in Cairo and arrested fifty-two men on charges of debauchery, Massad argued that it was not "same-sex sexual practices that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the *publicness* that these gay-identified men seek" (p.382). In a similar vein, Pratt Ewing (2011) argues that "Muslims are less troubled by sex and desire in all their possible forms than they are by the peculiar modern practice of *naming* our sexualities as the basis for secular public identities" (p.89). Such essentializations, she adds, are typically a part of the very structure of "coming out" stories that are foreign to Muslims (pp.93-94). In their anti-identitarian critique, that is the rejection of public identities in favor of erotic practices, both authors identify the naming of desires, rather than the desires themselves, as a problem. If these societies do not *know* these sexual identities to begin with, the argument goes, then how could they be accused of homophobia? In other words, how can there be a phobia without there being a homo?

Murray and Roscoe (1997) observed that "The apparent tolerance for homosexuality in Islamic societies depends upon a widespread and enduring pattern of collective denial in which the condition for pursuing […] homosexuality is that the behavior never be publicly acknowledged" (p.8). Further noting: "Usually in Arab and other Islamic societies, everyone successfully avoids public recognition (let alone discussion!) of deviations from normative standards – sexual or other" (p.15). As such, "claims of a [gay] identity and demands of respect for it challenge the

accommodation of discrete homosexual behavior" (p. 17). The insistence, then, is on the behavior to remain discreet. It is only in its reticent form that sexual nonconformity is, in turn, reticently tolerated. Juxtaposed to homophobia, this reticent tolerance can be understood as society's way of (not) knowing its sexual others. However, as Liu and Ding (2005) argue, "It is too simplistic to think of pre-western traditional tolerance and post-colonial or western epistemic homophobia as mutually exclusive and diametrically clear-cut attitudes and ways of knowing or ignoring" (p.32).

But visibility is a political question that determines who has access to the public sphere and under what condition. The space of appearance is brought forth through action and speech in public (p.183). The public, as Hannah Arendt (1958) has described it, is a "space of appearance," where one is heard and seen by others. It comes into being "wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm" (p.178). Its peculiarity, Arendt writes, is that it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men – as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed – but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves" (p.178). Power, Arendt writes, is "actualized only when word and deed have not parted company [...] where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence" (p.179). "What keeps people together after the fleeting

moment of action has passed (what we today call 'organization') and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power" (p.180). Plurality, acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization (p.181). The mere fact of appearing, as Thompson explains in his reading of Arendt, "endows words and actions with a kind of reality they did not have before, precisely because they are now seen and heard by others" (p.63). If we recognize the mediated nature of publicness it follows that the appearance of the non-normative in mediated representations is necessary for alternative life forms to be real – recognizable and identifiable – particularly for the minoritarian subject in a phobic public sphere. It is through their visibility and existence in public that discourses on gender can produce political possibilities for social change. The texts under discussion represent stigmatized sexualities and gender roles but also, importantly, the taboo of their representation. The politics of representation they enact could be described as "infrapolitical," to borrow James Scott's (1990) term, inasmuch as they constitute attempts to display the forbidden through fugitive gestures of disguise, masquerade, and anonymity. They act as "vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity" (xiii), among other strategies. The expressions of dissident genders and sexualities under consideration are *infra* inasmuch they are often undetectable and hard to pin down. The testifying social deviants on talk shows, for instance, often hide their identity behind masks and other accessories, becoming visible while maintaining their anonymity. Similarly, queer activists and bloggers write anonymously or under pseudonyms, in online and print publications, making themselves identifiable for members of the community

while hiding their identity from the larger public. The "dialectic of disguise and surveillance," as Scott (1990) explains, pervades relations between the weak and the strong, and help us understand cultural patterns of domination and subordination (p.4). The concealment of personal identity, occurring as it is on talk shows and in queer publications, is politically meaningful not because it enables a partial "coming out" of deviance in public – though this is also significant. Rather, its counter-hegemonic charge lies in its exposure of the limits of public discourse, of "what can be done and said in public, what can be done in private but not spoken of in public, and what can, patriotically speaking, neither be done nor legitimately spoken of at all" (Berlant, 1997, p.383).[20]

Scott (1990) points to the "theatrical imperatives" that prevail in situations of domination, distinguishing between the public and hidden transcripts of the discourses of the weak and dominated. For Scott, the dominated acts in public in close conformity with how the dominant want things to appear and it is in their interest "to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him" (p.4). In its accomodationist disposition, the public transcript "provides convincing evidence of the hegemony of dominant value, for the hegemony of dominant discourse" (p.4). Scott's distinction between public and hidden transcripts captures the dynamics of normalization of the status quo, not as evidence of a false consciousness among the dominated, but as the result of a compulsory performance of the norms of public behavior. It offers a useful

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[20] Importantly, as I will later discuss in the introduction, patriotism in the Lebanese context cannot be considered in isolation from sectarianism as allegiance to the nation is re-routed through an allegiance to the sect as a social and political community headed by a male leader.

framework to think about the practices of hiding in public that constitute a running thread across the different cultural productions under consideration. In chapter 2, for instance, I consider filmmaker Nadine Labaki's use of reticence in her depictions of the touchy subjects of homosexuality and female sexuality. Labaki's use of metaphor in her filmic image and script to render unspeakable subjects allows her to evade censorship by state authorities. Through symbolizing gestures – recurrent hair washing scenes between a feminine and a masculine woman – she renders lesbian desire without fixing it in representation. Her reliance on visual analogy and word play to convey meaning distinguishes her restrained style of storytelling that abstains from overstating its message. It displays without revealing everything. Labaki describes her reticence as a representational strategy, a necessary bargain to push the limits of the knowable in public.

In "The Privilege of Unknowing," Sedgwick (1988) questions the impulse against the sexual definition of same-sex bonds. She concludes that under the consolidate regime of "sexual knowledge," such a move took the shape of a repressive appeal to "a modern origin-myth of primeval sexual innocence" (p.121), a move towards the sexual de-legitimation that will undergird any new fascism. She writes that "It is only within this understanding that the political concept of a fight against sexual ignorance can make sense: A fight not against originary ignorance, nor for originary ignorance, but against the killing pretense that a culture does not know what it knows" (p.121). Knowledge, she explains, is the "magnetic field" and is not itself power (p.102). Ignorance and opacity compete with it in mobilizing the flow of energy, goods, and people. Recalling the work of Foucault and Derrida among others

in revealing knowledge's vexing relation to power, Sedgwick nevertheless holds ignorance under equal critical scrutiny, trying as with knowledge to pluralize and specify it. If ignorance is not "a single Manichaean, aboriginal maw of darkness from which the heroics of human cognition can occasionally wrestle facts, insights,

freedoms, progress, perhaps there exists a plethora of ignorances, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution" (Sedgwick, 1988, p.104). Cultural production around gender hierarchies and the stigma of sexual non-conformity is an important site of analysis of the labor it takes to maintain and disrupt the privilege of unknowing. It allows us to examine the creation of "red lines" for discourse, the distribution of speaking privileges, the elaboration of new modes of address, and the development of sites for the articulation of counter-cultural discourses.

Method

Name	Publication/Films/TV Shows	Occupation	Date
Diana	*Bekhsoos*	Writer	8/8/2015
Joelle	*Bareed/Bekhsoos*	Writer/Editor	1/7/2015
Leen	*Bekhsoos*	Writer/Editor	6/7/2015
Lynn	*Bekhsoos/Bareed*	Writer/Editor	13/1/2014
Manal*	*Bekhsoos/Bareed*	Writer	10/7/2015
Nadine	*Bekhsoos/Bareed*	Writer/Editor	22/4/2013
Ahmad Saleh	*Barra*	Editor	1/5/2015
George Azzi	*Barra*	Writer	16/3/2012
Raja Farah	Oh My Happiness (gay blog)	Blogger	20/12/2013
Carl*	Be Lebnani (gay blog)	Blogger	27/12/2013
Nadine Labaki	Caramel/Where Do We Go Now?	Filmmaker/Actress	08/15/2013
Janane Mallat	Let the Brave Speak Out	Television Producer	12/23/2014
Ziad Noujeim	Let the Brave Speak Out	Talk Show Host	12/15/2014
Zaven Kouyoumdjian	Open Conversation	Talk Show Host/Writer	03/16/2013

List of Interviews
*Indicates pseudonym to protect anonymity

To explore how non-normative and dissident genders and sexualities are communicated across media platforms, I propose an approach that combines textual analysis of talk show episodes, films, music videos, and electronic and print publications with interviews with cultural producers, filmmakers, television presenters and producers, and queer feminist writers and activists.

In order to grasp a cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to study its production (how it is created), the thematic narrative, visual, or textual content (what is being said) and its reception (how audiences interpret or use it) (Gamson, 1998, p.227). Therefore, in addition to interpreting the gender discourses and ideologies in the texts under study, my aim is to recover the meanings that cultural producers give to practices of representation and consider them within the political, social, and economic fields that define their conditions of articulation. This is a study of media as a cultural text and a public interface where neither the messenger nor the interpreter have the last say, and where meaning is never fixed but always in circulation. It consists of a thick description of the texts collected, capturing the density of the webs of signification that animate them and lend meaning to the social phenomena they represent.

Thick description, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has defined it, presupposes a semiotic concept of culture as "interworked systems of construable signs." Culture, Geertz writes, "is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed. It is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described" (p.14). Thick description, as a method of cultural analysis, is "not an experimental science in

search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p.5). It is an interpretation of the flow of social discourse, an attempt "to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions" (p.20). The dissertation locates the social meanings of gender and sexuality by mapping connections across these different discursive occasions, treating culture as a text and tackling a variety of media genres that evidently have different conditions of production and reception. While this may spread the analysis too thin, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) remind us, "the more settings studied the less time can be spent in each. The researcher must make a trade-off here between breadth and depth of investigation" (p. 31). The thickness of the description does not lie in the depth of engagement with the generic specificities of television, film, digital publications, or memoir. Rather, the thickness lies in the density of the webs of signification woven across multiple sites where the norms of gender and sexual behavior are represented, challenged, and reinforced. The locus of study, as Geertz reminds us, is not the same as the object of study. A cross-media analysis can identify discursive and communicative patterns in different representations, mapping lines of articulation within and among media texts and their producers.

Talk Show	Episode	Air Date
Let the Brave Speak Out (El-Shater Yehki)	"AIDS"	9/11/1995
	"The Devils and Hard Rock"	10/1/1996
	"Sexual Variance"	10/7/1996
	"Rape"	7/11/1997
	"Incest"	3/12/1997
	"Cohabitation"	6/2/1998
	"Prostitution"	6/3/1998
	"Marriage of Pleasure"	27/3/1998
	"Who Said It is Forbidden?"	29/11/2000
	"The Internet"	7/2/2001
	"Sexual Repression"	25/4/2001
Open Conversation	"AIDS"	26/02/1999

(Sireh Wenfatahit)	"Sexual Questions"	16/04/1999
	"The Phallic Woman"	15/06/2002
	"Transexuality"	16/03/2004
	"How Two Males Got Married in Lebanon"	23/05/2005
	"Prostitution"	17/08/2006
	"Girls Who Became Men"	7/09/2007
Bold Red Line **(Ahmar bil-Katt el-Arid)**	"Transexuality"	16/4/2008
	"Pre-Marital Relationships"	26/11/2008
	"Homosexuality"	28/1/2009
	"Sexual Harassment"	22/4/2009
	"Sexual Pleasure"	1/7/2009
	"Incest"	3/3/2010
	"Sexual Problems among Men"	16/6/2010
	"Those who Physically Transform"	11/5/2011
	"When They Touch"	6/6/2012

In his pathbreaking essay "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall (2006 [1980]) challenges the send-receiver transmission model of communication by interrogating the necessary correspondence between the encoded meanings of the message and the effects these meanings generate. He calls for the conceptualization of the communication process in terms of a "structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (p.128). This move, as cultural studies scholar Jennifer Daryl Slack (2005) argues, compels a rethinking of the process of communication not as correspondence but as articulation. In this model, the different components of the communicative process – sender, receiver, message, meaning – are themselves articulations, without an essential or fixed meaning. Discourses of gender and sexuality, circulating as they are in mediated messages, are constituted as analytic objects through lines of articulation drawn between texts and their producers, consumers, and other texts. This is a circular approach, as Grossberg (2009) explains,

inasmuch as it "can only produce what it is to analyze through the practice of its analysis" (p.35). The answer to the question, why do we talk about non-normative genders and sexualities in the way we do and how does this shape and reflect relations of power within society, does not lie in one place for all time. Rather, social meaning emerges through connections that must be made between different discursive sites through a process of articulation between moments of production, consumption, and circulation of cultural artifacts.

In chapter 1, I combine a textual analysis of 27 talk show episodes from three television talk shows – "*Al-Shater Yehki*" (Let the Brave Speak Out), "*Sireh Winfatahit*" (Open Conversation), and "*Ahmar bil Khatt el-Arid*" (Bold Red Line) – with interviews with Janane Mallat, a talk show producer, and two talk show hosts, Ziad Noujeim and Zaven Kouyoumdjian.

In Chapter 2, I analyze filmmaker Nadine Labaki's music videos and her two feature films, *Sukkar Banat* (Caramel, 2007) and *W Halla' La Wein*? (Where Do We Go Now? 2012). In addition, I examine articles about and reviews of Labaki's work and interviews with her in local and international media. I incorporate Labaki's own understanding and framing of her work through an interview I conducted with her in August 2013. In chapter 3, I examine two feminist queer publications, *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail, 2009) and *Bekhsoos* (Concerning, 2008 – 2012), through a textual analysis of stories and posts and in-depth interviews with six feminist and queer writers and activists.

Cultural studies, as Daryl Slack (2005 [1996]) argues, works with a conception of method as "practice," suggesting both the techniques to be used as well

as the activity of practicing or trying out. This "shifts perspective from the acquisition or application of an epistemology to the creative process of articulating, of thinking relations and connections as how we come to know and as creating what we know" (p. 115). More than a connection, then, articulation is the process of creating connections. For Stuart Hall (1986), the unity or connection that matters is the linkage between an articulated discourse – say on "gay rights" – and the social forces "with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily be, connected" (p.53).   The problem with Joseph Massad's (2002) conceptualization of the Gay International as the eminent social formation through which and to which discourse on LGBT rights is articulated is that it fails to account for the ways in which LGBT and queer discourse gets articulated to a variety of other social formations and discourses, thereby overlooking the unpredictability of articulation and the new political subject positions it may give rise to. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to identify and specify LGBT and queer discourses as they circulate in culture, and to disarticulate them from the hegemonic project of the Gay International in order to examine them in situ as they get articulated to other discourses such as anti-sectarianism, anti-imperialism, nationalism, social justice, gender equality, and in new social formations such as gay, feminist, and queer collectives (discussed in chapter 3). After all, the articulation of ideology in a new social formation, as Stuart Hall (1986) reminds us, is the condition of politics. A critique of queer and LGBT discourses that does not first proceed by tracing and describing the webs of meaning in which they are imbricated forecloses the political possibilities of these discourses by always already articulating them to Western neo-

imperial discourses and social formations, such as the Gay International, that simultaneously produce Arab queers as victims of their cultures and as collaborators in their victimization. Re-introducing articulation into the study of culture allows us to account for social transformation – the visibility of queer and gay subjects in public – not as the inevitable effect of the unhindered penetration of Arab societies by Western ideologies of sexuality, but as the result of unpredictable connections between these ideologies, the discourses through which they are socially articulated, and the social groups "that see themselves reflected as a unified force in the ideology which constitutes them" (Hall, p. 55). The theory and method of articulation, Hall contends, enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation. Through articulation, we can discern the situated meaning of queer discourses without reducing and essentializing any public manifestation of sexual politics as symptomatic of cultural imperialism. It is a theory and a method to explain, for instance, the interpellation of one of my informants, a Lebanese gay man, by a rainbow flag carried in the space of an anti-Iraq war street demonstration in Beirut. Signs, as Hall (1980) argues, acquire their full ideological value and are "open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings – at the level of their 'associative' meaning" (p.56). Articulation accounts for that non-necessary link between a rainbow flag and anti-war discourse. Framing queer-identified individuals as native informants for or collaborators of the Gay International misrecognizes the differences in a discourse of sexuality by fixating on its unities, and fails to account for the contingencies of a correspondence between an ideology and a social force.

The communicative mode of representations of non-normativity, their mode of circulation that I characterize as "infrapolitical" is significant for our understanding of the discourses themselves and the ideologies underpinning them because, as Hall (1980) reminds us, "the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange (from the viewpoint of circulation)" (p.129). Thus, the analysis of the form of appearance of signs of non-normative genders and sexualities, as well as their associative meanings, that is, of their articulation with discourses and social groups, is crucial because "it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification" (Hall, p. 133). To illustrate his point, he uses the example of religion, arguing that it has no necessary political connotation: "Its meaning – political and ideological – comes precisely from its position within a formation [by which he means society]. It comes with what else it is articulated to. Since those articulations are not inevitable, not necessary, they can potentially be transformed, so that religion can be articulated in more than one way" (Hall, 1986, p.54). This, however, does not entail that all articulations are of equal force. Some, as he suggests, are potent and persistent. He describes them as "lines of tendential force" that serve as barriers to re-articulation or re-signification (p.53). This explains, for instance, the tenacious articulation of non-normative genders and sexualities to discourses of medical pathology, moral inferiority, social deviance, and mental illness.

CHAPTER ONE

Television Talk: Sexual Deviance and the Performance of Politics

"With a few mediagenic elements to get attention – disguises, masks, whatever – television can produce an effect close to what you'd have from fifty thousand protestors in the street."

Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, 1998

"It was the wigs that made me want to be one."

Marga Gomez, *Marga Gomez is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, 1992

Introduction

"They are normal, living a life without noise around them. No one talks about them." Lucio, a twenty-two year old Lebanese man, had come to the studio to participate in an episode of "*Al-Shater Yehki*" (Let the Brave Speak Out), a weekly nighttime social talk show broadcast on the terrestrial channel of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC). Speaking behind a white screen, concealing his identity, Lucio complains about the unwanted "noise" in his life as a feminine-looking man. He compares himself to "normal" men and women who are spared the daily verbal and physical harassment he endures as a gender queer person. The point of appearing on the show, he explains, is to make his voice heard by thousands of spectators. In April 1996, when that episode was first broadcast, "Let the Brave Speak Out*"* was one of the most popular programs on Lebanese television. In fact, it was the first local adaptation of the live-audience talk show by LBC. The collective discussion format produced a space for public life to take form in a society emerging from a fifteen-year long civil war. Studio participants talked about their personal

experiences, audiences at home phoned in to state their opinions, share their stories, and address questions to the experts – psychiatrists, doctors, lawyers, university professors – featured on the show. Talk show topics are presented by the producers as issues of social and collective concern, interpellating their audiences as members of a national public, enlisting their participation in the creation of the discourse that produces it. In this chapter, I treat television talk as a space of publicity constituted in discourse. This popular media genre stages the performance of "public opinion" around such issues as prostitution, homosexuality, civil marriage, and incest, thus functioning as an archive of contentious politics around sex. But it is also occasionally a space for the expression of marginal subjectivities and their appearance in a majoritarian public sphere from which they have been excluded.

The show's claim to realism, its pretense of representing "social reality" (*al-waqe ' al-ijtima'i*), constituted its main attraction. In pre-recorded segments, producers claimed to capture "public opinion" on any given issue by asking ordinary citizens, on the streets, to share their opinions on camera. Writers on the show would, as executive producer Janane Mallat put it, go to the "end of the world" to report a compelling story – the end of the world in this case being a mere two-hour drive from Beirut. Long before the emergence of Reality TV, shows such as *Let the Brave* claimed to represent reality and "capture the voice of ordinary people." In the preface to his best-selling book, *Society's Witness*, talk show host Zaven Kouyoumdjian (2012) writes that his television program contributed to the emergence of new Arab and Lebanese generations that have no taboos in their conversations and daily lives. These are viewers that had now become "more comfortable with and willing to talk

about their bodies and their psychological problems" because "they had seen on TV people who are like them, talking about what they hadn't dared talk about" (p.11). In his words, the show had set in motion a "culture of revelation and confession on the television screen" (p.11). Through the representation of reality, these shows also wanted, crucially, to educate citizens about a host of pertinent social questions. In the studio, hosts would seek out the opinion of experts – clerics, priests, psychiatrists, medical doctors, and lawyers – on issues as diverse as rape, corruption, heavy metal music, and homosexuality.

That this particular form of televised therapeutic/didactic talk, where real people discussed real issues, emerged as it did in the direct aftermath of the civil war matters to the analysis. In a purely materialist sense, real people with real stories were television's newest commodity, delivered on a weekly basis to audiences watching from home. Sexual deviants like Lucio drove higher audience ratings and consequently higher advertisement shares. Their appearance on the show made commercial sense. But they were also among a roster of citizens who came to publicly testify and complain about a host of socio-economic and political grievances in the immediate aftermath of a fifteen-year civil war, in a context where the civil war itself could not be explicitly discussed. As media scholars Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1994) explain, whatever the intentions of broadcasters in making these shows – often accused of being irrelevant, cheap, and trashy – they do not define the nature of the product or its audience reception. In fact, such shows may end up constituting a "contested space" where "new discursive practices are developed in

contrast to the traditional modes of political and ideological representation"
(Carpignano et al, 1990, p.35).

In the context of a society that had come out of a long war that remained
largely unnarrated and underrepresented in the postwar mediascape, the confessional
drive of talk shows – and the obsession with representing reality that undergirds it –
takes on different overtones. Scepticism about the confessional drive fuelling these
shows is often articulated in relation to their sensationalist revelation and exposure of
what are seen as private or and politically trivial affairs, particularly concerning sex.
These shows do in fact turn personal stories into a spectacle for public consumption.
They incite and entice people to share intimate information about their lives with an
immediate studio audience, and through it, to millions of unknown viewers. In a
typical format, a studio is filled with invited "ordinary people" and "experts" who
discuss topical questions and social problems under the direction of a program host.
The studio audience, standing in for the general public, explores the personal troubles
of individuals who have come to tell their stories. As Bourdieu explains, while the
latter are there to explain themselves, the former are there to explain things, "to make
a metadiscourse, a talk about talk" (p.34-35). In this chapter, I consider both – talking
about the self and talking about talk – as new communicative practices that acquire a
particular significance in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. The utterances
made by ordinary guests, experts, studio audiences, in pre-recorded segments, call-
ins, and street interviews, constitute an archive of "the waste materials of everyday
communication in the national public sphere" (Berlant, 1997, p.13). Like Berlant, I
read this mundane talk about the nation, and the prominent place of sexual and gender

difference within it, "not as white noise but as powerful language, not as 'mere' fiction or fantasy but as violence and desire that have material effects" (p.13).

Taking the talk show as a site of social investigation, this chapter examines how this form of mediated talk, with its focus on televised self-disclosure, refracts otherwise muted differences of class, sect, and gender in the national public sphere. Through a reading of three talk shows, *Al-Shater Yehki* (Let the Brave Speak Out), *Ahmar bil Khatt al-Arid* (Bold Red Line), and *Sireh Winfatahet* (Open Conversation), my analytic goal is threefold. First, it is to understand how sexual difference is performed and narrated on television shows that claim to represent social reality. Second, it is to offer a theoretical account of how representations of marginal sexualities – of queers, children, or the rural working class – interpellate differently-positioned publics. Finally, it is to explore how television talk, as a media practice, may constitute a new ethnography. I treat episodes of these shows as texts, verbal and visual, where information about sexual deviance circulates. Between the opinion of experts, like lawyers and psychiatrists, and moral authorities like Muslim sheikhs and Christian priests, talk shows are part of the everyday vernacular in which sectarian citizenship is produced and reproduced in postwar Lebanon. The topics may have varied, but the lines of contention were set, and sect constituted the primary axis of social difference. In drawing the contours of the socially-acceptable, Lebanese talk shows are a repository of everyday sectarian discourse, which should be understood as a product of the civil war. The signing of the Taif Accord in 1990 may have put an end to the protracted armed conflict, but it had also set in motion a postwar discourse of "collective living" – *al-'aych al-muchtarak* – where sect became the primary and

only political signifier of identity, of difference, of a difference that could be legitimately politicized. In postwar Lebanon, religious sect is the primary identity that was allowed space in public, space to be politicized, and bestowed with the symbolic power to define the political terrain. While talk shows may have been popular channels for the circulation of a sectarian discourse, they have also allowed the public articulation of minor discourses, and have therefore, in the process, contributed to the emergence of counterpublics.

Anatomy of a neglected genre

The Lebanese civil war lasted from 1975 to 1990. Armed fighting was officially suspended following the signature, by Lebanese parliamentarians and political leaders, of the Saudi-sponsored Taif Accord in 1989.[21] Originally pitting leftist Lebanese and Palestinian factions against conservative Christian nationalists, the war eventually spiraled into a protracted sectarian conflict, bankrolled by foreign powers, that left 120,000 dead, 76,000 displaced, and 10,000 disappeared. As the warring factions splintered and multiplied over the course of fifteen years, so did their channels of communication. The breakdown of the socio-political order was in fact mirrored in the country's completely unregulated wartime broadcasting system. By the end of the war, there were fifty-two television stations and over 120 radio stations for a population of 3 million (Human Rights Watch, 1997). In a bid to control the

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[21] Constitutional amendments resulting from the agreement were passed in August 1990, expanding Parliament to 128 seats that were, for the first time, equally distributed between Muslims and Christians. Then, in March of 1991, Parliament passed a general amnesty law for crimes perpetrated before its enactment, ensuring legal immunity for the warlords and criminals who constitute the postwar ruling class.

airwaves after the establishment of civil peace, and within a broader context of re-instititionalization and re-regulation, the government passed a broadcasting law in 1994 to end the state's legal monopoly of the airwaves and establish a licensing system for privately-owned radio and television stations.

The Audiovisual Media Law was controversial because the licensing process it put in place largely followed the political interests of the legislators (with licenses granted to television stations that were directly or indirectly linked to leading political figures). In addition, it encouraged censorship by prohibiting the discussion of matters "seeking to inflame or incite sectarian or religious chauvinism or seeking to push society, and especially children, to physical and moral violence, moral deviance, terrorism, or racial and religious segregation." In practice, this regulation of proper media content meant that public expression and debate around the war - its causes, culprits, and consequences - was stifled and largely missing from public discourse. In addition, the *de facto* postwar hegemony of the Syrian Assad regime over Lebanon, which lasted until the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country in 2005, imposed further restrictions on freedom of expression, effectively circumscribing public criticism of the status quo (El Khazen, 2003; Salloukh, 2005).

As a mass medium, television was also undergoing structural transformations in the mid-1990s. First, the emergence and diffusion of satellite television in the Arab world - epitomized by the launching of the Qatari-owned all-news channel *Al-Jazeera* – delivered, for the first time, one of the largest regional media markets to advertisers. The prospects of this new transnational Arab television audience preoccupied public commentators and academics who reveled in the notion of an "Arab public sphere"

(Lynch). In this context, where the role of the media in Arab public life was becoming a topic of strategic and political interest, *Al-Jazeera's* political talk shows captured the attention of media scholars who saw in the genre the dawn of a new political age, characterized by public participation, rational deliberation, and open dialogue (Bahry, 2001; El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003; Miladi, 2003; Lynch, 2005; Rinnawi, 2006; Seib, 2008). Through fiery programs such as *Al-Ittijah al-Mu'akes* (The Opposite Direction) and *Bila Hudud* (without Borders), *Al-Jazeera's* promotion of criticism, mockery, and public call-ins was arguably democratizing Arab political culture (Lynch, 2003).

The fixation on the socio-political effects of these political talk shows, however, overshadowed other equally popular genres of TV talk that emerged at that transitional moment. As Marwan Kraidy (2007) points out, "When scholars and policy makers contemplate the Arab 'media revolution,' they mostly think of *Al-Jazeera* and its news competitors. They are guided by the assumption that all-news satellite television networks are the predominant, even the single, shaper of the Arab public sphere" (p.139). Social talk shows such as *Let the Brave* were largely excluded from an analysis that was concerned with the rational, argumentative, and deliberative model of public discourse even though they, too, largely adopted that model. But scepticism about the political significance of trivialized cultural forms is hardly new, nor is it restricted to the Arab context. As Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1994) point out, scholars who look at social talk shows in Europe and the U.S. often wonder whether "real conversation" takes place in these discussions, and whether they

produce "a community of citizens talking among themselves about issues of public concern" (p.3).

After going on air in 1985 as a platform for the Christian-nationalist Lebanese Forces militia, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, LBC, rapidly became the most watched station in the country and the longest running privately owned Arab television channel (Kraidy, 2007, p.142). The station quickly became popular among Arab viewers for featuring attractive and scantily clad TV anchors who mixed Lebanese Arabic with French and English words, often speaking with an American accent. LBC established a regional reputation as liberal, westernized, and morally-compromised media outlet. The station provoked a region-wide controversy in the mid-2000s with its first reality TV show, "Star Academy" (Kraidy, 2010). The moral panic around the representation of mixing between male and female contestants in a competitive environment of singing and dancing was one chapter in the station's history of pushing the envelope around gender representations. But well before the emergence of reality television, the station launched its first weekly social talk show, *Let the Brave Speak Out,* in 1995. It quickly became one of LBC's flagship programs by featuring real and ordinary people talking about controversial issues such as civil marriage, cohabitation, and incest. The show was cancelled in July 2001 following ongoing clashes with the Syrian authorities (and their proxies in the Lebanese security establishment) who were effectively governing the country.[22]

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[22] The show's host, Ziad Noujeim, recently confirmed that the program was cancelled under pressure by General Jamil el-Sayyed, Director of General Security at the time. Ziad Noujeim (November 8, 2012). "I never left a television station in my life but they were the ones to let me go." *El Nashra*. Retrieved from http://www.elnashrafan.com/news/show/1029942/%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8

Bold Red Line premiered in 2008, with the host Malek Maktabi announcing in the first episode: "Regardless whether red lines or taboos are set by society or by your own self… I, Malek Maktabi, will boldly juggle these opposing sides."[23] As opposed to the more local orientation of *Let the Brave*, *Bold Red Line* was pitched from the outset to a pan-Arab audience. It adopted a transnational angle, regularly featuring participants from Yemen to Morocco. The show's most controversial aspect is perhaps its self-established mission to penetrate Arab Gulf countries,[24] not simply as markets but more importantly as societies with their own share of social grievances and deviances. For the first time, the off-limit conservative Gulf societies, the most profitable among Arab audiences, became the spectacle. In the extreme case of an episode on sexual pleasure, a segment which featured a Saudi man disclosing his sexual practices and conquests led to the closure of LBC's offices in Saudi Arabia and the sentencing of the "sex braggart" to 1,000 lashes and 5 years in prison (Kraidy & Mourad, 2014).

Open Conversation, the longest-running Arab television talk show, aired on Future Television between 1999 and 2012. Founded in 1993, Future TV is owned by the family of business tycoon-turned-prime minister Rafik Hariri, who also owns *al-mustaqbal* (future) newspaper.[25] The station mainly targets a cosmopolitan, Sunni bourgeoisie – Hariri's political backbone – and adopts a modern and socially moderate outlook in its programs. While initially focused on entertainment, Future

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[23] Maktabi started his television career by working on a famous and long-running Lebanese political talk show *Kalam el-Nas* (The talk of the people).
[24] These include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman.
[25] Hariri also owns Solidere, a privately-owned, joint-stock real-estate company founded in 1994 and charged with rebuilding the capital's dilapidated city center after the war. The slogan of Solidere's campaign for the reconstruction was "Beirut, a great city for the future."

TV's programming grid underwent a major transformation after the assassination of Hariri, its founder and owner, in a massive car bomb in February 2005.[26] After the successive political events of 2005, which culminated in the Independence Intifada that officially ended the Syrian mandate over Lebanon, the station prioritized political and news programming devoted to anti-Syrian propaganda. Hosted by Armenian-Lebanese Zaven Kouyoumdjian, *Open Conversation* was one of Future's flagship programs, consistently securing high ratings among Arab audiences. The show was popular for regularly featuring a psychologist evaluating individual cases.

The Promises and Pitfalls of TV Talk

In the U.S and Europe, critiques of the genre have centered around three related characteristics: its investment in unusual stories and people (Gamson, 1998); its reconfiguration of the boundaries of public life (Carpignano et. al, 1990; Grindtstaff, 2002); and its adoption of an individualizing therapeutic discourse to address structural and social problems (Abt & Seesholtz, 1994; Peck, 1995).[27] In his analysis of U.S tabloid talk shows of the 1990s, anthropologist Joshua Gamson notes that the genre relies on bizarre and unconventional stories to drive up the ratings, often bringing the "rousing, unusual edges of a population for attention" (Gamson, 1998, p.214). As television scholar and talk show critic Vicky Abt (1994) argues, "In their competition for audience share, ratings and profits, television talk shows co-opt deviant subcultures" (p.173). As Tolson (2008) shows, scholars and

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[26] The Syrian regime was accused of standing behind Hariri's assassination as well as a number of other high profile political assassinations that shook the country since 2005, including those of prominent and vocal anti-Syrian journalists Samir Kassir and Gebran Tueini.

[27] The discussion of the therapeutic dimension of talk shows is not included in this paper.

critics have repeatedly questioned the moral and rational value of television talk, with some claiming that the genre was "deconstructing" society, and not in a good way. In their diatribe against American talk shows of the early 1990s, Abt and Seesholtz (1994) solemnly announce:

> To experience the virtual realities of television talk shows is to confront a crisis in the social construction of reality. Television talk shows create audiences by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming our ideas about what is possible, by undermining the bases of cultural judgment, by redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions, and cultural distinctions (p. 171).

The normative ambiguity attributed to the shows is believed to compromise our ability to "define and constrain deviance" (p.187) in this dystopian vision of society as an "ersatz community of eavesdroppers" (p.174). The infringement on individual privacy, which arguably results from an overexposure to others' intimate lives, is understood by communication and legal scholar Clay Calvert (2000) as a form of "mediated voyeurism." The term refers to the consumption, through the media, of revealing images and information about others' lives, often for the purposes of entertainment (pp.2-3). In his characterization of voyeuristic media genres, Calvert proposes the "tell-all" talk shows where "we get to eavesdrop on guests often selected from the bottom of the social barrel" (p.8). He describes participants in these shows as exhibitionists who allow us to "revel in the joys of others' lives made public" (p.8). In a similar vein, in his focus on talk shows in his critique of television, Bourdieu

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argues that the television screen "becomes a sort of mirror for Narcissus, a space for narcissistic exhibitionism" (p.11).

Others, however, are less pessimistic about this exhibitionism. By calling into question the very structure of separation between the production and consumption of cultural products, these shows turn passive spectators into active participants who shape the content of public discourse through personal disclosures and insights (Carpignano et. al, 1990, p.35). These scholars further tie the emergence of programming that focuses on the private discourse of personal relationships to the feminist struggle and its redefinition of the private/public divide. For them, the result of the politicization of the private is a transformation in the nature of the political whereby "the means of expression of these new areas of political struggle are quite different from those of formal politics. They rely more on the circulation of discursive practices than on formal political agendas (Carpignano et. al, 1990, p.51). Indeed, these discursive practices have been examined by media scholars Joshua Gameson (1998) and Laura Grindstaff (2002) who argue that new forms of and registers for participation enabled previously invisible and socially-marginalized subjects – queer and working class individuals – to claim the public spotlight. It did matter, as they show, that these talk shows somehow redistributed the privileges of public speech, momentarily opening up a central space for marginal subjects.

Not in Front of the Children

Michael Warner (2002) proposes three definitions of the noun "public." First, there's *the* public as a kind of social totality, meaning the people in general. Second, *a*

public is understood as a concrete audience or a crowd witnessing itself in a visible space. Third, and most pertinently for this discussion, there is the public that "comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (p.413). In this third sense a public is "self-organized:" it exists by virtue of being addressed, whether by a speech, a book, or a television broadcast (p.413). For Warner (1999), the public circulation of knowledge about sexual variance, more specifically, may call into being new sexual publics but also enables the learning and unlearning of sexual desires, practices, and identities. Drawing a link between textuality and sexuality, representation and practice, he explains that some erotic possibilities that were always there, such as anal pleasure and female ejaculation, "are learned by many only when the knowledge begins to circulate openly and publicly" (p.11). The "accessible culture of sex" (p.11), as he calls it, acts as a symbolic repertoire of erotic possibilities that are constantly transformed by new technologies. Moral authorities police public space to circumvent the diffusion of harmful and unsafe knowledge, typically performing their censorship practices in the name of the nation's children.

When the Lebanese National Council for Audiovisual Media (NCAVM) - the regulatory body overseeing media content in Lebanon - attempted to prevent the airing of *Bold Red Line*'s episode on childhood sexuality in September 2011, it claimed that the promos of the episode were aired at a time when children were still awake and watching television ("Sex education," September 29, 2011). As Lauren Berlant (1997) has shown, the child is often a stand-in for a set of anxieties and desires about national identity: "what gets consolidated now as the future modal citizen provides an alibi or an inspiration for the moralized political rhetoric of the

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present and for reactionary legislative and juridical practice" (Berlant, 1997, p.6).

Shortly after the advertisements for an upcoming episode on childhood sexuality were aired, *Al-Diyar*, a Lebanese daily newspaper, ran a front-page article lambasting LBC's decision to air the episode in question: "Today's episode on childhood sexuality is a scandal. Will General Security dare to intervene?" ("LBC's bold red line," September 28, 2011).[28]

Concerned about television's ability to penetrate homes and bedrooms without permission, the writer laments the erosion of parental supervision whereby adults are no longer the sole mediators of information. This concern was echoed by one of the fathers participating in the episode in question, who vehemently rejected the exposure of his children to sexual information at school or in the media. Citing the outrage of religious and family organizations, and expressing concern about "our religious and spiritual upbringing," the newspaper explicitly asked the state to intervene and ban the episode. "The Director General of the General Security needs to stop this program. This is not an attack on freedom. This is about protecting our children from the poison that such programs bring to their brains. This is not about freedom of opinion but is a matter of national duty to protect our children" ("LBC's bold red line, September 28, 2011). As Berlant (1995) points out, the constant fear of children coming into harmful contact with unsafe sexual knowledge (and subsequently

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[28] In Lebanon, censorship controls over literature, art, and media fall under the jurisdiction of the Directorate General of General Security. Following certain laws (some of which date back to the French mandate), General Security has been entrusted with the task of licensing, monitoring, and censoring creative works. It controls when and how much freedom will be permitted, heightening or reducing restrictions according to the prevailing political circumstances and dictates of various political and religious powers.

performing harmful sex acts) legitimates the control of public communication (p.383). Despite official warning, the episode aired but under the new title of "sexual education." Repeatedly emphasizing that this was an issue of "public health," the host deployed the same tropes of "moral danger" and "national duty" but to justify and legitimate the show's decision diffuse sexual knowledge. A month later the NCAVM issued official warnings to several television stations (LBC included) for their controversial programming, stressing that any failure to abide by the Council's recommendations would make their licenses ineligible for renewal. In a newspaper statement, the Council's president accused two talk shows, *Bold Red Line* and *Open Conversation*, of broadcasting "unethical content," emphasizing episodes with sexual themes (Meguerditchian, October 22, 2011).

By 2011, however, *Bold Red Line* producers had grown accustomed to such controversies. Two years prior to the sex education polemic, the show had placed the station in murky waters over an episode on sexual pleasure. In July 2009, LBC aired via satellite the show's season finale. In a pre-recorded segment, Mazen Abduljawad, a Saudi divorced father of four, bragged about his sexual exploits and flaunted his sex toys and aphrodisiacs on television. A wave of protest ensued in Saudi Arabia, with Saudis calling for the punishment of the "LBC sex braggart." Saudi officials proceeded to shut down the station's offices in Jeddah and Riyadh. Local journalists launched a media campaign, "do not compromise your nation," to protest pan-Arab television programming that sensationalized Saudi issues to boost ratings. In addition, Saudi citizens called for the commercial boycott of the Lebanese station that had trespassed the moral boundaries of their nation. Abduljawad was eventually

sentenced to 1000 lashes and five years in prison. As the French daily *Libération* put it, Abduljawad was "a Saudi citizen like others, except that he narrated on television what everybody knows but that nobody says in Saudi Arabia" (Ayad, November 8, 2009). The "sex braggart" controversy demonstrates that talk shows are notorious because they destabilize the boundaries between "what can be done and said in public, what can be done in private but not spoken of in public, and what can, patriotically speaking, neither be done nor legitimately spoken of at all" (Berlant, 1997, p.383).

What is even more interesting in the case of the "sex braggart" is how the controversy crystallized a certain infantilizing citizenship at work. Along with Abduljawad's friends who appeared with him in the segment, a summary court decided to prosecute a female Saudi journalist who had assisted in the production of the infamous episode. Rozana al-Yami, 22, was sentenced to 60 lashes for allegedly working for LBC without a license. However, the Saudi King Abdullah intervened and personally waived her sentence at the last minute. If Abduljawad's transgression was framed as "the fall of the father as a role model" in public commentary, the King's intervention confirmed him as "the benevolent father of the nation." Due to their compromising media practices, Abduljawad and Al-Yami were represented as the lost "children" of the nation in need of discipline.[29] These two public controversies around talk show episodes – controversies that resulted in legal action – demonstrate how moral panics are often manufactured around children or infantilized

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[29] For a more detailed analysis of the "sex braggart" controversy, see Kraidy, M. M. & Mourad, S. (2014). Crossing the red line: Public intimacy and national reputation in Saudi Arabia. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2014.960947

adults coming into contact with harmful sexual information. The public circulation of this information often mobilizes elements of the dominant culture, including the state and religious institutions, to take action in the name of a concerned or disconcerted public. A nuanced understanding of the publics of talk show performances, however, demands that we equally watch from a non-normative position. What happens when queer individuals, including queer children, come into contact with information about sexual variance? In other words, what about what Heather Love (2007) calls "the queer trauma of spectatorship" (p.15)?

Watching from the Margins

In *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz identifies the potential "counterpublic moments" of television through a recollection of his own marvel at the "televisual spectacle" of Ray Zamora and his father "talking openly" about homosexuality and AIDS in a distinctly Cuban Spanish. Recalling his own interpellation as a queer subject by the televised performance of Zamora, a gay and HIV-positive Cuban-American participant on the reality TV show *The Real World*, Muñoz writes: "I was struck because this was something new; it was a new formation, a being for others. I *imagined* other living rooms within the range of this broadcast and I thought about the queer children who might be watching this program at home with their parents" (p.160, emphasis added). In a sense, these "counterpublic moments" offer a compelling counterpoint to what communication scholars Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1991) call "media events." In these "high holidays of mass communication" (p.5), television supposedly enlists a

renewed loyalty to society through a collective watching of rituals of conquest, contest, and coronation which are planned in advance and simultaneously watched by millions. If, as Dayan (2001) argues, these televised rituals enable an experience of "watching with" (p.743), what do we make of more mundane televisual spectacles that enable a different kind of "watching against," where loyalty and belonging are not renewed but rather questioned and displaced? For Muñoz, these provide "instances" or "moments" of counterpublicity which are momentary, fleeting, and subtle. Within such an understanding, the transmission of an image of brown queer intimacy within and beyond the nation constitutes a valuable *instance* of counterpublicity, Muñoz argues, because it is where the mass public "glimpses" different lifeworlds than the one endorsed by dominant ideology. What started out as a "tokenized representation" in a reality show on a major network became "something larger, more spacious – a mirror that served as a prop for subjects to imagine and rehearse identity" (p.154).

Zamora's performance on *The Real World,* as rendered by Muñoz, exemplifies what media scholar Nick Couldry (2003) identifies as "media rituals," *instances* where non-media people perform for the media, for example by revealing intimate truths before unknown millions on TV shows. In such performances, Couldry explains, the media themselves "'stand in' for something wider, something to do with the fundamental organisational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, connected as members of a society" (p.3). In his ritual analysis of everyday media practices, Couldry (2003) draws on Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power to argue that such practices preserve the dominant symbolic order by reproducing "the

myth of the mediated center," that is the need and desire to go to and *be in* the media. Couldry is not interested in the details of what individuals disclose through mediated interactions but rather in the formal elements that give them shape. As he explains, "too close a focus on the content of individual disclosures risks missing the most puzzling aspect of this whole landscape: its links to the ritually reinforced notion that the media provide a 'central' space where it makes sense to disclose publicly aspects of one's life that one might not otherwise disclose *to anyone*" (p.116).

In *On Television*, Bourdieu (1998) himself describes television as a "formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order" (p.16). The journalistic field – television included – is socially important as it monopolizes large-scale informational instruments of production and diffusion of information. As such, it controls the access of ordinary citizens and other cultural producers such as scholars, artists, and writers, "to what is sometimes called 'public space,' that is, the space of mass circulation" (p.46). By controlling the means of public expression, he continues, journalists in effect control public existence, "one's ability to be recognized as a *public figure*" (p.46, emphasis in original). The control of the means of representation is important for Bourdieu because, with the rise of media technologies such as television, public space had increasingly become the space of mass circulation. The distinction between public expression and existence collapses precisely because our notion of a public space where the self is actualized had been deeply transformed by mediation. Being in the media becomes a being in public. Media scholar John B. Thompson (1995) calls this "mediated publicness,"

an open-ended space in the sense that it is a creative and uncontrollable

space […] where new words and images can suddenly appear, where

information previously hidden from view can be made available, and

where the consequences of becoming visible cannot be fully anticipated

and controlled (pp.246-247).

While Bourdieu recognizes this transformation in the mode of public visibility, he

adopts a rather narrow view as to what constitutes meaningful public discourse. Talk

shows, for him, in their profit-driven search for the sensational and the spectacular,

epitomize television's degradation of public life. Anyone appearing on television, he

argues, must ask the following questions: "Do I have something to say? Can I say it

in these conditions? Is what I have to say worth saying here and now? In a word, what

am I doing here?" (p.14). Nowhere is this rational and deliberative approach to public

discourse better illustrated than in Bourdieu's own description of his production of a

television cast of his lecture "on television:"

To maintain the focus on the crucial element – the lecture itself – and contrary

to what usually happens on television I chose, in agreement with the producer,

to eliminate effects such as changes in the format or camera angles. I also left

out illustrations (selections from broadcasts, reproductions of documents,

statistics, and so on). Besides taking up precious time, all of these things

undoubtedly would have made it harder to follow my argument (1998, p.11).

"These things" – camera angles, visual effects, illustrations – are eliminated not

because they are meaningless but because they matter a lot; maybe even more than

the argument that Bourdieu wants to isolate from all the visual noise. As the epitaph

shows, Bourdieu (1998) believes in the power of visuality to move publics, "With a few mediagenic elements to get attention – disguises, masks, whatever – television can produce an effect close to what you'd have from fifty thousand protestors in the street" (p.22).

What happens if we accept Michael Warner's (2005) invitation to suspend the metaphorical rendering of discourse as conversation and deliberation? For one, we would not treat mediagenic elements as marginal to discourse. Talk shows, as is evident in their very name, are as much about showing talk as they are about the rational exchange of verbally conveyed meaning. By describing the melodramatic talk show scene of revelation as "the money shot," Laura Grindstaff (2002) not only highlights the lucrative business of televised confession. Her use of a porn metaphor to characterize television talk underlines the aesthetic, affective, and visceral dimensions of public discourse. This performative dimension of discourse, as Warner (2005) calls it, is routinely misrecognized because in traditional approaches to the public sphere the public is thought to require persuasion rather than poesis (p.422-423). For Warner, however, all discourse or performance addressed to a public "must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address" (p.422). This is why public discourse, in his characterization, is poetic: it conjures the lifeworld in which it circulates not merely through its discursive claims, oriented to understanding, but through its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, lexicon, and mise en scène (p.422). Thus, the common perception of public discourse as conversational – as a rational-deliberative interaction – obscures "the poetic functions of language and corporeal expressivity in

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giving a particular shape to publics" (p.423) and the poetic or textual qualities of an utterance are disregarded in favor of sense.

Televisual Seduction

Sitting on a bed on a stage meant to look like her bedroom, Cuban and Puerto Rican-American performance artist Marga Gomez recounts her first interaction with lesbians in the public sphere. In a stage monologue re-narrated by José Esteban Muñoz, she recalls how, at the age of eleven, a voice had summoned her down to the living room where famous TV host David Susskind was announcing that he will interview "lady homosexuals" on his talk show *Open End*:

> I sat next to my mother on the sofa. I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn't think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that fell from their lips. They were very depressed, very gloomy […] there were three of them, all disguised in raincoats, dark glasses, wigs. It was the wigs that made me want to be one (p.).

In his reading of what he describes as Gomez' "televisual seduction," Muñoz demonstrates that beyond persuasion, seduction is a mode of public address. The formal characteristics of the television performance, its poetics, aesthetics, and mise en scène, shape its reception, and therefore its public-making potentialities. In other words, the wig and mask are not paratextual elements but are rather central to practices of mediated self-presentation and disclosure, particularly for subordinate or marginalized groups whose struggle for recognition, as Thompson (1995) explains,

"have increasingly become constituted as struggles for visibility within the non-localized space of mediated publicness" (p.247). In this transformed mediascape, talk shows provide access to the public space of circulation for groups who have been consistently excluded from it. There is a desire among members of such groups, Gamson (1998) explains, to be seen and recognized for who they are, as their "cultural visibility is often so minimal, or distant enough from the way people live their lives, to render them unrecognizable even to themselves" (p.213).

In his discussion of individual negotiation of stigma, sociologist Erving Goffman (1962) focuses on the management of discrediting information about the self by stigmatized persons. This is information about their "failings," such as their invisible physical disability or their deviant sexuality. For the stigmatized, writes Goffman (1962), the question is whether "To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (p. 41-42). Goffman's work on the presentation of the self has been recently taken up by new media scholars in their examination of online media practices and interactions. In their investigation of the online information practices of an extreme body modification community, Jessa Lingel and danah boyd (2013) unpack the ways in which shared stigma shapes community information practices and the complexities—in terms of social interactions as well as technological use—of becoming familiar with information resources and deciding whether or how to share information with others (p.981). In a more recent piece on what they call "privacy practices," Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2014) argue that the dynamics of social media sites have forced individuals to alter their conception of privacy to account for

the networked nature of the web. In their words, "individuals are trying to be *in* public without always *being* public" (p.1052) and their frequent sharing of content does not suggest that they share indiscriminately.

In her examination of online confession sites, Sherry Turkle (2011) quotes one user: "We put our secrets up, and we just want to show it to a stranger, not a friend but a stranger. You want to express your emotion. You write it down and write it on the website and you just want a stranger who doesn't know you to look at it" (p.232). Turkle, however, is not optimistic about this new tendency to share secrets and compromising intimate information with others one barely knows as it opens one up to the cruelty of strangers, leaving them vulnerable in new ways (p.235). For Warner (2005), on the other hand, the modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers. Strangehood, as a mode of relationality, is a "necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being. Where otherwise strangers need to be on a path to commonality, in modern forms strangehood is the necessary medium of commonality" (p.417). Long before the diffusion of digital technologies, talk shows provided a space to publicly address strangers by allowing individuals to speak without risking their identity or reputation. Adopting different "privacy practices" and modes of disguise, from white screens to masks to pixels, talk shows used a variety of technologies to ensure participants' anonymity when the topic was deemed stigmatizing. The individual struggle with publicness was transposed, as it were, to the conflict between modes of publicness.

This was the case with Lucio who, in 1996, appeared in an episode of *Let the Brave* titled "The Many Types of Sex." According to Ziad Noujeim, the show's host,

this was the first Arab television show to tackle the subject in such an "open" manner (personal interview, December 15, 2013). He was referring to the fact that the episode featured real homosexual and bisexual men speaking about themselves on national television. Sitting among the studio audience, three participants wearing white masks talked about the stigma and shame of their sexual desires, repeatedly framing their experience as "leading double-lives" and "wearing masks." [30] When Noujeim asked one of the anonymous guests, who had expressed that he was comfortable with his sexuality, why he doesn't remove his mask, "Noun" answered: "For legal reasons […] fear is scandal at work, scandal at home, among neighbors, before the state. I am in a continuous relation of illegitimacy with everyone, with society." Another participant, "Meem," explained: "As long as you are alive you will have…not two faces, probably more [laughs]. Perhaps three…you sleep as someone and wake up the next day as someone else, the person you are supposed and asked to be."

Not surprisingly, following the broadcast of the episode, a detective from the General Security visited LBC's offices to inquire about the masked guests. He was supposedly responding to a public complaint that was lodged against the show. "Last night you hosted *loutiyeen* [faggots] on the show," he told Janane Mallat, the show's producer; "I need to know their names." After correcting him, stating that these were not *loutiyeen* but *mithliyeen jinsiyyan* [homosexuals], Mallat told him that she didn't know their names because they had arrived to the studio wearing masks. Mallat was keen on protecting her guests; "They could've been sent to jail had they not covered

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[30] Compare the use of masks to disguise identity and protect reputation, as seen in this talk show episode, to the recent adaptation of the mask as a tool of disguise against pervasive technologies of surveillance in Zach Blass's "fag face." The goal in both is to hide one's identity. While the latter tries to evade surveillance, the former is a staged attempt to become visible.

their faces […] I wasn't going to risk these people's reputation and life and…in front of the camera." As a prosthetic, the mask enabled the public appearance of otherwise stigmatized bodies. However, masks may also reproduce stigma by reifying the queer obligation to hide.[31]

When I first started conducting research on queer visibility online in 2011 (discussed in detail in chapter 3), I interviewed George Azzi, a gay activist and co-founder of Helem - the first LGBT rights advocacy organization in Lebanon - to discuss his decision to publish a blog under his real and full name. During our conversation over Skype, Azzi referred to his handle "Nomaskleb." He recalled the masks and distorted voices on that episode of *Let the Brave*, remembering the powerful effect they had on him and how they made him feel: "The gay people on the show looked scary. I believe that the only way to change society is to see the real faces of LGBT people," adding "masks will just make them look different and weird." That homosexuality on these shows was often discussed in connection to other social deviances, such as addiction and prostitution, Azzi explains, made it into a source of shame inviting potential violence against the exposed individual and therefore mandating the masking of their identity.

Anonymity, in that sense, is not a desirable strategy to transform the dominant symbolic order as it is seen as a further pathologizing of non-normative sexualities.

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[31] The notion of a *public* sexual identity, in an Arab context, has been dismissed by some scholars as inauthentic. The argument against publicness was most staunchly made by Arab scholar Joseph Massad. In his critique of the 2002 Queen Boat Affair, when the Egyptian police raided the Queen Boat, a discotheque moored on the Nile in Cairo, and arrested 52 men on the charges of debauchery, Massad (2002) argued that "it was not same-sex sexual practices that were being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek" (p.382). It seems to elide Massad that, in their highly publicized trials, the men wore masks to cover their faces in a desperate attempt to safeguard theirs and their family's reputation.

This is all to highlight that the effects of particular forms of anonymous visibility are not uniform and cannot be pre-determined. They are often contradictory, simultaneously inspiring recognition and disidentification. In a way, the televisual spectacle of masked homosexuals also made Azzi want to be one. But beyond a critical engagement with the representation of sexual difference and how it shapes individuals' self-understanding, the question of queer media visibility allows us to unpack the perceived role of the media in representing social reality more broadly.

Conclusion

One of the main claims of their producers is that talk shows draw otherwise separate communities and publics together, bridging the social, sectarian, and actual physical distances that separate them. By tackling controversial topics, producers made use of audiences' opinions and attitudes around sexual difference to publicly stage regional, socio-economic, and sectarian distinctions. As Mallat explains, *Let the Brave* gave people "a chance to get acquainted with other Lebanese citizens who are very different from them" (personal interview, December 23, 2013).

For Mallat, the show "opened doors that were closed since the war." She was referring to actual, physical boundaries that had been erected, consolidated, and internalized between and among communities over the course of fifteen years. She proudly emphasized that her team of reporters used to go "everywhere:"

> Wherever we had a topic we would go bring it from there. Tyr, Saida, Akkar, Hamra, Achrafieh, Naccache, Bekaa. We went everywhere, because it was the subject that would take us there, the story. Some people had never stepped

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outside Jounieh. So this is why the show was so appealing to everyone. It was an eye opener for people who hadn't been outside their little town or village, and it brought to the audience another part of Lebanon.

The physical distance between the regions and neighborhoods that Mallat mentions is actually much smaller than her statement suggests. The northern region of Akkar, bordering Syria, is only a three-hour drive from Beirut (on a traffic-free highway). The significance of her statement, however, lies in the way it evokes the vast symbolic distances imagined by communities in a national population of 4 million people. Such distances are often captured in non-verbal cues such as regional accents.

An *Open Conversation* episode about transexuality, aired in 2006, opens with the story of Amale/Hussein Mawla. As the camera pans over a rural landscape, the reporter states: "In Hussein's village, secrets are scarce. Before the results of medical exams had been issued, the news was already out." The report was about fifteen-year old Amale who, according to medical exams, "turned out to be a boy." It featured testimonies from Hussein, his parents, and his siblings who all spoke in a thick Baalbaki accent. A predominantly Shia region in South East Lebanon, Baalback is geographically closer to Syria than it is to Beirut. For the urban Sunni bourgeoisie that constitutes Future TV's primary target audience, the spectacle was as much about showing rural poverty and "backwardness" as it was about seeing a trans adolescent.

Similarly, in a 1996 episode on pre-marital sex, Ziad Noujeim introduced the story of Hala who was murdered by her brother after he suspected she was not a virgin on her wedding night: "A few kilometers away from the city of Beirut, Lebanon's capital, something happened a little while ago – in 1995 – the team of *Let*

the Brave went and saw. Watch and listen." The report opens with a shot of a Muslim cemetery where a veiled crying woman is crouched on the ground next to her daughter's tombstone. The camera then pans over Abu Samra, a working-class neighborhood in the predominantly Sunni Northern city of Tripoli and, in the words of the reporter, "the mirror of Hala's society and her family." We hear testimonies from family members and neighbors, all speaking in a thick Tripoli accent. When asked about Hala's story, a middle-aged man proudly states, "for us honor and dignity are more important than eating and drinking." A woman comments, "We heard about the story but this has become normal for us." Beyond the content itself, these televised spectacles on sex gone bad provide discursive sites where the representation of a distant other serves to create and portray the cosmopolitan, urban center to itself. This function of media and television in particular, to visualize and narrate the nation, is pronounced in talk shows that claim to represent social reality.

This chapter has demonstrated how sexual and gender non-conformity are discursively mobilized in the performance of socio-political identities – most notably sectarian identities – in a postwar society where such identities had been muted in public life. The attitudes and opinions on sexual deviance expressed on these talk shows, serve as vehicles for the articulation of a range of social differences. Thus, the televisual discourses on sexuality could be said to function as an infrapolitical force, both channeling and masking the circulation of discourses where class, sect, and region find expression in public. Furthermore, these talk shows have served as platforms for the performance and articulation of newly-emerging sexual and gender

identities, providing an interface for the actualization of queer identification and the contestation of the hegemonic norms structuring sex and gender.

CHAPTER TWO

The Private Lives of Nadine Labaki: Projecting Femininity in the National Imaginary

"In Lebanon, you know, we live…it's not an individualistic society. We live within communities, within families, within neighborhoods. We're very intimate with the others, so this intimacy creates a lot of pressure. It comes from love. You're surrounded by so much love you're always scared to deceive. So you end up being the image that everybody wants from you but maybe it's not exactly what you want."

Nadine Labaki, personal interview, August 15, 2013

Introduction

Sukkar Banat (Caramel) is a 2007 Lebanese film set in a women's beauty salon in contemporary Beirut. In her first feature-length film, Lebanese director and actor Nadine Labaki depicts the interconnected daily lives of five women around salon "Si Belle." In its close depiction of feminine artifice, *Caramel's* feminist credentials have been subject to debate. Indeed, the deployment of the beauty parlor as a space of female solidarity and empowerment may be construed as a re-enactment of a "postfeminist" trope popularized by the American women's genre of the "chick flick." Owned by Layale, a young woman in her early 30s and played by Labaki herself, the beauty parlor is the setting of love plots, illicit encounters, female rivalry, friendship, and endless self-styling. Labaki, who dedicated her first film to "*Beirut, Sitt el-Donia*" (Beirut, Lady of the World), represents her home city and its social fabric through the lives of women, in a film about women. In its beautiful cinematography of interior spaces – bathrooms, waxing rooms, and bedrooms – *Caramel* takes intimacy, and intimacy among women in particular, as a site of social

observation. By representing the private lives of women – their negotiation of family ties, social obligations, gender roles, and moral norms – *Caramel* struck a chord that resonated with its local and international audiences, for different reasons.

This chapter takes femininity as an object of inquiry through a reading of Labaki's oeuvre. In addition to *Caramel*, it considers the filmmaker's second and equally successful feature film *w halla'a la wayn?* (Where Do We Go Now?) as well as her work on Arab music videos to unpack the cultural politics that structure the representation of femininity in the postwar national imagination. Particularly, I explore the semiotic and material labor of femininity in the construction and contestation of the fraught categories of "tradition" and "modernity," "East" and "West." Through her representation of femininity in music videos and in *Caramel* and of motherhood in *Where Do We Go Now*?, Labaki paints a portrait of women in contemporary Lebanon, examining their role and place in society and shedding light on gender relations and the power dynamics that govern them.

The meaning of Labaki's work, I argue, is necessarily re-routed through – without being overdetermined – by the global cultural circuits of international film festivals and their Orientalizing gaze. As for the much-debated feminist credentials of her work, I suggest that Labaki's commitment to the representation of womanhood – and femininity in particular – through her own subject-position as a woman could be characterized as feminist inasmuch as it strives to depict gender as an axis of social stratification and domination, and to do so through a valorization of the feminine as a site of storytelling. Through her consciously-crafted feminine authorship, where the creative process is always already personal, Labaki mediates the meanings of her

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work and is therefore herself part of the analysis. As feminist film scholar Catherine Grant (2001) has argued, approaching the filmmaker as auteur allows a broadening of the notion of what constitutes a primary text in film studies. Thus, in addition to a textual analysis of her two films and five of her music videos, I incorporate paratextual elements – articles about, reviews of, and interviews with Labaki in local and international media – and information gathered from an in-depth interview I conducted with her in August 2013. By treating Labaki as an auteur, I want to mobilize the figure of the woman filmmaker "to index questions central to contemporary feminism such as visibility, agency, labor, desire, and power" (White, 2015, p.31), questions that cannot be fully apprehended through a strict focus on the film as text. As I explain in the introduction, I am interested in trailing the meanings that cultural productions accrue in processes of mediation, which necessarily include their reception and interpretation by differently positioned local and global audiences. My analysis therefore adopts a sociological approach to film that was dismissed in feminist film theory of the 1970s and 1980s in favor of hermeneutic and psychoanalytic readings (Grant, 2000).

By reading Labaki's work vis-à-vis the author herself as well as the socio-political context and the media environment within which it circulates, this chapter asks, how does cultural production politicize gender? While my intention is not to prove nor disprove Labaki's feminism through a close reading of her work, I do want to explore what a feminist reading of these selected media productions – one that actively looks for the connections between the personal and the political – can tell us about the role of cultural production in making gender a category of social and

political analysis. The feminist sensibilities in Labaki's music videos and films, as I will show, lie less in any definitive answers or prescriptions they may have about the role and place of women in contemporary society and more in the public introspections and collective interrogations they generate on femininity as an embodied identity, a gender performance, and a symbolic realm that has been historically associated with and instrumental for the construction of a private sphere of human action. Through the subject-matter of productions and her public persona as one of the most successful Arab filmmakers today, Labaki, I contend, succeeds in asking the woman question anew.

Labaki's claim to Arab fame came with a series of music videos that she directed for Lebanese pop star Nancy Ajram in the mid-2000s, which catapulted a then unknown Ajram into pan-Arab stardom. Ajram, who had been singing since she was a teenager, re-launched her music career in 2003 with a music video, directed by Labaki, for her song "*Akhasmak Ah*" (I will Fight You). The video was an instant popular hit among the transnational Arab audience of the newly-emergent satellite music channels. Rotana[32] and Melody TV created a local television-based music culture, where a new form of fandom emerged around music videos and their stars.[33]

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[32] In 2003, Saudi Prince and business mogul Al-Walid Bin Talal launched four specialized music channels under the name of *Rotana*, a company worth U.S$1 billion (Kraidy, 2009, p.84). In an interview with Naomi Sakr (2007), Al-Walid boasted that *Rotana* controls 80% of all the music in the Arab world (p.122). In the mid-2000s, *Rotana*, which owned a roster of about 100 of the Arab world's top stars, produced "a new video every two to three days. The most expensive can cost up
to $300,000, a fortune in the Arab entertainment industry, where a 30-episode series is budgeted at half the price" (Usher, May 21, 2007).
[33] Established Lebanese performers like Ragheb Alama, Najwa Karam, and Nawal al-Zoghbi were already popular in the Arab world and had themselves introduced the music video as a genre in the early nineties.

In an environment of media convergence, new technologies allowed for high production values, making the new generation of music videos, heralded by Labaki, much more seductive to the Arab public. The music industry was undergoing a technological transformation occasioned by the rise and social penetration of mobile phone technology, satellite television, and the Internet. Digital technologies changed everyday media consumption, introducing new habits and enabling increased connections. Through mobile phones, viewers sent public text messages to be displayed at the bottom of the screen during each music video's broadcast. Many were love letters, many were long-distance conversations, many expressed pan-Arab sentiments, and many made absolutely no sense. Music videos thus became a site of media convergence, around which multiple technologies coalesced to create a new form of Arab entertainment and celebrity culture. Nancy Ajram was its poster child: a young and seductive Lebanese woman, from a modest background, rising to Arab fame through provocative performances in slick and ubiquitous music videos.

In the mid-2000s, "at any given time as many as a fifth of the free-to-air channels on Nilesat (one of the Arab satellite networks) may be broadcasting video clips" (Armbrust, 2005, p.18). For Labaki, this was a way for her to experiment with representations of femininity but also with audience reception: "every music video I did was a huge success. It was maybe aired over 50 times every day. There is not one household in Lebanon that didn't watch them" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). The credits were shown at the end of each video, with the director's name often appearing in the opening sequences as well, which made authorship highly visible.

This allowed Labaki to experiment with how people react to her work: "because in Lebanon you sign the music video, 'directed by…' people started knowing me and telling me what they like or don't like. They tell you what they think about your work because they know you" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). The genre's ubiquity, therefore, popularized the videos' directors who developed distinctive styles and aesthetics, becoming famous in their own right. Stars relied on directors to lure audiences through constant innovation in characters, plots, and settings. This investment in the visual representation of music, by stars and the industry, paved the way for the rise of a new generation of music video directors, providing a lucrative opportunity for young talents to experiment with cinematography and filmmaking.[34] With a background in television advertising, Labaki's style and aesthetics had mass appeal among Arab viewers, provoking public praise and condemnation, a wave of imitation, and inciting a new discourse on gender.

Upon the release of "*Akhasmak Ah*" and its wide circulation on local and satellite television, the Egyptian Parliament made an official request for television stations to suspend its broadcast. The video featured a bare-footed Ajram in a little black dress, dancing and singing before an all-male audience, flirting with and provoking the patrons of a traditional Arabic coffee shop.[35] As the sole feminine figure in a male homosocial space, Ajram teases, seduces, and taunts the men whose lustful gaze she commands, ultimately provoking a fistfight among them and fleeing the scene in amusement at the end. "*Akhasmak Ah*" sparked what came to be known

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[34] These include the late Yehya Saade, Joe Bou-Eid, and Leila Kanaan to name a few.
[35] "*Akhsmak Ah*": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-8Vz6jnGAE

as the music video controversy that preoccupied the Arab public sphere in the mid-2000s. The genre became a popular phenomenon, an industry, and a subject of public ridicule and legislation, where public outrage over the eroticized representation of women's bodies was symptomatic of the structural transformation of national media landscapes. These music videos, dubbed "porno-clips" by Egyptian journalists (Hasso, 2011, p.112), stirred sustained debates on the role of the mass media in shaping and subverting moral attitudes and gender norms.

This new discourse, circulating in public, yoked the eroticized representation of women in the media to an ongoing Euro-American cultural imperialism. Local music videos were perceived as a vehicle for the imitation and transmission of the West's morally suspect values (El-Messiri, March 17, 2005; Ismail, 2005). As such, they were the latest symptom of the cultural onslaught of globalization, one whose sexual overtones subverted local customs of gender presentation, dislocating individuals from their social and moral orders. Music videos, Frances Hasso explains (2011), "produce exceptional pleasure and anxiety as mediums of sex culture and sources of provocation" (p.112). Described as a cultural product of imperialist power, they were accused of "producing a colonial culture that consolidates a colonial reality" (Al-Barghouti, June 10, 2004). For some, the picture was less bleak, and the controversial genre offered a "glimpse of a latent Arab world that is both liberal and 'modernized'" (Freund, June 2003). Music videos, then, became a semiotically rich site of social investigation. Journalists and commentators accused the makers and stars of these videos of imitating Western formats, and consequently of promoting foreign values deemed unsuitable for a local context. The culprits were young women

who, through music videos, acquired access to the public sphere through the "wrong" means. Complaints of religious and moral laxity and imitation of foreign sexual practices were regularly lodged against Arab actresses and female entertainers (Hasso, 2011, p.112). And as Kraidy (2015) argues in his recent analysis of Arab celebrity culture, "attraction/revulsion revolves around the politics of female celebrities' ostentatious sexuality, and conformity/defiance turns around adherence to prevailing social and gender norms (p.164). [36] Heated debates about the effects of music videos in newspaper columns, television talk shows, and academic articles foregrounded a preoccupation with the representation of masculinity and femininity that indexed broader questions about the role of religion, family, and the state in the maintenance of social order.

Just as newspaper columnists played a crucial role in connecting the Arab reality TV discussions to wider themes of political participation (Kraidy, 2009), commentators on Arab music videos used the genre to articulate their cultural and political views of the social transformations underway in Arab societies. These changes were often interpreted and debated through the structuring binary of tradition and modernity, where media, and television culture in particular, was held responsible for the erosion of the former in the name of the latter. As such, music videos constituted "snapshots of modernity," to borrow Nilufer Göle's (2000) visual metaphor, at a time when new media technologies were redefining intimacy and the

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[36] In the 2006 video for her song "*Bayya'a al-Ward*" (the florist), directed by Yehya Saade, Lebanese singer Amale Hijazi appeared in a short pixie hair cut, wearing a man's suit: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbrbDzk-2A8). Following negative public reactions in the entertainment press to her masculine style, Hijazi apologized to her fans in subsequent media appearances and interviews. It is worth noting here that Yehya Saade started his music video career as the art director on Nadine Labaki's videos.

public sphere. They provide a "methodological gateway for reproducing the significance of the ocular and the corporeal" (Göle, p.115), and tracing the relationship of both to women's visibility in public, and how we – as citizens and consumers – are supposed to talk about it.

The controversies that music videos occasioned revolved around the question of appropriate gender presentation in public, where the bodies of female celebrities amplified the tension between global trends and local customs. At its core, the music video controversy – which was also articulated as a crisis in celebrity culture – was about gender divisions, separations, and hierarchies in contemporary Arab societies. Not only did the genre expose the multiplicity of moral attitudes around expressions of female sexuality and feminine embodiment and style, but it also revealed a transformation in Arab female celebrity culture, which in the dominant conservative view, was causing moral and cultural corruption through new technologies and media genres. "Music video stars" (*noujoum al-video clip*), as they came to be known, were young women who offered eroticized television performances in return for commercial gain and overnight fame. For Arab media scholar Walter Armbrust (2005), this eroticized femininity on Arab screens was an instance of the media's lucrative objectification and commoditization of women's bodies (p.22). But for Labaki, who was at the forefront of this new music video culture, this was about creating new images of strong women in possession of their bodies, in tune with their sexualities. Through music videos, she "created examples of Lebanese women" who, as she says, "were very at ease in their bodies, very spontaneous, beautiful of course, but especially at ease in their bodies" (Walker, February 22, 2008). As she reiterates

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in another interview, she wanted "to play on the image of Arab women; to create examples of women that are free with their bodies, with their movements, doing whatever they want to" (*The West Australian*, September 15, 2008). Labaki's successful collaborations with Ajram thus foreshadowed some of the themes and scenes that the music video director would go on to pursue more thoroughly as a bonafide filmmaker.

In "*Ah w Noss*," Ajram – wearing an Egyptian gallabiya or traditional robe and a headscarf covering parts of her hair – is an innocently seductive country girl inviting and resisting the gaze of a determined admirer.[37] The video, shot on location in South Lebanon, is set in what is supposed to look like the *Sa'id*, the Upper Egyptian rural landscape popularized in Egyptian films and television series. It follows Ajram's movements in the space of the village, from her bedroom to the street to the rooftop, depicting her restrained seduction of a handsome young man – played by a Lebanese model – who desperately seeks her attention. In "*Ya Salam*" (Oh My), the camera follows Ajram as she steps offstage and into the dressing room, zooming in on her face while she removes her wig and false eyelashes and wipes away her make-up, all the while gazing at herself in a brightly illuminated mirror.[38] In "*Yay Sehr 'Ouyounou*" (Oh! the magic of his eyes), Labaki casts Ajram as an eccentrically-dressed hairstylist who falls for the muscular and masculine blue-eyed construction worker across the street.[39] Ajram sings about her desire and infatuation with her lover's eyes to her effeminate male assistant at the salon, her best friend on

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[37] "*Ah W Noss*": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wG15wKK-yY
[38] "*Ya Salam*": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhnvSAxbk3k
[39] "*Yay Sehr 'Ouyounou*": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luueZ988lzY

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the bus, and to her mother and little sister in the bedroom and kitchen at home. Hers is not a love to hide in shame, but one that she boasts about to everyone. "*Inta Eh*" opens with a shot of Ajram lying in bed, the camera panning over her exposed legs and her white satin nightgown.[40] In domestic scenes that alternate between the bedroom and the bathroom, she cries about her cheating husband's blatant infidelity. It was these depictions of women in private spaces and intimate settings that spurred public interest and outrage in equal measure. Indeed, music videos were critiqued for their portrayal women where they should not be – in male-dominated public spaces – and in intimate spaces that should be off-limit to the public gaze – on their beds, in their bedrooms, in their bathrooms.[41] By doing so, music videos invited the audience's gaze into an otherwise private sphere while also staging female desire in public. As such, they visualized what Morrocan feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi (1987) identifies as narratives and acts of trespass in gender-segregated Arab societies.[42] For Mernissi (1987), "A woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, a foe [...] she is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be" (p. 85). Music video

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[40] "*Inta Eh*": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHnoewqUJp0

[41] Egyptian singer Ruby walked down a crowded street wearing a belly-dancing costume in her debut 2003 video "*Inta 'Aref Leh*" (You know why, dir. Sherif Sabry), causing an uproar in Egypt. In her 2009 video "*Ya 'Ebn el Halal*" (Good boy) directed by Yehya Saade, Lebanese pop star Haifa Wehbe walked down and danced in a crowded alley with her girlfriends, flirting with the men and women she encountered along the way. In her 2008 video "*Birahti*" (As I like, dir. Yehya Saadeh), Lebanese singer and actress Nicole Saba opens the curtain to her bedroom, inviting the viewer into her intimate space. In the opening sequence of her 2009 video "*Khallini Shoufak*" (Let me see you, dir. Yehya Saadeh), a white curtain is lifted, revealing Lebanese diva Najwa Karam sitting on her bed.

[42] Here, Saudi Arabia, the region's Islamic center, provides the extreme case of gender segregation: women cannot appear in public without wearing black robes and head covers; they cannot drive cars, bicycles, or motorcycles; and public places such as restaurants and coffeeshops must have separate seating sections for "family" and "men," a practice that legitimates the "family" as the pretext of women's very presence in public.

stars, as one member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt put it, represented "a tool for moral destruction" (Jaafar, April 16, 2007) precisely because they turned trespass into spectacle.

In its staging of this spectacle of feminine desire and intimacy, the Labaki-Ajram collaboration portrayed, in three-to-five minute long videos, archetypal feminine roles: The country girl, the femme fatale, the performer, the young woman in love, the bride, the cheated wife, and the neglected lover. Crucially, these roles – and the aesthetic sensibilities they embodied – were inspired by Arab and international cinema. Ajram's retro look in "*Akhasmak Ah*" channeled Egyptian actress Hind Rustom's femme fatale of 1950s black-and-white Egyptian films. Rustom's blond hair and curves, and her recurrent portrayals of the seductive vixen, had earned her the title of "the Arab Marilyn Monroe." In "*Ah W Noss*," Ajram revives Egyptian actress – "Lady of the Arab Screen" – Faten Hamama's role in "*Afwah wa Araneb*" (Mouths and Rabbits, 1977), and the trope of the resilient yet playful village girl who seduces but never yields. Ajram's appearance on stage in "*Ya Salam*" is comparable to Renee Zellweger's character in Rob Marshall's 2002 Jazz musical *Chicago*. In her embellished blond wig, sequined white flapper dress, and bright red lips, Ajram steps off-stage and into her dressing room at the end of a performance of her hit song "*Akhasmak Ah,*" in the video's opening sequence. Labaki's music videos, with their characters, scenes, settings, and plots, draw upon a visual archive, local and international, that viewers are familiar with. Here, the question of imitation should be asked anew, without an a priori condemnation of imitation as a degraded cultural practice of representation. Imitation, in Labaki's

work, requires creative practices of translation, adaptation, and citation. Beyond music video themes and the commentary they engendered on the unresolved tension between tradition and modernity, East and West, Labaki's citational aesthetics – the recycling and adaptation of old and new, local and global forms – troubled the terms of the very binaries they drew upon by not forcing us to choose. Indeed, this ability to cite multiple cultural sources is Labaki's artistic signature as a Lebanese and Arab contemporary feminine auteur.

The Seductions of a Global Filmmaker: Labaki as Feminine Auteur

After earning a degree in audio-visual media from the French Jesuit Université Saint Joseph in Beirut,[43] Labaki started her career directing commercials for Lebanese television. Her breakthrough came with a series of music videos she directed for Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram in the mid-2000s. Labaki then wrote the script for *Caramel* while at the Residence de Cannes in 2005. The film, whose shooting ended a week before the beginning of the Israeli war on Lebanon in July 2006, premiered in 2007 at the 60th Cannes Film Festival. From its inception, Labaki's debut feature-film was molded by the politics and aesthetics of the international festival circuit. Earning her many awards, accolades, and transnational fame, *Caramel's* wide local and international success launched Labaki's career as a Lebanese, Arab, Middle Eastern, and global filmmaker. With a portfolio of award-winning television commercials, music videos, and films, Labaki has made a major imprint on postwar Lebanese visual culture. A frequently photographed and

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[43] Labaki's graduation film "11 Rue Pasteur" won the Best Short Film Award at the Biennale Arab Cinema at the Arab World Institute in Paris in 1997.

interviewed celebrity, she regularly appears on the covers of regionally-distributed Arab entertainment and women's magazines such as *Laha* (For her), *Sayyidati* (My Lady), and *Elle Orientale*. She is versatile in her self-presentation and able to occupy different cultural spaces and speak in multiple tongues. In her television appearances in France, Labaki – educated in French missionary schools – speaks with an impeccable French accent.

The public persona and image of the woman director, particularly in the context of "world cinema" in which women directors are increasingly coming into view, is increasingly important in the reception and analyses of her work (White, 2015, p.14). At its most basic, auteurism conceives the film as a "conspicuous" product of its director and an expression of her individual personality, which can be traced "in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) of [her] films" (Caughie, 1981, p.9). The idea of the director as film author, or *auteur*, emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, within debates that took place in French, British, and U.S film magazines "about the relative artistic value of cinema, compared with the much longer-established arts" (Grant, 2001, p.114). Feminist film scholar Catherine Grant (2000) identifies the auteur, following Steve Neale, as a "brand name," a means of "labeling and selling a film and of orienting expectations" (p.102). As Patricia White notes (2015), from the range of work presented in festivals like Tribecca, Toronto, and Sundance – festivals that Labaki regularly attends and competes in – "emerges a picture of contemporary film art and commerce in which 'female director' is figured sometimes as puzzle, sometimes as brand, and increasingly as promise" (p.30-31).

I understand my reading of Labaki's oeuvre as "a study in portraiture" (Mayne, 1994, p.6): I am interested in the films she has made, as portraits of women, but also in how they have come to shape Labaki's image as a woman and a filmmaker. By treating Labaki as auteur, I want to consider the various texts and images, which bear the imprint "directed by Nadine Labaki," in relationship to each other.[44] But I also consider what has been said about her as integral to the meanings of her films. Methodologically, doing so broadens what constitutes a primary text to include interviews, "where the auteur, in addressing cults of fans and critical viewers, can engage and disperse his or her own organising agency as auteur . . . writing and explaining . . . a film through the promotion of a certain intentional self [with] the commercial dramatization of self as the motivating agent of textuality" (Corrigan, 1991, p.108-109). This is evidenced, for instance, in Labaki's claim that the ignition point for *Caramel* was that she was not at ease with her body and with who she was (personal interview, August 15, 2013). As I will show in more detail later, Labaki's identities – as a woman, a Christian Lebanese, and an Arab – explicitly and avowedly inform the creative process and the social narratives that are weaved around the films themselves. The female portraits that populate Labaki's work include her own. This dialogic interplay between the real and the fictional, life and representation, the director and the actor, which characterizes Labaki's account of her work, is a necessary component of the feminist sensibilities underpinning Labaki's productions.

For Patricia White (2015), the notion of authorship is of critical importance to feminist film studies in large part because women's access to the means of cultural

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[44] I borrow this formulation from Mayne's (1994) portrait of Dorothy Arzner (p.6-7).

production has been historically restricted. For women directors like Labaki from developing and non-Western countries, this access is further intercepted by and re-routed through local and global ideological and economic forces which inevitably shape and constrain their films. Circulating as they are on an international scale, these films, White argues (2015), are "uniquely important vectors of transnational feminist imagination and publicity" (p.18). But they also, as is the case in Labaki's work, reflect the local situation of women through their depictions of female characters and plots but also through the gender discourse they produce in their national publicity, circulation, and reception, in a media landscape where such representations are scarce. According to the 2005 U.N-commissioned Arab Human Development Report, "Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World," "women's social political and cultural roles were conspicuously absent from films, indicating that Arab cinema shows no concern for the evolution of women's positions in Arab societies" (UNDP/RBAS, 2005, p. 157).[45] The report concludes that the "visual exposure of the mechanics of women's submission" is among the most important contributions of Arab cinema in challenging the social sexual hierarchy (p.15). Arab countries ranked the lowest in the 2014 Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum, with Lebanon ranking 135th of the 142 surveyed states and 141 out of 142 in the political empowerment category (World Economic Forum, 2014).

In light of deeply-engrained and persistent gender inequalities in the region, films about women by women acquire particular significance in terms of the new visibilities they create for Arab women at home and abroad. The category of

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[45] The report included a study of 31 Arab films produced between 1990 and 2000.

"women's cinema," as White explains, has long been contested in feminist film scholarship: Is it a category of authorship, as in films *by* women? Or is it more content-oriented, as in films *about* women? Labaki's films, which she co-writes (with Rodney el-Haddad and Jihad Hojeily), directs, and stars in, in addition to her music videos for Lebanese female pop stars, undoubtedly place her in both categories. In this regard, Labaki should be considered alongside other Arab women filmmakers as well as television writers and directors, including film directors Enass al-Deghidi (Egypt), Moufida Tlatli (Tunisia), Randa al-Chahal (Lebanon), Jocelyne Saab (Lebanon), Haifaa al-Mansour (Saudi Arabia), and Annmarie Jacir (Palestine), and television directors Rim Hanna (Syria), Rasha Charbatji (Syria).[46] Indeed, the work of these directors, whether in cinema or television, should be considered within what Layale Ftouni (2012) calls an Arab feminist epistemology whose objective is "to retrieve the agency of Arab women, who are excluded from, or misrepresented within the narratives of History, culture, politics, and knowledge" (p.163). While Ftouni is writing about the lack of such an epistemology in critical engagements with modernity within the fields of Middle East gender studies, her call for an epistemology that regards "the existential reality of being a woman as a priori to becoming Arab," and one that requires strategic moves to "*empiricise* the lived experiences of women in Arab societies" (emphasis in original, p.163) also applies to film and media studies in the region.

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[46] This is far from being an exhaustive list. For a more comprehensive overview, see Rebecca Hillauer (2005). *The encyclopedia of Arab women filmmakers*. Cairo, Egypt. American University of Cairo Press. For more on the history of Arab women in film, see Viola Shafik (1998). *Arab cinema: History and cultural identity*. Cairo, Egypt: American University of Cairo Press.

Labaki is in fact adamant about the responsibility of cinema in bringing about social change, and has publicly expressed her vision of and admiration for a socially-committed cinema. In a *Huffington Post* interview, she emphasizes the importance of cinema for women, "it's like a cry for help, cinema. It's like you're shouting out loud something that you are feeling deep inside, it's not just about telling a story. It's about really expressing yourself and trying to make a change because everything needs to be changed, nothing is going the way it should be" (Rothe, June 9, 2015). In an interview with *France 24*, she explains that "when a woman makes a film you feel as if it's a scream, as if she's expressing herself, her view on society, more than merely telling a story. There are obsessions that the woman wants to talk about […]" (*France 24*, May 18, 2015). By describing cultural production as self-expression, Labaki insists on the subjective – and on female subjectivity in particular – as a catalyst for the creative process. She sketches out a cinema that is in conversation with the social reality it inhabits and represents as a cultural text, a reality that is always already gendered. The filmmaker, according to this vision, is a social critic and an activist. In her metaphorization of women's cinema as a "scream," a "cry for help," a shouting "out loud," she outlines the political and personal stakes that undergird the creative process. While this figuration of expressivity may curtail social critique through a reabsorption of the social with the psychology of the individual woman director, the importance of the "scream" lies in its social reverberations, its success or failure to make women's lived experiences visible in public, and therefore knowable.

Consequently, my analysis of Labaki's work treats it as a feminist text for its contribution to empiricize the lived experiences of women, to give a shape and form

to publicly muted subjectivities, offering in the process a different perspective of society, seen through the cracks of the door: in the dressing room, bedroom, and bathroom, in the waxing room of a beauty parlor, or in the hotel room of an illicit affair. Labaki's cinema is a women's cinema inasmuch as it wants "to effect a new vision: to construct other subjects and objects of vision and to formulate the conditions of visibility of another social subject" (DeLauretis, p.136). In this vision, women, played by non-professional actresses, are not only victims.[47] Indeed, Labaki insists, in interviews, that she did not face any major trouble in the industry because of her gender.[48] Her women break the rules, cheat, lie, and conspire. They challenge local conceptions of appropriate gender behavior without reproducing tired stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women in the West.

Born in 1974, on the eve of the Lebanese civil war, Labaki belongs to the war generation – *jeel al-harb* - and embodies a certain political sensitivity that undercuts it. As she explains in a 2007 interview with Sir David Frost, Labaki grew up during the war yet was sheltered from its direct violence. This feeling of disjunction – of an endless war without immediate violence – is not exceptional. It is this experience of the banality of war, its everyday nature, its prolonged tempo that defines Labaki's generation. They lived through it, and survived. Labaki's commitment to survival, as a necessary artistic and political – and indeed a personal – project captures a

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[47] Labaki states in an interview: "I looked everywhere in life for them, in public places, in restaurants. I had about five or six people scouting for these people I had in my mind. They looked everywhere" (Chapman, January 30, 2008).

[48] "I'm not saying we are in a perfect situation right now, but women are expressing themselves more and more freely," she argues. "Lebanon is a free country and it's not too strict on women. We cannot deny we have a lot of issues and taboos to deal with. But I've never had any difficulty in my job because I'm a woman" (Aftab, June 20, 2012).

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generational ethos in its preoccupation with the mechanics of survival rather than revolution. How do women exist in a patriarchal society? How can we prevent the war? These two questions, respectively, orient Labaki's two long-feature films *Caramel* (2007) and *Where Do We Go Now?* (2012). In her pathbreaking essay "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" (1973), Claire Johnston writes that "In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film" (p.33). Johnston's insistence that pleasure accompany politics, at odds with the American feminist climate of the 1970s captured by Laura Mulvey's "destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon" (p.20), resonates in Labaki investment in pleasuring her audiences. It is at this juncture, where politics, entertainment, and pleasure intersect, that Labaki positions herself as a feminine auteur. For her, the film "has to be accessible to everybody. At the same time artistic and commercial, because I want everybody to see it." But, she continues, "We have this problem, we think that a film that is commercially successful is not intellectually-stimulating. This is something I face; intellectuals think that my films are too commercial" (personal interview, August 15, 2013).

In his review of *Where Do We Go Now?* for the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar*, cultural and film critic Pierre Abi Saab (September 26, 2011) writes, "The young filmmaker's charm is irresistible. An actress, director, and citizen of the (Third) World who knows how to address the West and tickle the feelings of her contemporaries." Seduction, Abi Saab argues, is Labaki's primary mode of signification, one that knows "how to dramatize the wound without confronting it"

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and whose vision is "utopian yet pragmatic from a commercial perspective." Labaki's powers of seduction lie precisely in her ability to please multiple gazes by scratching the surface. She is uninterested in offering solutions, and the ones she does offer are "superficial" in nature, as her critics have pointed out. In *Where Do We Go Now?* Labaki's women attempt to prevent civil strife in their village by distracting the men with hashish, Russian prostitutes, and fake spiritual revelations. Labaki exclaims, "Some people took this to the letter! What does that mean?! It's all a joke! It doesn't mean that I found the solution. I don't claim to have the solution" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). Instead, Labaki dwells in visually stunning descriptions. Her sets and costumes are meticulously designed, and her interior spaces, in music videos and films, capture specific local tastes and aesthetics. In fact, she relies on visual signs to subtly convey without overstating religious and social diversity in the country. Labaki's poetics and aesthetics, then, rely on the power of surface, and as such constitute what Rey Chow (1995) has identified as a "new kind of ethnography" (p.143) in postcolonial cinema. The first element of this new ethnography, she explains, is that "it presents the results of its 'research' in the form not of books or museum exhibits but of cinema" (p.143). In her discussion of visuality and sexuality in contemporary Chinese cinema, Chow draws a compelling theoretical framework to understand how visuality operates beyond the colonizer's gaze in what could be called the postcolonial politics of visuality. "What is needed, after the ethical polemic of Said's *Orientalism* is understood," she argues, is the more difficult task of investigating how visuality operates in the postcolonial politics of non-Western cultures besides "the subjection to passive spectacle that critics of orientalism argue"

(p.13). Chow provocatively asks: how do we deal with the fact that non-Westerners also gaze, are voyeurs and spectators? And how do we discuss what happens when "the East" uses Western instruments of visuality to fantasize itself and the world (p.13). When we fail to account for the gaze of the East through an overemphasis on the "dominant" Western gaze in order to deconstruct it, we superimpose upon "West" and "East" "the great divide between seer and seen, active eyes and passive spectacle – a great divide that can as easily perpetuate as disable orientalism" (p.13).

To understand this new ethnography, Chow relinquishes "close reading" in favor of a focus on the surface, prioritizing the filmic and visual over the thematic. Identifying an obsession with surfaces in the work of Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, she shows that it is this obsession with visualizing, recording, and displaying an imagined reality – through particular tactics of visuality such as camera angles and color schemes – that characterizes his filmmaking as an ethnographic practice. What is displayed here is not so much a particular story, character, or theme but rather "the act of displaying, of making visible" (p.149). With this shifting of attention from the message to the form of the utterance and to artifice, meaning is displaced onto the level of surface exchange. Such a displacement, Chow argues, "has the effect of emptying 'meaning' from its conventional space – the core, the depth, or the inside waiting to be seen and articulated – and reconstructing it in a new locus – the locus of the surface, which not only shines but glosses; which looks, stares, and speaks" (p.143). Labaki's image, as much as her films, is a shiny surface that "looks, stares, and speaks," for the West *and* for Lebanon.

In a 2011 episode of his popular political talk show *Kalam el-Nass* (Talk of the People),[49] Lebanese television personality Marcel Ghanem hosted Labaki in a special episode dedicated to *Where Do We Go Now?* As the film's opening scene screened in the background, Ghanem introduced Labaki with the following words:

> I was in Paris, a month ago, when I made the decision to host Nadine Labaki and her team, after watching advertisements for her film, and after reading in many magazines and newspapers and internet sites articles about this surprising woman who comes from the Land of Cedars. I entered a restaurant and was asked by the manager, 'where are you from?' I told her from Lebanon. She said, 'from the country of Nadine Labaki?' I said yes. She said, 'I watched *Caramel*, and I am so eager to watch the new film.' As soon as I came back to Lebanon, I asked for an exclusive screening of the new film before its official public release (September 22, 2011).[50]

Ghanem's celebratory introduction of Labaki demonstrates how the filmmaker is the closest thing the country has to a national sweetheart. She makes the country proud, and, more importantly, she makes the world proud of Lebanon. For the Lebanese, the consensus around Labaki's films is in fact a consensus that she makes them look good abroad. Both of her films premiered at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival – *Caramel* at the Director's Fortnight in 2007 and *Where Do We go Now?* in the "Un Certain Regard" category in 2011. Both were Lebanon's official entry in the Best Foreign Film category at the American Academy Awards. They were further

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[49] This is the longest running political talk show on Lebanese television and remains a flagship program for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation.
[50] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4ucPCq2XPw

recognized with awards from international films festivals in Spain, Sweden, France, Argentina, Canada, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Syria, something Labaki proudly notes in her interviews and media appearances. *The Independent* dubbed her the "poster girl" of Beirut (Aftab, June 20, 2012) and *Variety* magazine named her among the Top Ten Directors to Watch at the Sundance Film Festival in 2007. In addition, she has starred in television commercials for international brands such as L'Oreal and Johnnie Walker. In the past two years, Labaki has also appeared in supporting roles in three French films, *Rock the Casbah* (2013, French-Morroccan), *Mea Culpa* (2014), and *La Rancon de la Gloire* (2014). In 2008, the French Ministry of Culture and Communication awarded her the insignia of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters, which recognizes "significant contribution to the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance" (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2015), Labaki is a true child of the Francophonie.

Indeed, the French state has repeatedly recognized and supported Labaki's work, symbolically and financially. As Neidhardt explains (2010), due to the extremely high production costs of films and a lack of funding in the Middle East, most of the financing is provided by European public film funds.[51] The money is allocated as loans to European private production companies that either function as the main producer for an Arab director or cooperate with an Arab production company and act as co-producer.[52] Thus, beyond their artistic and cultural value,

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[51] Along with Germany, France is the main financer of co-productions with the Middle East. As far as cinema is concerned, most of the co-produced films are not shown in the Arab region apart from one-off events, if at all (Reinhardt, p.43).
[52] At the Barcelona Conference in 1995, foreign affairs ministers from the EU and 12 Mediterranean states agreed to form the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to nurture closer

films are also commodities that undergo a highly industrialized process of technical workflows, division of labor, financing, marketing, and distribution. In addition, due to the scarcity of cinema screens in the Arab world, films from the region need to rely on European markets for financial purposes, which places them in a situation of economic dependence (Neidhardt, 2010, p.32). "Ironically," Reinhardt comments, "the European funds demand local stories from the Arab film-makers, but sophisticated films. Yet what does 'local' stand for if the film's market is Europe and its audiences cannot decode the Arab Middle Eastern local stories?" (Neidhardt, p.32). In this market configuration, Neidhardt explains, European funds and spectators expect filmmakers to represent their national or cultural-religious collective and make its specific features comprehensible. "The outcome can only be stereotypical" (Reinhardt, 2010, p.46).

But the appeal of Labaki's films for foreign audiences, and more specifically European and American viewers must not be reductively understood as "pandering to a Western gaze." Labaki wants to be in conversation with a Lebanese public and to speak its dialect, but she also wants her film to speak universally: "Why would I want to just speak to Lebanese? For me, it's not enough" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). The common assumption that the rise of global culture –global cinema in this case – through transnational capitalism will inevitably lead to the erosion of cultural distinctions is troubled by communication scholar Nector Garcia-Canclini (1995) who argues that distinction will continue to lead individuals (and collectives such as the

economic and cultural ties between the Middle East and North Africa region and Europe. One result was the launch of the Euromed Audiovisual Programmes, which address media professionals in both regions.

nation) to hold on to, unearth, or recuperate traditions to distinguish themselves. Music is central in this regard. Labaki's husband, Lebanese pianist and composer Khaled Mouzannar, created the soundtracks of both her films, mixing classical, jazz, and oriental music with the colloquial lyrics of indie Lebanese singer Tania Saleh.[53] In his discussion of the "cultured middle-class," Garcia-Canclini (1995) explains that it is not the association of this class with a repertory of modern objects and messages that defines it as cultured; rather, it is so because "it possesses the knowledge of how to incorporate different elements, from tradition and modernity, into matrices of social privilege and symbolic distinction. There are elites and popular sectors that reestablish the specificity of their patrimonies or search for new signs in order to differentiate themselves from others" (p.266). But also, and crucially in the context of international film markets, differentiate themselves and their societies from pre-established and stereotypical images abroad. As Syrian documentary filmmaker Omar Amiralay puts it, local filmmakers also seek out transnational collaborations "to provide an alternative body of representations and meanings of our countries to Europeans" (Al Abdallah Yakoub, 2006, p. 116).

Through her gendering of national cinema on the world stage, Labaki seeks to destabilize the common global perception of Lebanon as a country at war. She does so in *Caramel* by avoiding the subject, and in *Where Do we Go Now?* by confronting it head on. As she explains in a 2007 interview with British television host Sir David Frost on *Al-Jazeera English,* following the release of her debut film, the choice not to make a film about war was deliberate: "I wanted to show a different side of my

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[53] *Caramel's* "*Mreyte ya Mreyte*" (Mirror Mirror) and *Where Do We Go Now?*'s "*Hashishet Albi*" (Hashish of my Heart) became national hits.

country, of my people, that you don't necessarily know over the world. Because the first thing that comes to your mind when you say Beirut is a completely different image. It's a country at war with miserable people" (Frost Over the World, October 26, 2007). She continues, "we are people who are very colorful, who have a very strong will to live and survive, who have a sense of humor, who are very warm. And we deal with everyday problems and everyday issues and we are humans. It was important for me to show that and to say this about my country."[54] Labaki is attentive, to use de Lauretis' (1987) words, to "the wider public sphere of cinema as a social technology" (p. 134) whereby the politics of address, "who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom" (p.135) matter. The author's positionality and the film's circulation are therefore important questions that inform the film's politics of representation.

In his interview with Labaki, Frost states, "Unlike other movies made by Lebanese filmmakers, this one is *not* about war. It's about love" (Frost Over the World, October 26, 2007). As hard as it tried to distance itself from Lebanon's political reality, Labaki's romantic comedy could not escape the frame of war through which it was primarily received and understood. In fact, this insistence on the absence of war – in local and international media accounts and reviews of the film– landed *Caramel* back within Lebanon's bloody history, not outside it. The need to reaffirm that the film is not about the war exposed the impossibility of escaping its still imposing specter. In an interview about a film that is not about the war, Labaki – as it

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[54] "We had a lot of doubts about what the film said, but now I know that it was my mission after all: This is my country, not the clichéd image that people have in their heads of a country at war. It has a message of hope" (Chapman, January 30, 2008).

turns out – could speak of nothing else. Frost then asked her about her experience growing up during the civil war. After describing her relatively sheltered upbringing, Labaki explains that it was important for her to forget the war: "It has been so overanalyzed, and seen in so many different angles. I didn't feel that I was going to add anything more." A year after her film was released though, the country had reached a political deadlock because of its deep polarization between the pro-U.S March 14 movement and the Iran-backed March 8 movement, discussed later in more detail. As she states in an interview, "I thought I could get away from it but the reality of the war caught up with me" (Doshi, 2009). In her public accounts of *Where Do We Go Now?* Labaki repeatedly describes that the idea for the film was inspired by the eruption of armed sectarian clashes in Beirut and around the country in May 2008. "At that time I was pregnant with my first child. I guess it does change your perspective on things. You wonder, what kind of a world is this? How am I going to raise this child in this world?" (Smith, 2012) Through her insistence on the seamless continuity between cinema and real life on one hand and motherhood and filmmaking on the other, Labaki blurs the boundary – in her account of her work – between the personal and the political, reality and fiction, and caretaking and creative work. If the war was ignored in the focus on femininity in *Caramel*, it made its comeback through motherhood in *Where Do We Go Now?*

The Reticent Poetics of *Caramel*

"[Homosexuality] is very secret, which is why I decided to write about that. I

see a lot of homosexual women and men who just keep it to themselves, and they lead very unhappy lives where they end up hating their bodies and hating themselves. Many people live with it in secret, but there are also many victims and others who have problems dealing with it in public. It's the contradiction of the country" (Chapman, January 30, 2008).

In this excerpt from her interview with *Vulture* about her then newly-released film *Caramel*, Labaki makes two related points that capture the ethos of her debut feature film. First, she reveals the secret that is homosexuality in Lebanon, then she invokes it – the secret – as the reason for her writing. Secrecy is the centerpiece of *Caramel,* its structuring narrative device and plot line. In its depiction of the interconnected lives of five women around a beauty salon in Beirut, the film traces their fraught relationship with their bodies, desires, and familial and romantic attachments. Their everyday navigation of social spaces is conditioned by practices of concealment and revelation, requiring them to pass as that which they are not, hide who they are, and confess their inability to do so when they break down or fail. Although the film is not *about* homosexuality, it is about the kind of secrecy that structures its circulation in public, and which can be discerned in the movements and restrictions of women's sexuality in public.

Layale, the owner of the salon, is having an affair with a married man. In her late twenties or early thirties, she still lives with her parents and teenage brother, hiding under the bed cover and in the bathroom whenever she speaks on the phone with her lover. Nisreen, the salon's hairstylist, is engaged to be married to a man who does not know that she is no longer a virgin. Jamale, a regular customer and friend, is

a divorced mother of two going through menopause and desperately trying to maintain a younger image of herself. Rima, the salon's masculine-looking hair washer, is attracted to women and develops a crush on a new customer. Finally, Rose is a middle-aged seamstress who lives across the street from the salon with her senile older sister Lily whom she cares for. The individual plots constitute the film's narrative storyline, which features only one supporting male character, the neighborhood's friendly policeman who is infatuated with Layale and played by famous Lebanese television comedian Adel Karam.[55] Through these connected individual stories, Labaki invites us to examine the pressures of intimate and familial relationships on women. What does sisterhood in old age mean? Why do women get plastic surgery? Where do non-married couples fuck in Beirut? Is pre-marital female virginity a norm?

While themes of infidelity, jealousy, rivalry, shame, love, and female abjection are universal in scope, their representation in the film draws on their socially-specific manifestations in a contemporary Lebanese context. In her script and cinematography, Labaki captures a sense of locality that has universal appeal. This slippage between the film's global circulation and reception and its local significance is best exemplified in its description by Western media as a "chick flick," a light women's comedy about the status of women in the Arab world, in the Middle East, in Muslim societies. The chick flick is a commercial women's genre, specific to the U.S., described by feminist scholars as a "protofeminist social vehicle for expressing (and managing) women's discontent" and a "populist antidote to avant-

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[55] Along with Labaki, Karam is the only professional actor on the film's cast.

garde feminist aesthetics" (White, 2015, p.38). Taking stock of the global flows of culture and capital that shape the production and reception of generic formulas like the "women's film" outside the West, media and film scholars' analysis of the genre's global manifestations must not be overdetermined by histories and discourses specific to their original Western contexts. As Patricia White (2015) has recently argued, "women directors participate in changing national cinema cultures by tapping into generic formulas of the chick flick, at the same time accessing international circuits in which these formulas are universalized" (p.37). In addition, generic features themselves mutate as they move from one social context to another. *Caramel* may have had a universal appeal, it may have drawn on familiar Euro-American cinematic tropes and aesthetics, but it also, crucially, signifies nationally and regionally.

As a melodrama centered on women's lives, Labaki's is the first commercial feature film directed by a woman, about women, in Lebanon.[56] As she explains, the idea of *Caramel* came from her realization that most women around her were unhappy and from her inability to find a local female role model. Men too, she adds, are not at ease and unable to navigate their lives between the "Western example of the very liberated man" on one hand and "the rules and traditions" on the other, unsure where they belong or how they should behave (personal interview, August 15, 2013). *Caramel*, then, represents social and psychic tensions around gender identity and behavior and the culture of secrecy that the inability or refusal to conform gives rise

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[56] Along with Labaki, Randa Chahal, Jocelyne Saab, and Danielle Arbid are prominent, award-winning Lebanese filmmakers. Although their films featured lead female characters (Chahal's *The Kite,* 2002; Saab's *Dunia,* 2005; Arbid's *In the Battlefield,* 2004), they were not specifically framed as *about* women in the same way that *Caramel* was by Labaki, the media, and the critics. In addition, their films were not as commercially-successful as Labaki's.

to among women. To talk about *Caramel* is to talk about Labaki herself:

> The ignition point for *Caramel* was that I was not at ease with my body, me. I was not at ease with who I am; I used to dream of becoming more…being more liberated, being less afraid of who people perceive me as, how they look at me, or the idea they have of me. Because there's a big difference between who I want to be and what I allow myself to be, because of that, because of how people look at you, how they perceive you, what they expect of you (personal interview, August 15, 2013).

As a film that is explicitly *about* women, *Caramel* is inspired by and mobilizes the filmmaker's own experience *as* a woman. Her own biography informs her account of the film as well as its reception. Intimacy, the pressures it breeds and feeds upon, she explains, can be self-alienating, but it also leads, as Labaki herself asserts, to self-censorship: "Because of all this pressure, I am self-censored. I don't need people to censor me because I censor myself, naturally, because of the fact that I grew up here. I know how to deal with it" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). Thus, Labaki managed to tackle the sensitive topic of female sexuality without being censored. She attributes this to her deeply engrained sense of self-censorship. "I know how to cheat, in a way to please other people, to please society, my parents, my family, the people who expect so many things from me and at the same time do what I want to do. And I've found this balance […] In both movies I've made, that tackled sensitive, delicate topics, they didn't censor anything, not even a word" (Personal interview, August 15, 2013). Indeed, as Lebanese film critic Ibrahim el-Ariss (2010) notes, Labaki managed to secure a wide consensus, locally and in the international film circuit, around her

film's success (p.284). Her care about and investment in what people think of her, as she herself asserts, is evidenced in her commitment to please the censors, the audience, and the critics. Provoking people, she asserts, does not work in Lebanon. "You have to propose things in a clever way, in a subtle way in order to be accepted. And I think that I got away with a lot of things because of humor […] you cannot provoke, you have to ease your way in" (personal interview).

In her account of her work, Labaki describes a certain reticence that animates it, an oblique way of getting to things, whether through the reticence of illicit sexuality in *Caramel* or the allegory of civil war in *Where Do We Go Now?* She does not want to provoke; she wants to propose. In "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei (2005) define reticence as a mode of writing wherein the real message goes beyond the actual words of the text (p.34). Engaging recent theorizations that posit non-Western (in their case Taiwanese and more broadly Chinese) cultures as silently tolerant of same-sex and non-normative desires, the authors reproach such essentializing accounts for imagining non-Western cultures as continuous and unchanging, and for failing to account for the homophobic forces that undergird such silent tolerance and are reproduced by it. As a dominant aesthetic-ethical value, reticence contains deviant subjects in the realm of shadows according to the following logic: "Although they can't be made to disappear for good, they can be made to cooperate in their own invisibility and quiescence" (p.32). Identifying reticence in rhetoric, narrative deployment, aesthetic ideal, but also as model of speech and behavior, Liu and Ding (2005) contend that the ideology of reticence enables and facilitates a gentle homophobia. Such an ideology keeps persons, whose

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modes and practices of desire are deemed morally reprehensible, in the "shadowy ghostly spaces of the socio-familial continuum"(p.32). In contexts where personhood is "inextricably entangled with paternalist familial relations" (Liu & Ding, p.30), the family is a primary site of gender regulation, surveillance, and control. It is a highly but often reticently regulated sphere where unspoken rules dictate daily lives, including sexual behavior and gender expression. Labaki's focus on family, in her films as well as her account of filmmaking, reveals the structuring influence of the family on individual identity and life choices:

> In Lebanon, you know, we live…it's not an individualistic society. We live within communities, within families, within neighborhoods. We're very intimate with the others, so this intimacy creates a lot of pressure. It comes from love. You're surrounded by so much love you're always scared to deceive. So you end up being the image that everybody wants from you but maybe it's not exactly what you want (Labaki, personal interview, August 15, 2013).

The intimacy she describes is a central subject in her films, but also informs her own practices and decisions as a filmmaker.

As Labaki states in an interview, "girls in Lebanon are raised with the word '*ayb*' (shame). We are always afraid to commit something we must not do, with the idea of personal sacrifice to please our parents, children, men, and families. At every stage of our life we are given a model to follow, even though it doesn't reflect who we want to become" (cited in el-Ariss, 2010, p.285). Indeed, Labaki's "we" invokes a gender-based commonality, women in plural. She describes a shared experience of

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shame that undergirds each of the character's storylines: Shame of growing old, of abandoning family obligations for love, of having sex, of lying, of loving women, and of looking less feminine. What emerges across these individual plots is the central role of the family in the regulation of the sexual and affective lives of women. In these parallel depictions of feminine interiorities, of spaces and affects, *Caramel* lays bare the normative structure of kinship in contemporary Lebanon from a woman's perspective. The family appears as an enclosing space of intimate sociality, warm and supportive but also imposing and restrictive. By imposing rules of kinship, the family reproduces compulsory heterosexuality, monogamy, and female chastity as social norms, which gives rise to a culture of shame and secrecy around sexual behavior that deviates from them. Layale struggles to find privacy at home and with her lover. Nisreen will seek a hymen reconstructive procedure in order to keep the secret of her pre-marital sexual history from her future husband. And Rima cannot express her lesbian desire. They each have to navigate social minefields in their negotiation of intimacies that often become unbearable.

In the remainder of this section, I read *Caramel* as a reticent feminine text that stages the silence around female sexualities that exceed the bounds of normative femininity. In other words, I approach it as a text that strategically mobilizes its filmic elements – its plot, dialogue, and cinematography – to represent the struggle to conform to gender norms and the difficulties of talking about it in public. Through visual analogies and the coupling of individual storylines, the film not only manages to signify reticently, insinuating what happens in one scene through another, but she also visualizes, through montage, the intersectionality of the characters' struggle *as*

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women. Such an approach decenters the state as a locus of modern power by examining the micropowers of family and neighborhood as sites of intimate, informal, everyday regulation. Reading the film through moments of self-concealment and disguise, we discern how normative rules of kinship shape and circumscribe women's bodies in private and public, and how social institutions regulate women's sexualities by regulating speech about them. In addition to her witty use of verbal and visual metaphor, her frequent narrative deployment of humor softens the edges of otherwise sensitive and often censored subjects. Without *saying* anything about virginity, for example, Labaki uses sewing as a metaphor to talk about it. She notes that while Nisreen never explicitly says anything about sex or hymens, the meaning is assembled by the spectator who decodes the metaphors leading up to the scene of the hymen reconstructive procedure: a long close-up of Nisreen's face intercut with shots of the seamstress' hands operating the sewing machine. Labaki actively enlists her viewers in the construction of the film's meaning: "I don't find it very hard to say the things I want to say subtly. It comes naturally. With Rima and her lover, there is nothing to say, you can't cut out anything, but at the same time you understand everything about what's happening between them. But the censorship cannot tell me 'this is a scene you must remove'" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). While the state can censor a written script, Labaki suggests, it cannot censor its reading. The filmmaker therefore relies on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) has called "periperformatives," which are not "just about performative utterances in the referential sense: they cluster around them, they are near them or next to them or crowding against them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative' (p.68). As

Bonnie Honig (2013) explains, periperformatives "dance around a speech act but are never quite uttered and in this reticence find their power" (Honig, 2013, p.3). This reticence characterizes the filmic poetics of *Caramel*.

Looking for a room where she can celebrate her lover's birthday with him in private, Layale hops from one hotel to another in a desperate attempt to book a room without presenting her identity card and a marriage certificate. She attempts to pass as a married woman but has no evidence to prove it. She worries about being recognized by someone in the hotel lobby, hides behind her glasses, uses fake names. She dodges questions from an inquisitive male receptionist about her family background. She finally settles for a decrepit motel, accepting to "share the stairs with whores" for the sake of privacy. Her failure to pass as a married woman circumscribes her movements and limits her choices, ultimately landing her in an uncomfortable place. In the small, tightly-knit, hyper-networked context of Lebanon, it is practically impossible for the individual to escape social surveillance which, beyond direct or explicit state control, keeps the subject in her place. In a comparable scene, Nisreen and her fiancé Bassam are interrupted, in the middle of their car conversation, by the neighborhood's police officer who accuses them of offending public decency. In contrast to the salon, which appears as a space of female agency, the public spaces that the characters have to navigate expose them to the normative power and regulatory gaze of hetero-patriarchal ideology. In public, the characters' intimate lives and relationships are interrupted and scrutinized without their consent and despite their minor resistance. *Caramel* is a largely heterosexual romance that exposes the workings of patriarchy in its portrayal of women's quests for illicit love.

After finding a hotel room, cleaning and decorating it in preparation for birthday dinner for her lover, Layale is heartbroken when he is a no-show on the much awaited night. Her friends show up at her doorstep, providing her with emotional support, as she laments the state of her relationship. She crumbles under the weight of the constant lying she needs to perform in front of her parents, and the social pressure she succumbs to, for someone who never seems to show up. In fact, we never see the lover in the film. As she is confessing her shame about having an affair, Layale is interrupted by Nisreen's sudden tears. The bride-to-be asks her, "you think you're the only one who's lying here?" Nisreen confesses to her friends that Bassam, her fiancé, "will not be the first one." Layale adds, "and he doesn't know?" to which Nisreen replies, "he doesn't know anything." In a dialogue that is dense with sexual shame, the two women come out to their friends about their illicit encounters and relationships. This intimate scene, in a dimly-lit hotel bedroom, is abruptly interrupted by sounds of sex emanating from the bedroom walls of the cheap, low class motel.[57] In this scene, Labaki stages the secrecy of female sexuality. Nisreen confesses to her friends that she is not a virgin and then – upon Layale's inquiry – that her fiancé doesn't know about it. This double-confession distinguishes for us, as analytical categories, sex and speech about it. Layale's question and the rest of the scene unravel a shared cultural logic in which sex is not a problem as long as no one knows about it.

Siham, the oldest among them, breaks the scene's dramatic intensity with an off-handed suggestion to stain the sheets with pigeon blood to pass as a virgin on her

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[57] Located in an alley off of the central Hamra Street, the motel became a popular tourist destination following Labaki's film.

wedding night. The idea is mockingly dismissed by Rima and Layale, who are then interrupted by the sounds of a man and a woman having sex next door. Pigeon blood and loud sex fulfill a comic function that is essential in Labaki's storytelling, breaking the seriousness of the subject, softening its rough edges, and, to borrow her words, "easing her way in." The imperative to lie about sex that is central to normative femininity is reproduced in the scene by the women themselves, and later on by Layale's decision to opt for hymen reconstructive surgery. Whether it's the learned tradition of pigeon blood or the Doctor Stambouli's clinic which makes her "brand new," these are among the many technologies, modern and parochial, available for women to exercise more control over their bodies and how they want them to signify. They are also technologies that ensure the reproduction of kinship norms. Fake blood and fake hymen serve as reparative technologies for an otherwise abject femininity while simultaneously reproducing female sexuality as an unspoken secret. As such, they mask female sexual shame rather than eliminate the logics that produce it. Virginity becomes a form of gender drag, a form of disguise, which we can already discern early on in the film when, at the request of her fiancé, Nisreen rolls down her sleeves, buttons up her shirt, ties up her hair, and spits out her chewing gum before they visit his conservative parents' house. Passing, writes Randall Kennedy (2001), is a deception that enables a person to adopt certain identities from which she would be barred by prevailing social standards (p.1). As Jessa Lingel (2009) has noted, passing has come to encompass such disparate things as class-jumping, cross-dressing, and age-faking among other combinations "of adopting or abdicating characteristics of religion, culture, age, class and ethnicity" (p.391). Through the withholding or

projection of information about one's identity, passing allows subjects to navigate social roles and spaces that are otherwise inaccessible. Together, Layale's failure to pass as a married woman without proper evidence and Nisreen's success in passing as a virgin expose the social pressure placed on women to embody gender norms and ideals of female chastity.

Finally, in the hyper-feminine space of the beauty parlor, Rima's butch appearance and mannerisms stand out: She sports a short haircut, wears loose-fitting jeans, and operates the generator during power cuts – a task typically reserved for men. Rima's plotline revolves around recurrent scenes of encounter with an attractive feminine-looking customer whose hair she washes. These eroticized and prolonged encounters with the woman are juxtaposed to Rima's antagonistic and clearly rushed interactions with a hyper-masculine delivery guy whom the ladies mockingly call "Johny Bravo." Rima's gentle and soft-spoken attitude with her now-regular customer is contrasted with her severe and truncated exchanges with Johny Bravo. The hair washing scenes between the two women in the salon's basement are set to the same tune, composed by Labaki's husband Khaled Mouzannar and titled "shampoing revelateur" (revealing shampoo). There, Rima sensuously washes the customer's hair as the camera zooms in on both their faces. Lesbian desire is coded in the slow but deliberate movements of Rima's hands, through the woman's wet, long, black hair, set to the tango melody of Mouzannar's violins. It is a prolonged ritual, we learn, as Nisreen loudly scolds Rima for using up all the hot water, upon which the two women exchange a mischievous, quiet laugh. In the few, brief words they exchange during the otherwise mute shampoo scenes, the unnamed woman

compliments Rima's short hair. Rima returns the compliment by telling her that short hair would probably suit her as well, to which the woman responds with a mix of awe and amusement: "Cut my hair? They would go mad at home!" The film ends with a back shot of the woman sitting in front of the salon's mirror. The camera then cuts to the floor where we see her hair falling. In the final scene, the woman leaves the salon, running her hand through her short hair in disbelief, smiling every time she catches her reflection in a shop's window.

In her analysis of the film's lesbian subplot, Patricia White (2015) describes Rima's character as a "stand-in for closeted Lebanese lesbians," her erotic visibility exemplifying the film's more "tolerant, internationalized, and modern" cultural outlook (p.156). Lesbianism, White argues, functions as "an emblem of Lebanon's modernity" (p.155). While this may be true in the film's foreign, international reception, the erotically-charged tension between the two women cannot be characterized, in its local viewing context, as a "well-worn trope of grooming as a stand-in for lesbian sex" and a "failure of imagination" on the part of the filmmaker (p.157). Labaki may well be pitching her film for an international, Western audience, but she is also committed to its local circulation and reception and is therefore careful not to provoke the General Security which may decide to censor scenes deemed too daring and inappropriate. Thus, the film's knowingness about the need for discretion should be recognized as such: a knowingness shared with the spectator, and relayed through the knowing glances of Rima's coworkers when the woman returns to the salon, of the limits of what can be said and the boundaries of the speakable. This knowingness, as I previously explained, forces some filmmakers, like Labaki, to

adapt to the conditions and limits of speech if they want their works to pass uncensored. As she put it, "You have to cheat in a way where people get the message without bluntly seeing it. Because if you want to bluntly say the message, it's not going to come across. Your film will be cut in pieces, no one will see it, and you will put in in the drawer" (personal interview, August 15, 2013).

Censorship of literary, artistic works, and media in Lebanon fall under the jurisdiction of the Directorate General of General Security which controls when and how much freedom will be permitted in creative works, tightening or loosening restrictions according to the prevailing political circumstances and dictates of various political and religious powers.[58] Contrary to established laws, the General Security monopolizes decision-making around censorship and licensing and develops extra-legal tactics, such as issuing screening permits after certain deadlines (film festivals for instance) or even revoking screening permits after their issuance (Saghieh, Saghieh, & Geagea, 2010).[59] When filmmakers know and expect arbitrary restrictions on their work, they find creative ways to adapt.

The importance of state censorship, then, lies in its promotion of a culture of pre-emptive self-censorship. Over the years, movies have managed to push the envelope on a number of issues, particularly in their representation, narration, and evaluation of the Lebanese civil war. In light of a public silence – termed by some as collective amnesia –about the civil war (a silence most sharply felt in the total

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[58] Censors often recommend the replacement of terms with more "socially acceptable" ones, for instance, instead of "he's riding her" use "he's coupling with her." With regard to film screening, General Security is the sole authority with power to censor parts of movies or restrict viewing to certain age groups (Saghieh, Saghieh, & Geagea, 2010, p.28).
[59] For example in the case of *Help!,* a 2009 Lebanese film banned following pressures by the Catholic Church.

absence of the war from school history books and curricula), Lebanese filmmakers managed, as early as the 1980s, to portray an otherwise unrepresentable war. With the lack of consensus around the war's history and the rise of a culture of unaccountability in its aftermath, Lebanese cinema was at the vanguard of the public memorialization of national trauma that "had been pushed into the closet" (Westmoreland, 2008, p.65).[60]

Where Do We Go Now? Towards a Politics of Lamentation

If *Caramel* was dismissed as a "chick flick," *Where Do We Go Now?* was often described as a comical take on the tragic national and regional politics of sectarian division. A *New York Times* article compared it to a "raucous sitcom about scrappy little boys whose canny mamas conspire to keep them out of trouble" (Holden, May 11, 2012). In her second feature film, Labaki represents religious intolerance and masculine belligerence in the story of an unnamed idyllic village, isolated from the world, which slowly starts to feel the flames of sectarian violence infiltrating its borders, pitting Muslim and Christian men against each other in a series of tragic events. Released in 2011, Labaki's second feature film was an outcry against a national political crisis that had gripped the country since the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a massive car bomb in downtown Beirut. The spectacular killing of Saudi Arabia's number one ally, architect of Lebanon's postwar

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[60] This is best exemplified in local TV series, where the names of characters, for instance, were always neutral: no Tony or Elie or Therese, visibly Christian names; no Omar or Haidar, visibly Sunni and Shiite. These may be the most common names in society, but postwar television had to be sanitized from sects, and names had to stripped of their sectarian connotations.

reconstruction, economic privatization, and market liberalization, and the nation's most popular multi-millionaire secular Sunni leader, inaugurated the emergence of a new political order.

Syria was directly accused, by the leaders of the newly-emergent multi-sectarian opposition bloc to which Hariri belonged, of standing behind the assassination. Following massive popular demonstrations under the slogans "Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence" and "Syria Out" and mounting American and European diplomatic pressure, the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad pulled out its troops which had been stationed in the country since Syria's 1978 military intervention during the civil war. The resignation of Omar Karami's government on February 28, 2005 and the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005 marked the official end of the unofficial postwar Syrian mandate over Lebanon. If the events that followed Hariri's assassination transformed the geopolitical balance of power, they managed to leave the ruling political class and its logics of governance intact. Indeed, the same warlords that became *de facto* political leaders in the wake of the civil war were the democratic heroes of what came to be variously called the "Independence Intifada," the "Beirut Spring," and the "Cedar Revolution." Hariri's assassination set in motion a process of political and sectarian polarization between the Iran-backed March 8 and the U.S-backed March 14 coalitions, both named after major popular demonstrations that took place in 2005. The new national hegemonic order was thus formulated around the Saudi/U.S-Syrian/Iranian axis of contention, producing a local politics and discourse of Sunni/Shia division. Political figures and journalists from the March 14 camp were assassinated in a series of car bombs between 2005 and 2013,

their tragic and gruesome deaths giving rise to a poetics of mourning and martyrdom that defined the March 14 and national political rhetoric. Mounting tensions and armed clashes between Sunnis and Shias, particularly in the North and the Bekaa but also in Beirut culminated in the 2008 nationwide armed clashes that came to be known as "*Ahdath Ayyar*," or the May Events.

If Labaki tried to avoid national politics in *Caramel*, she did the exact opposite in her follow-up film which was literally the brainchild of the May Events. "At that time I was pregnant with my first child. I guess it does change your perspective on things. You wonder, what kind of a world is this? How am I going to raise this child in this world?" (Smith, 2012). As a tragicomedy, the film mirrors the divisions of the political world, but it also offers, as tragedy as a genre often does, an "anti-politics" that points beyond them (Honig, 2013). Motherhood constitutes a central trope in *Where Do We Go Now?* which is itself dedicated by Labaki "to our mothers." The film's title is a reference to the final scene when, on their way to bury a young boy who had died from a stray bullet, the men carrying the casket stop to ask the slain boy's mother, Takla, where to bury the body: on the Christian or the Muslim side of the village's shared cemetery.

The plot of the film, which ends with the collective religious conversion of the village women from Christianity to Islam and vice versa, revolves around their creative attempts to pacify and distract the men – their husbands, brothers, and sons – to prevent them from engaging in intercommunal violence. Relying once again on a female ensemble cast of non-professional actors, the director's much-anticipated second film stars Labaki as Amale, the owner of the village café where most of the

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action unfolds. Along with other women, including the comic Yvonne, wife of the village mayor, and the tragic Takla, mother of the slain boy Nassim, Amale – a Christian woman in love with a Muslim man – devises elaborate plots to maintain civil peace. These include burying weapons where the men can't find them, hiding newspapers and destroying the only television set shared by the villagers to prevent the spread of the news of sectarian warfare, making hash baked goods, inviting Ukranian strippers to the village, feigning religious miracles, and ultimately resorting to religious conversion. Premiering at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival in the "Un Certain Regard" category, the film went on to win the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival – previously won by *The King's Speech*, *Precious*, and *Slumdog Millionaire* – and was a box-office hit in Lebanon where it became the third-highest-grossing film after *Titanic* and *Avatar* (White, 2015).

If the feminine – metonymically indexed by the beauty parlor – constituted the master aesthetics and poetics of *Caramel*, the poetics of the maternal anchor Labaki's vision of the nation in *Where Do We Go Now?* As she repeatedly mentioned in interviews, including the one quoted above, she wrote the film's script when she was pregnant with her son. It is therefore as a mother, primarily, that Labaki frames her authorial intent:

> Everything that these women have done in the film, I as a mother can do. I would shoot [my son] in the foot to prevent him from taking up a weapon and going down to the street in the name of protecting his family or the building where he lives or the religion he belongs to or the political party he belongs to. Yes, I would shoot him in the foot. And I think many women and many

mothers would do this too. Everything that was written in this film, I as a mother can do (interview with Marcel Ghanem, September 22, 2011).

Labaki's mobilization of motherhood in the film and her talk about it cannot be readily dismissed as a re-enfolding of women's agency within a familial but never political sphere. Such a deployment in fact redefines motherhood *as* political performance – a political act – that doesn't gain its political valence through its incorporation into *a* politics. Rather, motherhood *as* politics reimagines political space not along private/public lines but through a flattening of the very binary. Simply, Labaki seems to be saying, kinship is always already political, and women have a duty and an obligation to act alone and together *as* mothers in times of war and crisis.

In her study of women's literature during the Lebanese civil war, literary scholar miriam cooke (1987) shows how a group of upper and middle class women writers who wrote in Arabic, French, and English – the Beirut Decentrists, as she came to call them – were "compelled by the war to become an increasingly visible part of the public sphere," recognizing the role they might play in a society undergoing massive transformations (p.5). This new consciousness, cooke argues, inspired literary productions – including novels, short stories and poetry – that became increasingly feminist in orientation (p.5), and that blamed the men for participating in the violence or alternatively for leaving the country and the women behind. The writing of the Beirut Decentrists was therefore crucial in gendering the war, highlighting the place of women in a conflict that was perpetrated by men. Clearly, *Where Do We Go Now?* is a variation on what seems to be a transhistorical

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theme of the role of women in the wars of men. Whereas *Caramel* is more descriptive in its approach, in *Where Do We Go Now?* Labaki adopts a prescriptive tone that is best captured in Amale's passionate and angry monologue, delivered to an all-male audience in her café. After physically intervening to break a fight that had erupted among customers, Amale stands in the middle of her café – encircled by men - in a hopeless attempt to expose the senselessness of perpetual violence and to teach the men a lesson: She screams to their faces, "Are we doomed to keep mourning you? Are we doomed to stay in black?"[61]

In her monologue, Amale captures the film's ethos: mourning and lamentation as the inevitably tragic fate of women. Set in a mythical time and place, in an unidentified but clearly Lebanese village, *Where Do We Go Now?* broaches Lebanon's history of religious and sectarian violence in an oblique manner. Incorporating choreographed musical scenes to dramatize the narrative, including a funerary march of women dressed in black in the film's opening sequence, Labaki formally and thematically draws on tragedy as a genre. The movie, Labaki explains, "is a fantasy, a fable. That's why it starts with dancing, and with the narrator's voice saying 'I'm going to tell you a story.' It's the story of the short-lived utopia of a village that managed to find peace at a time of war" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). As an article in the *New York Times* puts it, the film reveals itself as a "modern variation of Aristophanes' 'Lysistrata,' in which the village women, sick and tired of

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[61] Upon taking the stage at the Murex d'Or –Lebanon's response to the Oscars – to receive the best film director award on her behalf, Labaki's husband musician Khaled Mouzannar delivered an impassioned and angry acceptance speech, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Amale's monologue in the film, scolding the Lebanese for falling prey, yet again, to sectarian violence.

losing their menfolk to senseless warfare, band together to keep the peace by any means necessary" (Holden, May 10, 2012). If the conspiratorial nature of the women's collective action recalls one famous Greek comedy, its poetic register and political discourse evoke another. In its staging of the relationship between death, kinship, and the state, Sophocle's *Antigone* lends itself to being read as one of the film's subtexts. The fifth-century Athenian play, one of the most commented-upon dramas in the history of philosophy, feminism, and political theory, has inspired many readings, interpretations, and adaptations (Honig, 2013, p. 6). Figuring prominently in the works of Virginia Woolf (1938), Luce Irigaray (1974), and Judith Butler (2000), Antigone, as Sam McBean (2012) notes, "has staked her claim on the Western feminist imaginary" (p.22). Feminists adopted her anti-statist language and praised her public defiance in the name of family and the private sphere.

Set in the aftermath of a near civil war following the end of Oedipus's rule over Thebes, the play, Honig (2013) argues, provided a way for Athenians to grapple with thorny issues that might have been "too close to home" (p.4). The distant yet familiar setting of Thebes allowed Sophocles to "broach for public consideration issues that would otherwise be dangerous to consider" (p.4). After the exile and death of their father, Polynices and Eteocles – Antigone's brothers – both lay claim to his throne, ultimately killing each other in battle. While Thebes' new ruler, and Antigone's uncle, Creon orders the burial of Eteocles in full honor, he issues a decree forbidding and outlawing the ritual burial of Polynices whose body is left exposed in the city. Unable to accept her brother's fate, Antigone feels compelled to offer him a proper burial, violating through her deed the sovereign's edict. While Antigone first

performs the unlawful act quietly at night, when no one is there to witness it, she returns to burry her brother once again and is caught by one of Creon's guards. Upon learning about his niece's deed the ruler commands that she be immured alive in a cave. Lamenting her fate but not her action as she is taken outside the city, Antigone finally hangs herself in the cave/tomb where she had been sentenced to a living burial.

Antigone's allegiance to the private sphere, exemplified by her insistence on performing funerary rites on her brother in defiance of state laws, "dramatizes the difficult relationship that 'woman' has to citizenship" (McBean, 2012, p.22). As such, Antigone came to embody the possibilities of a feminist political speech for many feminist theorists (Elshtain, 1981; Dietz, 1985; Zerilli, 1991). In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf (1938) returns to Antigone in her attempt to answer the question of how to prevent war. It is her position as Oedipus' daughter, and a patriarchal daughter under Creon more generally, that allows Woolf to see Antigone as a figure "who binds the daughters' struggle against patriarchy with the struggle against fascism and reveals the two causes to be the same" (Swanson, 1996, p.38). In Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Antigone embodies women's necessity for the community and the polis and their simultaneous exclusion and occlusion from its bounds. It is by fulfilling her duties as a woman, mourning and memorializing the dead in the familial sphere where she exists, that Antigone is expelled from the community. Against Hegel and Lacan's readings of an apolitical Antigone, who acts either from the private sphere or out of pure desire, Irigaray (1974) insists on the tragic heroine as a civic subject. Her public deed, she contends, is an articulation of a

political alternative that is not recognized by dominant readings of male-dominated forms of citizenship (p.218). For Butler (2000), however, Antigone does not act as an oppositional feminist figure to established authority. Rather, both her character and the play open up the question of whether kinship and the state can ever exist separately or whether they are mutually-constitutive. Against readings that place Antigone on the side of kinship against Creon/The State, Butler argues that Antigone in fact troubles both the norms of kinship, by the mere fact of simultaneously being Oedipus' daughter/sister, and of the state by speaking through the language of sovereignty, which does not belong to her as a woman. Thus, for Butler (2000), Antigone's value lies in "the social deformation of both idealized kinship and political sovereignty that emerges as a consequence of her act" (p.6). Antigone's value for Butler, as McBean (2012) explains, resides in her exposure of the limits of the very categories of kinship and the state (p.32). Furthermore, her failure to speak in the realm of the polis exposes citizenship as a category "that excludes, disciplines subjects, and defines modes of belonging" (McBean, 2012, p.23), preventing women and other disenfranchised subjects from entering into what is recognizably political.

In the critical feminist writings it occasioned around citizenship, women, and the state, the play's theoretical relevance for Labaki's film is hard to miss, and the thematic parallels between the two abound. Of particular interest, in this regard, is the refusal of Takla – one of the village women – to announce the death of her son in order to prevent civil unrest, which leads her to postpone his burial and to hide his body in the well behind their family home. Takla, the film's tragic heroine, is a widowed mother of two, having lost her husband in an episode of sectarian violence.

In a dramatic scene following the death of her youngest boy by a stray bullet outside the village, Takla bursts into the village church late at night to confront the statue of the Virgin Mary, lamenting her failure to protect her son. Takla, herself dressed in a light blue robe, epitomizes the figure of the tragic mother, doomed to lose her loved ones - her husband then her son - to the senseless wars of men. Like Antigone, she is confronted with a dilemma: to bury her son and fulfill her duties as a mother, or to keep his death a secret and leave his body exposed, acting as a citizen to maintain civil peace for the well-being of the community. Takla's deed, her refusal to make her son's death public, is a heavy burden she must carry. Unable to grieve and mourn her loss, she makes up lie after lie to justify her son's absence, crumbling under the pressure of her self-imposed secrecy. Upon discovering the truth, her incensed oldest son takes up his rifle and decides to avenge his brother's death despite his mother's pleas for peace. In a last attempt to prevent him from starting what at this point seemed to be an inevitable war, Takla takes up a rifle and shoots her son in the foot.

In its foregrounding of lamentation as a performative speech act, *Where Do We Go Now?* attempts to chart out what a feminine politics may look like in public. Grief and mourning, and their withholding, are reworked and mobilized as viable modes of public intervention, amounting to what could be called, following Honig (2013), a "politics of lamentation." Indeed, it could be said that postwar Lebanese cinema is itself a cinema of lament. Lina Khatib (2008) has shown how films produced after the civil war – since its beginning in 1975 and its end in 1990 – have dealt with themes of impossible and constant mourning, repressed and contested memory, and the question of the Other as enemy, ally, and stranger. *In Where Do We*

Go Now? however, mourning and lamentation acquire a particularly-gendered, feminized inflection. As a performance genre that has been traditionally and historically associated with women, the lament is both a passionate expression of grief and a mourning of a loss. Whether it is the opening and closing scenes of mournful women in the village cemetery, Layale's impassioned monologue against male-perpetrated sectarian violence, or Takla's confrontation with the statue of the Virgin Mary in church and with her son at home, lamentation – as a poetics, a performative speech act, and a form of feminine public speech – constitutes the film's rhetorical and visual touchstone. In her reading of *Antigone*, feminist political theorist Bonnie Honig distinguishes and juxtaposes a "politics of lamentation" to a "lamentation of politics," arguing that the latter enables and is enabled by a "mortalist humanism" which regards pain and suffering, and ultimately death, as the universal basis of our shared humanity. Identifying an anti-sovereign sensibility that underpins this humanism which privileges mortality and vulnerability in its vision of commonality, Honig proposes an "agonistic humanism" that stresses equality in life, not death. Instead of rejecting sovereignty, she contends, feminist and democratic theorists may do well devoting themselves to its cultivation through what she calls a "politics of counter-sovereignty."

In its espousal of a universal humanity based on common suffering and grief against the divisive politics of sectarianism, Labaki's film seems to fall within that category of mortalist humanism identified by Honig. Indeed, Labaki herself is vocal about her belief in a shared humanity around universal human suffering and death. "I think in a very human way. For me, any mother in the world would act the same way

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when faced with her son's death. For me it's a universal, human reaction. So I know how to talk the universal language, I don't know why. I know how to speak to a French woman, an English woman, a Chinese woman, to and Indian woman and to a Lebanese woman in the same language" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). In her universal portrait of motherhood and affective maternal labor, Labaki suggests women as more peaceful, rational, and compassionate social actors than men. Against sectarian politics, she proposes sex, drugs, and superstition as common pleasures. Her approach can be construed as a lamentation of politics, exemplifying the anti-sovereign politics sketched out by Honig. As film critic Pierre Abi Saab (September 26, 2011) put it, Labaki's deployment of seduction, comedy, and drama as narrative techniques is not meant "to provoke us and lead us to awareness (which would require a deeper treatment of the subject), but to build a successful cinematic product that achieves consensus. She shows us what we love to see, she hides behind clichés and generalizations to avoid diving into the wound and saying painful things. It is the aesthetics of seduction that reaches its full meaning here."

Indeed, Abi Saab is right in pointing out the aesthetics of seduction that are operative across Labaki's works. However, the lack of depth he identifies in her treatment of the national question of sectarian violence is a deliberate one. Labaki is uninterested in the origins of sectarianism and civil wars. The film, for her, deals with a universal inability to tolerate the other and to accept difference. That the lines of contention in her film were religious is only a factor of her immediate context, the one she is most familiar with and which has informed her personal life and vision. As she explains, speaking about Muslims and Christians was the most accessible way to

symbolize intolerance, the refusal of difference. "That's why it was a sort of a fantasy, because I didn't want to speak about the Lebanese war. I consider that most of the conflicts in Lebanon were done for the wrong reasons and for stupid reasons. So I don't have time to waste and analyze why this war happened and whose fault it was. This is not what I want to do or what I am interested in. I do not want to analyze the Lebanese war because I will not get anywhere" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). Some people, she adds, took the "solutions" she proposed to the letter whereas they were clearly comical takes on a tragic situation, a way to show women's desperation in the face of male obstinacy and the inevitable warfare it leads to. Labaki is attached to the idea that the solution will come from mothers. "The solutions to all the wars in the world should come from mothers. Because it's all in ours hands; it's what we say to our children, it's how we stop them from going to war" (personal interview, August 15, 2013). Perhaps this naïve and essentializing belief in the power of motherhood exemplifies what Abi Saab identified as clichés and generalizations in Labaki's work. Here, we are tempted to ask, with Honig (2013), might it be the maternalism that does the work of universalism? "Is there only power in this promotion of extra political powerlessness as a kind of admirable female power and political chasteness?" (p.14 -15).[62]

In her re-reading of *Antigone*, Honig (2013) intervenes in the recent turn to mourning and lamentation in cultural studies. She notes that the play's dramaturgy has been largely neglected by feminist, queer, and democratic theorists who focused

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[62] Arab critics and journalists saw the film as a satirical protest against sectarian violence and civil war (Al-Osta'a, May 31, 2012). But once again, they reproached Labaki for her "superficial" treatment of the subject-matter.

on its role in the history of philosophy and its arguments on obedience, sovereignty, authority, religion, gender, and sexuality. What remains relatively unaddressed in these readings, she argues, are speech acts, rhetoric, gesture, tone, and voice (p.6). A dramaturgical approach, Honig explains, "treats the text as a performance that may succeed or fail rather than as an argument that may be true or false, right or wrong" (p.6). It attends to the way information circulates, which things are said directly, which are overheard, which are uttered in someone's absence, and which are said over someone's head (p.6). But it also draws attention to the asymmetrical powers of different speakers, taking double entendre, jokes, puns, irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole as objects for an analysis of power. In this context, the lament in *Where Do We Go Now?* is a performative speech act, among others, that characterizes women's speech in public. It is not, as Honig shows, an instance of a "mortalist humanism" (p.24), which shies away from politics in the name of humanism. Rather, it is an instance of speech acts that mirror political divisions in the real world while pointing to a place beyond them. The allegedly superficial nature of the women's tactics and their dismissal as apolitical shenanigans must therefore be reconsidered. In juxtaposition to familiar scenes of "serious" masculine politics, such as the destruction of the statue of the Virgin Mary, the desecration of the village mosque, the replacement of the church's holy water with blood, and bouts of fist-fighting among men, Labaki's deployment of hashish, sex, and superstition gestures towards a politics of pleasure, as if to insist that it is not by death alone that people can recognize their common humanity. Thus, she proposes pleasure as an alternative basis for a different humanism, beyond the grip of death and human finitude. If a mortalist humanism

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"focuses on shared mourning rather than shared feasting" (Honig, 2013, p.26), these tactics of pleasure, borne from an anticipatory fear of death and lamentation, stand as an example of the importance of political resignification, of "kinship done otherwise," that Butler (2000) finds embodied in Antigone's claim. The ending of *Where Do We Go Now?* is perhaps most suggestive in this regard, whereby the village women appear in cross-sectarian drag, declaring their religious conversion and thus suggesting a break from the sectarian filiality that structures the postwar socio-political order, bringing sectarian difference into the home in order to nullify it. This conversion should be understood as a performance of disidentification from the status quo – from the traditional identity politics of sectarianism – through cross-sectarian solidarity between women. Through her concern with womanhood as the ground for collective political action, Labaki mobilizes gender as an antidote to sectarian attachment.

That these women act in public *as* mothers carries a deep resonance in contemporary Lebanese history. One of the few remaining, visible, and active public bodies of the civil war – a public that embodies the war's persistence in the present, that insists that it has not yet ended despite official claims otherwise - is the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared. The Committee was officially established in November 1982 by Wadad Halwani, whose husband was kidnapped from their home in October of that year. Searching for others like her who were desperately looking for loved ones that had gone missing or were forcibly kidnapped, Halwani – who was thirty-one at the time – issued a call on the radio, inviting concerned people to meet in person outside the Abdel Nasser mosque in the

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Beirut neighborhood of Cornishe al-Mazra'a. When she arrived to the meeting, Halwani (2012) was surprised to see a hundred women gathered outside the mosque, some with children: "My body went numb, my head got swollen. I said to myself, of course we must do something, but what, I don't know! After a while we stopped crying, we wiped our tears, we organized our ranks, and we started walking. And this is how [our] first demonstration started, November 17, 1982." In her speech on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the establishment of the Committee, Halwani addresses the young men and women of Lebanon, children of the disappeared but also of the non-disappeared, recounting her story, history: "At first I started running alone, from a leader to a director to a member of parliament to our prime minister to ask for their help. All that came out of them were redundant words, 'How unfortunate, may God help you you're still a young little woman. Anyway there are people like you who came to complain.' Ok, who are these people? Not one of them was able to give me a single name!" This is how the Committee was born: mothers and sisters responded to a stranger's radio call. "I thought that if I found two like me, but taller and bigger than me, we would become stronger and we would see what we can do together, and this is why I made the call," Halwani explains (November 17, 2012).

The Committee continues until this day to uphold the demand to know the fate of the disappeared and hold those responsible for their disappearance accountable, a demand that – unfortunately – has yet to be fulfilled. Halwani's radio address thus catapulted a counterpublic into being. To quote Michael Warner (2002), "raise it up the flagpole, and see who salutes!" (p.42). Importantly, and as Halwani herself underlines, members of this public did not choose to become so. No one chose to be

the wife, mother, sister, son, or daughter of a disappeared or kidnapped person. As Halwani states, "Someone else had chosen that we would spend thirty years on the street. They chose how we think, how we feel, how we sleep, and how we ache." From shared personal and familial trauma emerged a political solidarity – a movement – that had long-lasting effects on individuals and society. In April 2015, the Committee co-organized and participated in a national campaign to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the civil under the title of "*Min Haqna Na'aref*" (We have the Right to Know). By mobilizing personal and familial ties as politics, Labaki in fact speaks to a familiar local history where the politicization of the personal trauma of disappearance, as carried out by the Committee, kept the civil war's memory and legacy alive in the national imaginary. Her women in black - in eternal mourning - carrying the black and white photographs of missing dead men and marching solemnly into the village graveyard in the film's opening sequence, can only recall the women – mostly still in black – who are still holding camp in downtown Beirut, still insisting on their right to know.

In times of war, lamentation becomes a daily practice. Launched in December 2014 by theater group Aperta Productions, *Antigone of Syria* is an eight-week drama workshop that culminated in three on-stage public performances by displaced Syrian women at Al-Madina Theater in Beirut. The performance combined the personal stories of Syrian women now living in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, their views on the tragedy of *Antigone* and its characters, and a meta-commentary on the

performance itself.[63] Against a massive screen where videos, texts, and images were projected, the women took turns narrating their tragedies, recounting the death and disappearance of loved ones, the loss and destruction of their homes, and their inability to bury the dead. As a review of the play in the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* put it, "This is not acting, per se, but more of real-life testimonials presented and fashioned for a larger audience." It is a performance style, the writer adds, that is increasingly popular, "with its heavy infusion of meta-commentary, autobiographical experiences, and scrutiny of the medium, society, and the self, and in which fact and fiction bleed together" (Al-Saadi, December 16, 2014). [64] In this timely reinterpretation of Sophocle's tragedy in the context of the Syrian revolution-turned-civil war, the performance acquires a therapeutic dimension for the actors/participants. [65] In an interview with *NPR*, the play's producer Itab Azzam explained that it is "about women taking control of their lives. Antigone's not a victim" (Fordham, December 13, 2014). As if contesting a humanist philosophy of equality in finitude that Honig identified in most readings of *Antigone*, Mona, one of the participants, notes, "We are not princesses. No one knows of us and no one would speak of us if we died. Even in death, there are lucky people" (Fordham, December 13, 2014). Antigone after all, Mona reminds us, was a princess. In civil wars and their aftermaths, the dead and the disappeared haunt the collective social imaginary. But

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[63] For a short video about the project, see https://vimeo.com/111457644. For more about the workshop and the play, see Aperta's website at http://www.apertaproductions.org

[64] http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22917

[65] Explaining his decision to stage *Antigone* with displaced Syrian women in Beirut, director Omar Abu Saada states, "The main theme of this text is a very important one for these women. In Arabic, *tamarrod* – that is, insurgency, rebellion, disobedience. Antigone defies Creon, she refuses to obey. She insists on doing what she believes is right, even though there are a lot of consequences. This is one of the most important questions for Syrians today. Did they do right or wrong in deciding to ask for freedom?" (Ross, no date).[65]

while the dead have been buried, the missing bodies of the disappeared mark the war's ongoing presence as their fate remains unknown. Knowing and speaking about the dead and the disappeared is the only way to preserve their memory as victims of war. As guardians of that memory, Labaki's village women are also the guardians of civil peace.

Conclusion

In her televised and filmic representations of women, Nadine Labaki foregrounds gender as a cultural and political identity in contemporary Lebanese society. The circulation of her work, locally and transnationally, opened up discursive spaces where the role and status of Lebanese and Arab women became an object of attention. Whether it is the controversies around her music videos in the Arab world or the success of her feature-length films in international film festivals, Labaki's work captivated transnational audiences through its portrayal of femininity as a site of submission and transgression within a masculinist social order.

In both *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?* Labaki displays homosocial private spaces, such as the beauty parlor and the kitchen, as sites of female support and solidarity. In *Caramel*, women help each other navigate the pressures and constraints of the patriarchal order on their self-image, desires, sexualities, and aspirations. In *Where Do We Go Now?*, the village women – doomed to perpetual mourning – are determined to bond together against men to stop them from starting another civil war. In both films, secrecy constitutes an organizing narrative thread. In *Caramel*, the women are each other's confidantes; they know and keep each other's

secrets about illicit sex, intimacy, and desire. In *Where Do We Go Now?,* the women are engaged in a secret conspiracy against men, devising elaborate and comical plots to prevent violence through the distracting pleasures of sex, food, and hashish. Secrecy, in both films, is the mode of transgressive behavior. It allows women to prevent and overcome the shame and stigma of their non-normative bodies, relationships, and desires in *Caramel*, and it enables women to intervene in the public life of their rural community in *Where Do We Go Now?* Secrecy is therefore a strategic practice, for the navigation of the constraints of familial, romantic, and conjugal attachments on the private lives of women in the former and for the intervention in the masculine realm of politics in the latter. It is also reflected in Labaki's creative practice, as a woman filmmaker, through her reliance on reticence as a mode of signification that allows her to broach the controversial topics of female sexuality and war, both of which are subject to social and state repression. In this regard, Labaki's films are in conversation with the talk shows discussed in chapter 1, as they also constitute a site to examine the nature and mode of visibility of non-normative bodies, gender expressions, and sexualities in public culture.

Religiosity is also a central thread and visual trope in both films. It is marked through rituals and accessories – crosses and headscarves – and is used as an important marker of harmonious social difference and community. Tradition, on the other hand, is cast as obsolete and constraining. It is through womanhood, I argue, that the slippage between the two is enacted in and structures Labaki's work. As a collective identity, womanhood carries the promise of anti-masculinist and anti-sectarian politics through its transgressions of and conspiracies against the traditional

patriarchal order. It does so without a rejection of and condemnation of religion but through a critical engagement with tradition as the socially mandated and enforced reproduction of gender norms like female chastity, heterosexuality, and violent masculinity. In her filmic representations of cross-sectarian female homosociality and solidarity, Labaki proposes a sense of commonality that coalesces around the shared pleasures and pains of femininity. It is this unresolved ambiguity about the social and political promise of the feminine that is signified in the pleasurable and painful practices of hair removal, body modification, and lamentation that punctuate Labaki's films. These practices are significant in the ways they index the effects of religion and tradition on feminine embodiment in contemporary society. As such, they speak to the practices of feminist queer self-writing that constitute the object of the next chapter, and which expose and critique compulsory heteronormative femininity by making visible alternative female desires and forms of embodiment.

In conclusion, it is useful to return to the queer subplot in *Caramel,* which finds its resolution in the final scene of the film. As she leaves the salon, having just had her hair cut short by Rima, the film's hypothetical lesbian, the mysterious woman, skips down the street, the camera following her movement from across the sidewalk, then catching her from inside a shop window, as she gazes at her face with a mix of excitement and disbelief. The camera freezes. Self-identification becomes possible through the perverse resolution of the dialectic of disguise and surveillance, a provisional alignment between the surveilling gaze and the perspectival close up. The film ends with the mysterious woman's reflection meeting the gaze of the camera. It is a moment of subversion of the ocular logics that constrain all of the

women's lives, and a kind of enactment of Labaki's own position as the subject and object of her own directorial gaze. Whether it's in the hair washing scenes between the two women or the car scenes which stage illicit and fleeting encounters between lovers, the camera detaches from the point of view of the film's characters to become a surveilling gaze. As spectators, we are invited to peer in on the women through the bathroom door or the car window. The attempts at privacy are so feeble in both scenarios. The film thus shows how visibility looks, enacting and representing the dialectic of disguise and surveillance. Labaki signifies reticently to evade censorship, and her characters are caught in this dialectic, made visible by intercutting close perspectival shots with mid range shots that have no character to focalize them. In this sense, it could be said that *Caramel* is a film about the police, about policing, and nowhere is this more evident than in Layale's/Labaki's seduction game with the only visible male character in the film: the neighborhood policeman. He is infatuated with her, following her every move, forcing her to wear her seatbelt, fining her at every opportunity. And she, cognizant of her seductive power over him, plays along.

CHAPTER THREE

"We Must Write:" Language and Visibility in a Feminist Queer Counterpublic

I looked back at the summer of 2007, when I found myself getting closer and closer to a woman. I couldn't get her out of my head. When I told her, she completely freaked out. She wouldn't answer my calls …What does it mean to tell someone you can't stop thinking about them? I didn't have a name for it.

Anonymous, *Bareed Mista3ji*l, 2009, p.222

To talk about one's life - that I could do. To write about it, to leave a trace - that was frightening.

bell hooks, *Talking Back,* 1989, p.158

Introduction

The epigraph is taken from the last story in *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail, 2009), a collection of autobiographical short stories published by Meem,[66] a Beirut-based feminist queer collective. The anonymous author describes how her inability to name her desire for another woman, to qualify it, became a defining moment in her life. The story, titled "That Thing," is about a woman who went online in search for a thing she felt but didn't understand and couldn't verbalize to herself. The narrator falls in love with another woman and is unable, for years, to name her feeling which remains "That Thing," unidentified but imposing, until an online search leads her to Meem. While she remains anonymous, her story becomes part of the collective's archive, public for others to read. In its insistence on the therapeutic quality of naming feelings, which the narrator only achieves after joining Meem, the story lays

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[66] Established in 2007, Meem's name is derived from the letter "m" as pronounced in Arabic and stands for "*Majmou'at Mou'azara lil-Mar'a al-Mithliyya*" (Support Group for Lesbian Women).

bare queer publicity's intimate labor: by making alternative desires and embodiments legible and accessible for others to read, Meem and the community around it changes the lives and self-understandings of the women who heed its call, who identify themselves in its public address.

This chapter traces the production and circulation of queer self-expression in public. It does so through a reading of *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail, 20009, hereafter *Bareed*) and *Bekhsoos* (2009-2012), an electronic magazine for and by Lebanese and Arab queer women. These digital and print publications, produced by Beirut-based feminist queer collective Meem, constitute a public archive of the lived reality of sexual and gender non-conformity in contemporary Lebanon. Like Ann Cvetkovich (2003), I explore these cultural texts "as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (p.7). I focus less on feelings and more on the practices of encoding that Cvetkovich gestures to, which I capture through a textual analysis of *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos* and in-depth interviews with five of their writers/editors. How did queer feminists/feminist queers encode their lives, desires, politics, and identities? To what effect? My analysis shows that these practices of encoding create and sustain the communities whose existence they document?

In contrast to the global visibility of Nadine Labaki, explored in chapter 2, the queer women that populate this chapter are anonymous to their publics. Responding to their erasure from national cultural narratives and the pathologization of their bodies and desires by mainstream media, they produced a counterdiscourse on sex

and gender norms without making their identities public. Like talk show participants in the first chapter, they too intervene in public through disidentificatory declarations of non-heterosexuality. While the content of these declarations has been recently interpreted by scholars of gender in the Arab Middle East (Dropkin, 2011; Georgis, 2013; Kaedbey, 2014; Hamdan, 2015), their form has not yet been thoroughly explored. This chapter thus examines how queer self-expression, unfolding as it is in print and digital platforms, relies on anonymity and translation as strategic representational practices that enable the formulation and circulation of a feminist queer discourse in public.

Like talk show appearances discussed in chapter 1, I consider Meem's public writings, shaped as they are by the communication technologies through which they are produced, as acts of mediated self-disclosure (Couldry, 2003). Together, the e-zine and the memoir are aggregations of personal experiences that, in their public circulation, expose the powerful hold of heteropatriarchy while offering a viable alternative. Through the collective textualization of personal experience, queer feminists politicized gender and sexuality as sites of community-formation and social activism. As such, they constitute a form of women's writing (Cixous, 1976) that insists on the personal as a locus of power and thus as a necessary site for politics and resistance. By focusing on queer women's writing, I want to contribute to the emerging literature on women's sexualities in the Arab world (Amer, 2008; Habib, 2007; Georgis, 2013; Kaedbey, 2014) that has engaged questions of representation in its exploration of queer female desire. I characterize processes of self-writing by Meem, following Zizi Papacharissi (2002), as a "particular breed of civically

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motivated narcissism" (p.13), self-focused yet socially directed. After providing a brief overview of LGBTQ media use and community-building in Lebanon that locates Meem's publications within a broader history of queer representation, I move to a more detailed discussion of *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos,* unpacking the thorny questions of language and visibility that have preoccupied scholarship on postcolonial experiences and representations of same-sex desire.

In what they labeled as the "transnational turn" in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey (1999) argue that new identities, erotics, communities, and intimacies were being examined as they emerged in "hybrid cultural fields" (p.439). The increasingly transnational mobility of people, media, commodities, discourses, and capital had an impact on local, regional, and national modes of sexual desire, embodiment, and subjectivity. They write:

> Postcolonial nations were witnessing the emergence of sex-based
> social movements whose political rhetoric and tactics seemed to mimic
> or reproduce Euro-American forms of sexual identity, subjectivity, and
> citizenship and, at the same time, to challenge fundamental Western
> notions of the erotic, the individual, and the universal rights attached
> to this fictive 'subject' (p.439).

Postcolonial scholars have noted the twin-processes of mimicry and interrogation that animate postcolonial queer cultural expressions. Neville Hoad (2007) explains that "while one is suspicious of the homogenizing effects of the culture industry, too quick an assertion of sexual identity as cultural imperialism misses the ways in which these images/identities are consumed and may be used from

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below to very different end" (xviii). In his work with Filipino gay men, Martin F. Manalansan (1997) shows that, instead of "'uncritically transferring or buying the technology' of gay and lesbian politics from the outside," there is a syncretic move, a notion of a "multiply determined subject and a possibility of coalitions between different identities and political agendas" (p.495). Cross-cultural communication therefore involves practices of translation and hybridization that are integral to the emergence of new sexual subjectivities.

In their introduction to a special issue on "Queer Affect" in Middle East Studies, Hanadi al-Samman and Tarek el-Ariss (2013) claim that the binary mode of thinking that posits a clear distinction between a pre-modern East and a modern West has locked Middle Eastern queer studies in a standstill. This binary, they argue, ignores "long traditions of cultural exchange and the specific forms of translation and dialogue that take shape when the identities and models of desire associated with the West travel or are performed outside it or at its periphery" (p.205). Middle Eastern sexuality, they insist, cannot be read as exclusively symptomatic of imperialist projects and must be reckoned with as complex sites of meaning-making and self and social transformation (p.205). Although the literature on LGBTQ social movement organizations in the Global South draws attention to the importance of translation in the circulation of a dominant Western LGBTQ discourses, Moussawi (2014) argues, it fails to account for the complex ways in which activists from the Global South situate and define themselves by drawing on both local and global discourses of sexuality (p.2). By focusing on practices of cultural production by and for queer women, I want to decenter the West in an analysis of queer identities to enable a more

locally-attuned understanding of the social, political, and cultural forces that come to shape and stigmatize non-heterosexual and transgender individuals. Language and visibility have come to constitute pivotal points in academic and intellectual debates on the emergence of LGBTQ politics in contemporary Arab and Middle Eastern societies and beyond. In this regard, the common use of English and the deployment of a discourse of "coming out" among local queer publics have been construed as symptoms of the ongoing cultural encroachment of the West on local configurations of desire.

In what follows, I want to contribute to debates on language and visibility by unpacking their manifestation in the textual politics of Meem. First, I treat language as a practice – not as an inherited artifact – in local queer organizing and expression, teasing out processes of cultural appropriation and translation that have been essential for queer self-formation. Second, I consider the particular form of anonymous visibility adopted by Meem to argue that the desire for and fear from visibility is a feature and dilemma of everyday life, one that cannot be readily dismissed as an imitation of Western identity politics. Anonymity and translation, I argue, are characteristic practices that enable and condition the public circulation of personal accounts on the tyranny of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead of treating these publications as cultural productions by an existing queer counterpublic, I contemplate their vital role in the *creation* of this counterpublic about which they speak and to whom they are addressed. Through the collective production of countercultural texts, these publications put into language and make visible an imagined community of queers, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, trans persons, and individuals who don't identify

with any of these categories but who participate in the social lifeworlds that emerge around them. These texts, in their print and digital forms, act as a community archive, making queer feminist spaces, histories, and politics legible, and making gendered and sexual violence a matter of public concern.

Bekhsoos, meaning "concerning" in colloquial Lebanese Arabic, is a commonly used term among the Lebanese gay community to denote the insider/outsider status of a person, was launched by Meem in 2008 as a quarterly electronic zine and re-launched in 2009 as a weekly one. The e-zine, which included content in Arabic, English, and French, featured commentaries about mainstream media coverage and representation of sexual deviance, personal testimonies by queer-identified women, intimate relationship stories, sexual health advice, and opinions on Lebanese and Arab LGBTQ activism and organizing. Published in 2009, *Bareed Mista3jil*: *True Stories* (Express Mail) is a collection of short autobiographical stories by lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning women and transgender persons living in Lebanon. Written as first-person narratives, the stories are based on interviews with 150 women and trans persons, and arranged around twelve main themes identified by the editors: discrimination, self-esteem, gender identity, activism, coming out, family, relationships, sexual diversity, religion, community, self-discovery, and emigration. "Bareed Mista3jil," the editors (2009) explain, "has a very close meaning to 'Express Mail,' but a better translation would be 'Mail in a Hurry.' It reflects both the urgency of getting these stories across and also the private nature of the stories – like letters written, sealed, and sent out to the world" (p.10). While *Bareed* does not provide a unified narrative of queerness or feminism, it constitutes, along with *Bekhsoos*, a

collectively-produced text: A compilation of individual narratives about bodies and desires that do not conform to and cannot be contained by dominant heterosexual norms and narratives.

The Digital Roots of a Counterpublic

The rise of the internet in the Arab world in the mid-2000s transformed the conditions of possibility for individual self-expression in public. By 2009, blogging and digital forms of writing were becoming increasingly popular, particularly among the queer community. One Lebanese blogger described it as a "gay electronic Intifada (Al-Haddad, August 27, 2009). But the history of queer and LGBT presence online predates the emergence of blogs. In fact, the histories of the LGBT community and the internet are intimately connected in Lebanon and can be summarized around three moments: first, the migration of queers to the internet is search for similar others in internet chat rooms; second, the move from online encounters to in-person meetings; and third, a return to online modes of engagement through digital publications. The domain name www.gaylebanon.com was registered on September 29, 1999 and is considered one of the first manifestations of LGBT organizing in the country. According to one queer activist and blogger, gay and lesbian individuals "who were unable to come out publicly were able to use the website to find information, resources, links to chat rooms and mailing lists, and a connection to a larger community" (Moawad, March 30, 2010). Most encounters, in the early 2000s, took place on an mIRC chatroom "#gaylebanon" (Moawad, 2010). As one anonymous writer (2009) in *Bareed* recalls in a story titled "How it all Started," "During those

days, websites and chatrooms were another of those rare places where gay people could meet. A popular website at the time was glas.org (Gay & Lesbian Arab Society). It was mostly built by Arab gays living in the West. Their online chat room featured '*Yawmiyyet il gays bi Libnen*' (The Diaries of Gays in Lebanon)" (p. 124). Cyberspace, as Zizi Papacharissi (2002) has argued, is a public and private space, which makes it appealing "to those who want to reinvent their private and public lives" as it provides new terrain to play out "the age-old friction between personal and collective identity; the individual and community" (p. 20). Online meetings led to in-person meetings, which flourished in 2001 and 2002, eventually resulting in the establishment of Club Free, an underground community that organized social activities and meetings for gays and lesbians.

In 2002, some of the members of Club Free started contemplating the creation of a public organization that would operate openly in society (Helem, 2008, p.15). Founded in 2004 and based in Beirut, Helem (which means "dream" and is an acronym for Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender Persons) is the first above-the-ground LGBT organization in the Middle East and North Africa region, "lobbying for the legal and social rights of people with alternative sexuality" (Helem, 2008, p.5).[67] Helem defines itself as a rights-based

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[67] Freedom of association is explicitly guaranteed in the Lebanese constitution. Lebanon applies the 1909 Ottoman law governing associations and groups. The law itself is largely based on the French law of association of 1901. It is seen as extremely liberal even compared to association laws in some Western countries. According to the law in Lebanon, an organization assumes a legally existing status if it does not receive a negative reply from the Ministry of Interior within two months of submitting an application. Helem did not receive a negative reply, nor did it receive an official registration number. Thus it has an ambiguous legal status as it is not officially recognized by the state (Helem, 2008, pp.14-15; Makarem, March 2005).

organization working on the annulment of article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which outlaws ''sexual relation contrary to nature'' (often used to connote anal sex) (Moussawi, 2014, p.13). Helem does not frame itself as a community of exclusively LGBT people. As Moussawi (2014) explains, the group's collective identity "is derived from its commitment to human rights issues and abuses in the country, which extends beyond LGBT issues. One could argue that what binds the group together is its struggle for civil liberties for civil liberties,'' with an emphasis on LGBT rights (Moussawi, p.11). In 2005, female members of Helem, feeling that their particular issues and struggles as women were not being adequately addressed in the organization, created a women-only listserv[68] then started Helem Girls, a woman-focused group within Helem in 2006 (Abbani, 2012).[69] "There were about thirty of us in our first meeting, then people started learning about this through word of mouth and were added to the listserv" Maya, one of the founders of Helem Girls, explains. Soon afterwards some of the members created a zine, *Souhak* (lesbianism): "we wrote about our personal stories, and it was a place to vent. That we exist." Some of the members of Helem Girls started meeting on a weekly basis in 2007 in a yoga studio that they rented out on Hamra street, and eventually decided to create Meem,

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[68] listservs, as Juris (2012) notes, are a particular kind of networking tools with a unique set of socio-political affordances. They allow users to circulate and exchange information, interact, collaborate, and coordinate (p.286). These new diffuse network formations, he explains, "frequently outlived the mobilizations for which they were created, cohering into more or less sustainable movement infrastructures beyond any specific set of protests or actions" (p.286).

[69] For a critique of gender dynamics within Helem and the establishment of a separate group for queer women, see this online post by "Shax," former member of Helem "The Pandora's Box of Helem and Gendered Violence" http://theshaxfiles.tumblr.com/post/44726097983/the-pandoras-box-of-helem-and-gendered-violence\

which provided a support group and a space that was not male-dominated. It adopted different organizing strategies and structures from Helem. As Moussawi shows, one of the main points of diversion between Helem and Meem is their approach to questions of visibility, the closet, and coming-out. As he points out, while Helem presents itself as an "above-ground" organization that relies on an "open yet cautious visibility" to raise awareness in society, Meem is a "partially-visible" support group for queer women and trans persons which seeks to remain under the social radar (Moussawi, 2014, p.13).[70] While the address of the safe Womyn House, run by Meem, was never disclosed to the public, it was nevertheless known by members of the community. This partial visibility is also reflected in practices of anonymous writing that will be discussed later in the chapter. Thus, the group aimed to provide its members with support and services "without the fear of being legally and socially outed'' (Lynn, 2010).[71] The House, located in the Mar Mikhail district in Beirut, was essential for community-building, providing a space for queer women to meet, organize, hold discussions, write, and play cards. "We would there everyday, hang out, meet new people. There was someone new all the time" (Maya, personal interview, July 10). The House also provided a space away from the pressures of family life: "I spent my days at Meem, and my evenings with *the Mug Girl* and *Abdo el RaQissa,* sometimes joined by *Shant* and others, projecting movies on a white wall,

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[70] For a more thorough analysis of the differences between Helem and Meem, and the ways in which they craft collective identities around questions of coming out/the closet, queer visibilities and LGBTQ rights, see Ghassan Moussawi (2014).

[71] In a talk delivered by Meem at the International Lesbian and Gay Association in Sao Paolo in 2009, it presented itself as a grassroots organization with the primary goal of creating community and providing empowerment and a safe space for LBTQ women in Lebanon (Lynn, 2010).

channeling our exhaustions through conversation, a couple of drinks and a smoke, until some of us went home, and the rest passed out by dawn" (Lynn, May 22, 2012).[72] The House consisted of a living room, a coordinators' office, a library, and a therapy room. As Maya explains, therapy was one of the strongest and most sustainable services that Meem and the House offered, "It was very helpful for a lot of people to have access to therapy, to introduce the idea of therapy to the community, to healthy process" (July 10, 2015).

In addition to providing, for the first time, a physical safe space for queer and questioning women, Meem was also committed to writing and publishing. As one of Meem's co-founders put it, "The age of 'wow, gay groups in Lebanon! That alone is impressive!' is over. It's not impressive anymore. Now is the time for us to become engaged with our own societies, to think analytically, to advance politically, to understand the truth about oppression, to create, to research, to be proactive, to write, to write, to write!" (Saldanha, September 16, 2009). The objective for writing was threefold: First, to monitor and correct the mainstream media's stereotyped and prejudiced coverage of gay issues; Second, to provide a virtual space for association and mobilization where such physical spaces lacked; And third, to provide a forum for queer self-expressions where similar channels were unavailable. As Meem co-founder Nadz explains in her editorial after *Bekhsoos'* 2009 re-launch, the e-zine started out as a replacement for a "real" print magazine, which would've been costly, but with the way information sharing has evolved, she continues, it became clear that *Bekhsoos* belongs online: "That's where young LGBTs in Lebanon are looking for

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[72] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2012/05/why-wasnt-i-an-emergency-case/

information, connections, and support" (September 6, 2009).[73] As Internet penetration

increasing and the costs of Internet connection decreased, online publications made

financial sense. But online publishing was also a way to circumvent the gate-keeping

functions of mainstream media, to create content that was simply lacking and absent

in film and television. It provided a direct channel of communication between the

writers and their audiences without the mediation of third-parties, such as writers and

producers of talk shows. Online queer discourse, in its public and politically-driven

nature, was a "strategy for coping with and undermining straight culture" (Smorag,

2008, p.3).

As one browses *Bekhsoos* and *Bareed*, an image of the community emerges

trough the writing of its anonymous members. As Georgis (2013) has argued is the

case with *Bareed*, the stories published in *Bekhsoos* also give us insight "into a tightly

knit community of queers in Lebanon and form a narrative archive of the

entanglements of their emotional and politically implicated lives" (p.234). Reading,

and print culture generally, Steven Jones (2002) explains, have been criticized for

isolating individuals, "promoting a sense of the imagined, the 'read about,' rather

than engagement with the world" (p. 14). But cultures of reading, as Benedict

Anderson (1983) has famously argued, are also at the core of the modern formation of

imagined communities. It is through mediated and shared narratives that collectivities

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[73] Lebanese bloggers do not face prosecution and intimidation[73] typical in neighboring Arab capitals such as Syria and Egypt, which respectively ranked 3 and 10 in the list of the worst countries to be a blogger issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2009 (CPJ, April 10, 2009). In contrast, Lebanon displays a lack of any state or ISP censorship or cybercrime laws when it comes to internet usage; Although the Ministry of Interior proposed a "Technology Committee" to draft a policy regulating online fraud, cybercrimes, and pornography in October 2006, there was no proper follow-up on the matter (Moawad, March 30, 2010).

come to think of themselves as such. "Narratives may imagine communities, and we may imagine ourselves to be a part of a community based on our reading of a narrative" (Jones 2002, p.16). Imagination, as Appadurai (1996) reminds us, is a prerequisite for the formation of communities, and an important practice of media consumption and production. Here, the imagined, the "read about," is not at odds with and does not prevent an engagement with the world. Rather, reading about and with similar others carries world-making possibilities in its imagination of an otherwise to heterosexuality in this local queer community, revealed as it is through anonymously-authored articles: "We sleep on each other's couches and share our mothers' homemade food […] We empty gel hormones into little plastic bottles and sneak them with a Qor'an and a few oranges into the illegal migrant detention center. We pick each other up off highways after brutal arguments with family. We care for each other" (Lynn, May 22, 2012). These articles become archives of people, places, and memories that would otherwise go unrecorded: Dunkin Donuts Achrafieh – open 24/7 – and perfect after-party joint; drag nights at Walimat Wardy[74] in Hamra, Bardo's gold ceiling and wall projections;[75] catfights, parking lot quickies, and trippy laser lights at Acid, a popular gay nightclub; awkward encounters with ex-lovers at Coup d'Etat, the country's first women-only bar; Paradise Beach in Jbeil, where "Tante

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[74] A restaurant located in the central commercial district of Hamra in Beirut, that specializes in Lebanese cuisine and is popular among and frequented by journalists, writers, artists, and Leftist leaning individuals in general.
[75] Allegedly, Lebanon's first gay bar and café, located in the Clemenceau neighborhood of Beirut, adjacent to Hamra.

[Aunty] Labibeh" sold her manakish and sodas while some boys got busy in a little cave by the sea side (Phoenix, January 11, 2010).[76]

The movement from virtual anonymity to a self-conscious and self-representing community, from gaylebanon.com to Meem, is enabled by the mediated address to indefinite strangers and the degree of anonymity that digital technologies allow. This is how, according to Warner (2002), publics and counterpublics are formed. A public, unlike a concrete audience and a polity, is text-based:

> Public discourse says not only, 'Let a public exist,' but 'let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.' It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success-success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding it articulates (Warner, 2002, p.422).

By eschewing the gatekeeping of traditional media industries, electronic publications like *Bekhsoos* are examples of independent media platforms, which thrived with the emergence of web 2.0 technologies. By launching websites, publishing magazines, writing blogs, creating public Facebook pages and events, all open for everyone to see, activists create and circulate a queer discourse that attracts new potential members and supporters. They are participatory media platforms in which individuals are creators and consumers of culture, allowing "the public sharing of the minutiae of life" (Peipmeier, 2009, p.13). As Peipmeier explains, print and electronic zines are sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives "from the materials that comprise their cultural moment: discourses, media

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[76] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2010/01/top-10-gay-hang-outs-lebanon/

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representations, ideologies, stereotypes" (p.2). This is what we find, for instance, in

commentaries about media representations in articles where a feminist and queer

perspective is constructed and articulated through a critical engagement with

mainstream culture. Rather than identifying with representations of non-normative

genders and sexualities, Meem's writers mobilize what bell hooks (1992) has called,

in the context of black female spectators of American mainstream media, "the

oppositional gaze," whereby marginal subjectivities "both interrogate the gaze of the

Other but also look back, at one another, naming what we see" (p. 116). The critical

gaze, for hooks, is one that looks to document and oppose misrepresentations. By

looking at these representations, queer writers deconstruct the normative assumptions

they are based on and help reproduce, thus asserting their agency by "claiming and

cultivating 'awareness'" which in turn politicizes "looking relations" and opens up

possibilities for agency (hooks, p. 116).[77] *Bekhsoos* and *Bareed* therefore embodied

what Janice Radway (2002) has called "insubordinate creativity," the creative

construction of the self using the cultural materials that are "ready-to-hand" (p.178).

What makes this creativity insubordinate, Radway explains, is the way in which it

calls into question and reinterprets dominant cultural forms and norms. By making

oppositional ways of decoding dominant representations available, Meem politicizes

cultural production and consumption, exposing the power hierarchies embedded in

common discourses of sexual deviance. As Dima Kaedbey (2014) has argued in her

study of emergent queer feminist thought in Lebanon, online queer spaces and activist

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[77] For hooks (1992), the oppositional gaze is predicated on a refusal to identify with negative and harmful representations. Critical spectators look from a location that disrupts dominant narratives, where the pleasure of looking comes from practices of deconstruction and reading against the grain (p.123).

print publications constitute the "politicized face of queerness" (p.1).

Narcissism and Women's Writing: Making Shame Public

With the rise of digital media technologies and the growing popularity of social media in the Arab world, Arab youths have been labeled the "Facebook generation," a derogatory expression referring to their passivity, laziness, lax morals, and increased influence by the West (Moawad & Qiblawi, 2010, p. 113). The Arab uprisings instigated a shift in the discourse from slacktivism to a wide recognition of the catalyzing role of digital technologies and social media in political mobilization and social transformation, leading some observers to talk of Twitter and Facebook revolutions. According to a report by the Center for International Media Assistance (2011),"To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history" (p. 4). The popular uprisings therefore occasioned the proliferation of online and user-generated content, but also literature on the role of new media technologies and social media sites in political mobilization, protest, and collective action in the region (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Hirschkind, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Snider & Faris, 2011).[78]

In their attention to new opportunities and tactics for popular mobilization and information sharing by activists and protestors, scholars tended to ignore the ways in

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[78] The questions to be asked, as Jeffrey Juris has noted, are "how new media matter; how particular new media tools affect emerging forms, patterns, and structures of organization; and how virtual and physical forms of protest and communication are mutually constitutive" (p. 260).

which media technologies also transform modes of intimacy and interpersonal dynamics, and the repercussions this carries for public life. This requires a readjustment in the definition of social protest to include long-term forms of sustained social and political action. The queer feminist writing produced in *Bekhsoos* and *Bareed* is an integral element of the collective and ongoing social protest against heteropatriarchy and the gender hierarchies and norms it imposes and reproduces. Importantly, it is an expression of dissent that is borne of the sharing of the putatively private and isolated experiences of shame that punctuate the lives of queers in Lebanon. Such expressions are political inasmuch as they produce and circulate a counterdiscourse on gender, sexuality, and womanhood. By expressing gender as a site of solidarity, community, and political meaning-making, digital and print publications make the alternative intimacies that emerge through Meem, and the community more broadly, public and therefore imaginable as alternative lifeworlds. At its core, then, queer feminist writing was about making the personal political. What gives this writing its queer charge is its insistence on publicizing shame as a mode of overcoming it.

In her reading of *Bareed Mista3jil*, Dina Georgis (2013) traces the creative potential of "shame" as a site of signification, noting how "writing shame" is a modality through which queer identities can be constituted from within their local and cultural milieu. Georgis distinguishes between the emotional strategies to survive and negotiate the difficulties of postcoloniality from the strategies of post-Stonewall pride culture (p.233). *Bareed* and the expressive impulse that undergirds it, she explains, must be understood as an exercise in queer community-building through the shared

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expression of experiences of shame and humiliation (p.233).[79] But this openness in talking about shame, which constitutes a central aspect of community-building must not be misread as a desire to disentangle oneself from the familial and communal attachments that constitute the very sites of shaming. Rather, as she explains, for many narrators in *Bareed*, "the loss of group belonging is not a sacrifice they want to make for the right to be 'out'" (p.235). This refusal to choose between familial attachments and individual freedom, which underpins many of the personal narratives in *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos,* is best captured by the anonymity that characterizes much of local queer publishing. Anonymous publishing lies at the core of the politics of feminist queer visibility enacted by Meem, one where the collective rather than the individuals constituting it is made publicly visible. While I concede with Georgis that the desire to be "out" does not outweigh the desire to maintain family and community ties, I want to put more pressure on the latter and consider the alternative communities that are enabled by a certain mode of "outness." One of the most important insights that readers gain from *Bareed* is that family is not always a safe space. Indeed, one of the primary concerns of queer and trans women, as expressed in *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos*, is a need and desire for more privacy from family encroachments and for alternative forms of community. Therefore, while there may not be a desire to come out in the sense of declaring one's identity in public, there is a

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[79] Georgis infuses her analysis of *Bareed* with a personal account of her coming to queerness as a diasporic Arab subject in Canada in the mid-1990s: "At the time, it felt like my final arrival to queerness was also my adieu to Arab culture—no thanks to my mother, who insisted that homosexuality did not belong to Arabs" (p.233). For Georgis, *Bareed* provided a much-needed opening to the question of what it meant to be queer and Arab.

necessary gesture of reaching out in the writing and publication of personal stories. The openness in talking about shame in queer writing may not require or express a desire to disentangle from family ties, but it signals a desire for the formation of other entanglements and attachments sutured by the shared experience of shame. A reading of a locally-produced discourse on non-conforming genders and sexualities, in *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos*, elucidates the ways in which privacy and publicity are redefined in queer feminists' transgressions of the limits of the sayable through their critical engagement with the disciplinary force of shame. The focus on new identity formations around sexuality and the ways in which they have been inevitably structured by the universalization of Western modernity (Massad, 2007) has foreclosed a sustained engagement with queerness as subculture. By recasting the public manifestations of non-normative sexualities as a function of the rise of subcultures rather than the consequence of a hegemonic Western will to knowledge, I want to foreground a queer desire for and attachment to forms of community and collectivity that is expressed by and enacted through feminist queer writing.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous (1976) writes, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (p.875). In her essay Cixoux coined *écriture feminine,* "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text" (Showalter, 1986, p.249). Writing, Cixous argues, has been extensively and repressively run "by a libidinal and cultural – hence political,

typically masculine – economy," and as such constitutes a locus where women's repression has been perpetuated and where woman "has never *her* turn to speak" (p.879). This exclusion from writing has serious and unpardonable repercussions, Cixous explains, because writing "is *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (emphasis in original, p.879). In what follows, I want to focus on this precursory force of writing identified by Cixous, unpacking what it means in the context of feminist queer self-writing.[80]

"We are trying to define and redefine things as we go," said Lynn, one of *Bekhsoos'* editors and regular writer, clarifying why certain issues became so divisive and contentious during editorial meetings.[81] Some, for example, objected to a feature story on pride parades, refusing to ascribe to or reproduce an international and mainstream LGBT discourse of pride. The discussions had a powerful effect on members, adding, "the experience of working on this with the same group of people on a weekly basis was powerful" (Lynn, personal interview, January 13, 2014). "Tuesday night was sacred for me since that's when we held our meetings," recalls Poupi, author of a regular column in Bekhsoos, who considered quitting training for a job because it prevented her for making the meetings (personal correspondence,

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[80] "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence" (p.881).

[81] The editorial team consisted of ten people and sometimes there were as many as fourty. Special issues – on sex tourism for example – took longer to prepare. The editors would often invite people to write on specific topics, and the zine frequently featured pieces from Arab contributors and guest writers.

August 8, 2015). Privately, *Bekhsoos* was a platform for writers to grapple amongst themselves with the issues and challenges of identity politics. But it was also a public platform for feminist queer expression in a local media landscape where both feminism and queerness were under erasure. It emerged primarily as a counter discourse to the rhetoric of "sexual deviance" propagated by Lebanese mainstream media. As Lynn explains, "There's a specific formula in mainstream media to talk about non-normative sexualities, and you feel that you cannot identify with this stuff. There was a problem of representation, of identification" (personal interview, January 13, 2014). The media's angle was often voyeuristic, she adds, inviting the audience to gaze upon a victim or sick person who often appeared behind a screen or as a shadow.

In the shadow of a normative mainstream discourse that pathologized queer genders and sexualities, there was a shared desire to write, and to do it collectively. *Bekhsoos* became a textual response to and commentary on different incarnations of sexism and homophobia in Lebanese and Arab public cultures, cultivating a local queer feminist discourse. The aim of *Bekhsoos*, in Lynn's terms, was to create "an alternative discourse" because getting angry at television shows was no longer enough. "We wanted to create a platform to talk about our lives, our experiences, our relationship to our bodies, to other people's bodies." This drive for self-expression, I argue, is an instance of "civically motivated narcissism" (Papacharissi, 2002, p.13) which she describes as a the "introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs and similar spaces." This new narcissism, she explains, "is defined as a preoccupation with the self that is self-directed, but not selfishly motivated," one that is motivated by the desire to connect the self to society (p.13). The social nature of

this form of narcissism through self-writing is evidenced in the writers' description of their motivation to write: **"**It was essential to me to write about my experiences and my feelings and the questions i was asking myself and sharing them in the world since i knew a lot of people were going thru similar things to what I was feeling and the challenges and barriers i was facing as a queer person living in Beirut" (Poupi, personal correspondence, August 8, 2015). "For me it was anyone who is in my shoes; people stuck at home, who came out of the closet thinking they are the only ones on the planet; so I was writing for them" (Maya, July 10, 2015). As Leen explained, they often imagined younger generations as their audience, **"**We were obsessed with lesbian teenagers. She was very present. At every meeting we would raise this point; whenever we would disagree on something, we would say, 'imagine you're 15 years-old and reading this article, what would you think or feel?'" (personal interview, July 6, 2015).

Here is where the precursory politics of Meem become most evident. In its reaching out to an other, the writing in *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos* prefigures the kind of community it hopes to achieve and believes it achieves. As Phoenix writes in one article, "We must use *Bekhsoos* as a documentation tool. She archives our struggles and our pain […] The *Bekhsoos* motto is 'we must write.' And write, we shall. Our writings will be our letters to the world. They will be the words of support from the ones who can speak to the ones who cannot, until they are capable of doing so" (September 6, 2010).[82] She imagines *Bekhsoos* as the writing of a common pain, "our," as a form of support for imagined others who cannot speak, but who will one

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[82] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2010/09/bekhio-therapie/

day. "Writing was a fuel for us," Maya explains. "We were very into the idea of a movement, of an underground movement, feeling that we were going to be groundbreaking" (personal interview, July 10, 2015). There was a desire for a "movement," one that has perhaps yet to materialize, but which is invoked in and through the writing, fuel for a collective imagination, and for the imagination of a collective. "We weren't too far in age, from the teenage girls," Leen explains, "we were in our early twenties and remembered very well how difficult and complicated teenage years were; we needed every bit of support, and almost all of us didn't find it, until we found each other. When we used to live each one alone, in our societies as teenage girls, we never found this. For us it was very important for a fifteen year-old girl, who is just starting to feel these things, to go to *Bekhsoos* and see that we are OK, that we survived, that we grew up, that we're writing, that there are people who feel like her" (Leen, July 6, 2015).

The feeling of social alienation, beyond the specificities and multiplicities of bodies and desire, is what binds the community. Scenes of shame and stigma are revisited and inscribed in writing, which turns experience into public knowledge, repurposing shame – through confession – as a source of community. As such, the writing in *Bekhsoos* and *Bareed* points to feminist theory's original emphasis on the analysis of the personal (Miller, 1991, x). The expression of the personal for the purpose of its analysis and critique necessitated acts of translation and anonymiztion. In the following sections, I will unpack translation and anonymity through a focus on *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos*, respectively, to demonstrate how language and visibility are structuring issues in the postcolonial politicization of sexual and gender identities.

Translation at the Limits of the Sayable

Bareed appeared in English because the authors were more comfortable writing in English. When they tried to write in Arabic, the editors note, they were faced with "a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality. The words didn't exist to express exactly what we wanted them to, and we were constantly struggling between the Lebanese Arabic dialect that we speak in our everyday lives and classical Arabic which is traditionally used in writing" (p.6). Classical Arabic, they explain, was remarkably distant from real-life experiences. *Bareed Mista3jil*, a collection of forty-one short autobiographical stories of "women who are not heterosexual" in Lebanon (p.2), was conceived by members of Meem as a publication that communicated the lived experiences of queer women and trans persons in Lebanon, experiences they believed were ignored, mystified, or pathologized in mainstream media discourse. The result was a collection of short essays, some submitted in written form and others narrated by individuals but recorded and composed by the editors.[83]

In *Bareed*'s introduction, the editors explain how they struggled with euphemisms and scientific words to describe sexuality terms and slang that differ in different regions of Lebanon. "We've tried to analyze the reasons for this other than the obvious cause that we don't talk about sexuality much in the Arab world. Arabic

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[83] *Bareed* was published in 2009 through a grant from the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, a German political foundation affiliated with the German Green Party tablished in 1987, the foundation was named after German writer Heinrich Böll. Headquarted in Berlin, the foundation has thirty offices around the world. Its main areas of interest are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, and self-determination and justice. In addition, it places particular emphasis on "Gender Democracy," defined as social emancipation and equal rights for men and women.

as a language has not adapted itself to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression" (p.6). The editors explain their use of "queer" to represent all non-heterosexual identities, as an umbrella term for non-conforming sexualities. "It is very similar to the current Arabic derogatory term, '*shazz,*' which literally means 'deviant' and is the most common Arabic term for 'homosexual'" (p.2). Through a series of translations that open the book, the reader is immediately introduced to the language predicament that constitutes *Bareed*'s master theme; indeed, that characterizes Arab queer cultural production. "It's becoming harder for what the world calls 'developing countries' to study and look at sexuality outside of the Western construct of 'LGBT,' which is the most widely used term to denote non-heterosexual individuals and communities" (p.2). The editors bemoan the fact that the most globally visible queer identities are generated in Europe and North America, which they believe further reproduces stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual on a universal scale (p.3). The cultural hegemony of LGBT identity politics, coupled with the quasi absence of alternative representations of non-heterosexual sexualities and identities, shapes the forms and idioms through which Arab queers – and Lebanese queer feminists in particular – come to identify and represent themselves. In this section, I want to show how queer writing emerges in and through a postcolonial condition of interlinguality (Chow, 2014), where Arabic and English are brought together in creative attempts to fill the public silence that shrouds non-conforming genders and sexualities.

In her critical reading of the 2005 UN-sponsored *Arab Human Development*

Report: Towards the Rise of Arab Women, anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod (2009) interrogates the international circulation of political discourses on women's rights and empowerment in the early 21st century (p.83). While she admires the report's ambitions, intentions, and commitment to the amelioration of women's lives and status in Arab societies, Abu Lughod is disappointed "by the political limitations of the intellectual framework and language it used and in the prejudices that shape its analyses of women's everyday lives" (p.83-84). She identifies three main problems with the report: first, the possibility of its negative appropriation in what she calls a "particular international context of global inequality and hostility" (p.84-85); second, the report's limited focus on a "cosmopolitan or urban middle-class" perspective on women's lives; and third, the report's reliance on the "particular international language of women's rights" and the dominant political paradigms it indexes – modernization, human development, and neoliberalism. Abu Lughod (2009) explains that the social networks and international bodies through which the dominant liberal definition of women's rights is promoted gave rise to a "'dialect' of rights the status of what [Talal] Asad calls a 'strong language,' one into which others must be translated" (p.84). Translation is construed here in a negative light.

In *Desiring Arabs* (2007), Massad imagines a pre-colonial, fluid, and non-identitarian same-sex desire, unbridled by the structuring forces of Western sexual discourses and the taxonomies underpinning them. He establishes a firm link between cultural imperialism and the emergence of new gender and sexual identity politics. In a chapter titled "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," Massad (2007) interrogates the new visibility of "gay" and "lesbian" identities and

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the validity of their use as categories of Arab personhood. He distinguishes between a Western homosexuality that is an "identity seeking social community and political rights" and non-Western "forms of sexual intimacy that seek corporeal pleasure" through same-sex contact (Pagano, December 1, 2009). He writes, "The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating" (p. 41). He accuses a constellation of Western-based international gay rights organizations of creating homosexuals where they do not exist, acting as agents of an indiscriminate and culturally-insensitive universalization of a gay rights discourse. The "Gay International," as he calls this organizational network, stands behind the heterosexualization of a world "forced to be fixed by Massad explains that "homo/heterosexuality were invented recently as direct translations of the Latin original: '*Mithliyyah*' or sameness in reference to homosexuality and '*ghayriyyah*' or differentness in reference to heterosexuality" (p. 172). The invention of Arabic words, through the translation of foreign concepts, is characterized in his account as an "epistemic violence." In its introduction of new terminologies into the Arabic lexicon, and by extension of new modes and objects of knowledge in Arab societies, translation is treated as an index of the cultural and epistemological onslaught of neo-imperial power. As such, the lack of words and expressions in Arabic around gender or sexual identity is mobilized as evidence of the inexistence or elitism of said identities.

Like Massad, who describes self-identifying Arab gays as "native informants"

and agents of the West fulfilling an "imperialist epistemological task" (p.189), Abu Lughod is skeptical about the currency of a women's rights dialect among local Arab elites whose appropriation of a foreign, strong language stands as proof of their implication in the perpetuation of cultural imperialism. While she draws her conclusion about the international circulation of a gender discourse from the dominant position of bodies and institutions of global governance, such as the U.N, the critical questions of political appropriation, perspective, and language that she outlines could be posed from a minor perspective. The production of knowledge about gender and sexuality in the Arab world is not restricted to international organizations. In this context of global inequality and hostility charted out by Abu Lughod, minor publics like Meem strategically appropriate globally-circulating discourses of gender and sexual rights in their social struggles and political projects. *Bareed Mista3jil* and *Bekhsoos* provide a different and often disregarded perspective through which the forces of colonialism and globalization could be apprehended. A view from the bottom, I suggest, engenders new perspectives on the old question of cultural imperialism by attending to the resistances it inevitably generates.

First, while it is true, as Abu Lughod (2009) demonstrates, that modernization, human development, and neoliberalism are dominant political paradigms that underpin the global discourse of gender and sexual rights, these paradigms are interrogated in the appropriation of this discourse by Lebanese and Arab queer feminists who inflect them with local meaning. Second, in their rendering of class, sectarian, gender, racial, and sexual differences that constitute Lebanese society, *Bareed* and *Bekhsoos* expose the multiple and intersecting vectors of power that make

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postcolonial female and queer subjectivities. Although they present largely cosmopolitan and urban middle-class perspectives, these publications are highly reflexive about the omissions and exclusions that they help reproduce and cognizant of the importance of intersectional analysis and praxis. In an article on Arab queer organizing published in *Bekhsoos*, for instance, Lynn Darwich and Haneen Maikey (2011) call for a thorough understanding of local queer activism within the geopolitical framework within which and against which it must define itself. They recognize the universalization of a dominant narrative whereby "the Homophobia, Coming Out, Visibility, and Pride axis has continuously been shaping contemporary LGBT communities, their values and demands, around the world" (para. 9). They explain that, within this framework, their struggles become issues of representation and privilege, ones that "contribute to hierarchies that leave the transgenders, the non-identified, the bisexuals, the intersexed, the disabled, the migrants, the colored, the illiterate, and many more, at the bottom, and unworthy of rights" (para.10).[84] The skewed, unavoidable middle class perspective, then, is interrupted by reflections on self-implication in the marginalization and exploitation of disenfranchised others. Finally, in their appropriation of queer and feminist discourses, also in global circulation, queer feminists engage in a process of translation, investing and inflecting concepts originating elsewhere with local value and meaning, Arabizing English terms, and often creating new Arabic terminologies of sex and gender. Through an explicit and self-avowed struggle with language, the producers of and contributors to local feminist queer publications lay bare the cultural politics that animate

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[84] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2011/10/from-the-belly-of-arab-queer-activism-challenges-and-opportunities/

postcolonial self-expression.[85] I characterize these processes of appropriation and translation as instances of what Rey Chow has called "languaging."

In *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience*, Rey Chow (2014) unpacks the linguistic processes that necessarily shape and are shaped by the experience of colonialism which had profound consequences on colonized subjects as "linguistic or language subjects" (p.37). The disciplining of subjects through language, as she notes, is at the core of the colonial enterprise. In this regard, a colonial education entails "a protracted confrontation between the enforcement of the colonizer's language as the official channel of communication and the demotion of the colonized's languages as obsolete or simply irrelevant" (p.37). In her autobiographical essay "Growing Up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon," Lebanese novelist, artist, and poet Etel Adnan (1986) recounts her education at the hands of the nuns of the French Catholic Church in Beirut. Upon establishing their official mandate over Syria and Lebanon, the French expanded the already-existing French schools in the country and established new ones. They imposed a system of education in total conformity with its counterpart in France, an education, Adnan (1986) notes, which "had nothing to do with the history and the geography of the children involved" (p.7). Reflecting on her language education during these formative years, Adnan remembers how she started speaking French upon starting

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[85] These discourses, in other words, are accented. It is through the accent that we can discern the oblique trajectories of European and American cultural imperialism – past and present – in whose shadow individuals continue to live, and against whom Arabs have been defining and re-defining themselves. It is the accent that opens up a possibility for difference in sameness, and hence for the endless deferment of complete hegemony.

school at age five and then only French, as Arabic was forbidden in French schools. "So," Adnan writes, "I grew up thinking that the world was French. And that everything that mattered, that was 'in books,' or had authority (the nuns), did not concern our environment. This is what is called alienation" (p.7). Adnan's loss of Arabic, as well as the disappearance of Greek and Turkish – usually spoken with her Greek mother – at home, exemplify the process, identified by Chow, "in which to learn is simultaneously to alienate or estrange from oneself what is closest to one," and which should be recognized "as the condition a priori to the postcolonial scene of languaging" (p.45).

Alienation, for both Adnan and Chow, is produced and felt at the level of language. Colonial education, extolled as it was by the French *Mission Civilisatrice* (Civilizing Mission) that sought to uplift indigenous populations, was predicated on the spread and promotion of the French language.[86] This came at the expense of local languages deemed inferior, creating a sense of cultural loss and dispossession, but also of alienation in intimate family life. As Adnan writes, "studying in a language basically foreign to my parents created a distance between us: I was engaging myself in territories alien to them and I was being estranged. I felt more and more different, with frames of reference they could not share. I was becoming a foreigner in my own house" (p.14). Indeed, as she started expressing her desire to move to France to continue her education, Paris came to embody, for Adnan's mother, "hell itself, the

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[86] Created in 1970 to embody the solidarity between its 80 member states, the International Organization of la Francophonie, a postcolonial extension of France's linguistic colonial legacy, represents one of the biggest linguistic zones in the world. It boasts that its members not only share a common language but also share "the humanist values promoted by the French language." Lebanon has been a member of La Francophonie since its establishment. http://www.francophonie.org/Welcome-to-the-International.html

capital of white female slavery, the chaos in which children who have left home disappear forever" (p.19). And when Adnan finally tells her mother that her professor at the Ecole des Lettres wanted to send her on a scholarship to Paris, the mother accused the teacher of being an immoral man, "stirring us up and separating us from our homes," and threatened to blow up the school (p.19). "We obviously lived in irreconcilable worlds," Adnan concludes. Adnan's alienation through the mastery of a foreign language, manifested as it was on an intellectual and intimate level, was also, importantly, her gateway to individual freedom, creativity, and professional success. Thus, even as she retraces her "traumatic interpellation" by colonial education, to borrow Chow's words, Adnan recognizes this trauma's structuring role in her formation as a "woman writer." While her subjectivity was necessarily constituted in a condition "of being caught between languages not simply as skills but as indexes of cultural superiority and inferiority" (Chow, 2014, p.39), Adnan's intellectual, academic, and professional advancements were predicated on her mastery of French. She described writing in French, which she took great pleasure in, as her "little domain," a world where she had no fear, no tension, no problem (p.11).

Mastering the colonizer's language secured an education, followed by a first job as a teacher of French Literature in Al-Ahlia school for girls. There, Adnan got close to the headmistress, a Lebanese Protestant woman whose success and achievements she admired: "She was an admirable person, had gone to the American University of Beirut and had a Ph.D in Education from a university in the United States. It was my first contact with teaching and with Anglo-Saxon oriented milieu of Lebanon" (p.20). Here, Adnan's account reveals the coexistence of French and

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American cultural domination through missionary education, exposing the multilingual colonial milieu that was Lebanon. Language proficiency gave her access to an unfamiliar universe and eventually secured her a scholarship, in 1949, to finish her Licence des Lettres in France, thus moving out of the family home and away from the homeland. The alienation, at the scene of colonial education, is thus done and undone by the knowledge of a foreign language. While that knowledge distanced her from her culture and her family, it simultaneously provided otherwise restricted opportunities for her emancipation as a woman. Predicated as it is on her alienation as a national subject, Adnan's languaging illustrates the melancholic scene in which "the colonized suffers the loss of her harmonious relation to her own language" (Chow, p.47) but also represents the reparative potential of recasting coloniality, through its language politics, as a prosthetic rather than an origin for the subversion of gender norms and hierarchies. Here I engage Chow's central questions: "How to strive for self-recognition even as one must efface oneself in the process of speaking and writing? How not to essentialize loss even when loss is embodied and intimately felt, but rather to treat loss itself as…a kind of prosthetics?"

This detour through Adnan's biography, by way of Chow's theorization of postcolonial language practices, is meant to establish the postcolonial scene of languaging, defined as it is by loss, dislocation, and alienation, long before the relatively recent global emergence and circulation of a language of women's and LGBT rights and feminist and queer identity politics. By setting the "givenness of the fraught linguistic scene" (Chow, p.38) that is the postcolonial contemporary writing of queer desire, I want to disrupt the epistemic break that is commonly drawn around

the internationalization of sexual rights politics. The subject has already been disciplined by the colonization of language when the gay rights discourse enters her cultural and linguistic repertoire.

Maya, a founding member of Meem and regular contributor to *Bekhsoos*, explains, "When you get to college, and during your entire time there you take maybe one class in Arabic. All your surroundings tell you that English is wow and Arabic is shit. This is social pressure" (personal interview, July 10, 2015). The expression of a remoteness from the native language and culture, as Chow (2014) demonstrates, results from the instillation of a hierarchy of cultural values in which English is deemed "an indispensability for social advancement" (p.44). Leen, one of the editors, notes that Arabic is not the language of instruction in Lebanese schools. "We study sciences, maths, everything in English or French, we don't study them in Arabic. The curriculum, from a pedagogical point of view, is really problematic" (personal interview, July 6, 2015). And Lynn, another editor, concedes, "Unfortunately, because of our education, we don't learn to conceptualize in Arabic. We don't learn how to express ourselves in Arabic. If you learn philosophy in French you won't be able to conceptualize in Arabic" (personal interview, January 10, 2013).

The discomfort with Arabic, and the complaint about its absence, lack, and inadequacy is reiterated by other Arab queer activists and collectives. Rauda Morcos, co-founder of Aswat (Voices), a Palestinian lesbian organization, states in an interview, "I have forgotten my language, I don't know how to say 'to make love' in Arabic without it sounding chauvinistic, aggressive, and alien to the experience" (Whitaker, October 2, 2006). For Morcos, queer activism was primarily "about

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developing a 'mother tongue' with positive, un-derogatory and affirmative expressions of women and lesbian sexuality and gender," adding, "we are creating a language that no one spoke before" (Whitaker, October 2, 2006). Queer publications are one site for the production and circulation of affirmative expression. The 2005 inaugural issue of *Barra* (Out), the first Arab LGBT magazine produced by Helem, featured a "glossary of Arabic expressions" which consisted of Arabic translations of English terms such as "bisexual", "gay," and "transsexual." *Barra* is a direct translation of "Out" and thus invokes the coming out narrative that is central to American LGBT politics. The magazine was launched in March 2005, in the midst of "the Independence Intifada" that followed the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February of that year. It featured articles about homosexuality, health, arts and culture, but also reported on mainstream media coverage of LGBT issues in Lebanon and the Arab world. [87] Ahmad Saleh, the magazine's coordinator, explains that writing in Arabic was a challenge. He recalls discussions in the magazine about the Arabic translation of "transgender." There were many possible permutations between "*tahawwol*" (transformation) and "*taghayyor*" (change) on one hand and "*naw'a jandari*" (gender), "*dawr jandari*" (gender role), and "*jins*" (sex) on the other. Possible translations included "*taghayyor al-naw'a al-jandari*" (gender change),

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[87] The second issue in 2006, for instance, included a four-page feature on Lebanese press coverage of issues such as the presence of queer characters in Arab music videos, gay marriage in the West, and the troubles of being homosexual in Lebanon. The magazine also included interviews with prominent Lebanese personalities, such as television producers and writers, about their opinions on the legal and social status of homosexuality. It was distributed electronically over Helem's mailing list and website (www.helem.net) and was found in print select venues. In the editorial of the first issue, Helem co-founder Ghassan Makarem writes, "Homosexuals have a history that hasn't been written, but it exists in the folds of literature, art, poetry, and the human sciences […] homosexuals also have a present that they have to historicize to illuminate the causes and effects of the repression they are subject to" (Makarem, March 2005).

"*taghayyor al-dawr al-jandari*" (gender role change), "*tahawwol al-naw'a al-jandari*" (gender transformation). The magazine's goal, first and foremost, was to discuss practical issues around non-normative sexualities and gender identities in Arabic, in public, where they were lacking (personal interview, May 1, 2015).[88] For example, Saleh recalls, the magazine published an article on breast binding for trans men in the health section. "This wasn't about risk or fear or danger around sex, it was something people think about and try to find online, and we were offering this in Arabic, and this was the point, to actually make it available in Arabic" (personal interview, May 1, 2015). In *Bareed*'s introduction, the editors highlight the inability to express sex in Arabic as a major obstacle in writing. This could be, as both activists and scholars have pointed out, because of the sheer inexistence of certain terms in Arabic. Alternatively, it could be a problem not of language, but of the difficulty of speech, of speaking about sex in public. As Leen explains, "We find it uncomfortable to express sexuality in Arabic because we are not used to it. Not the other way around. We are used to '*kiss*' (pussy) as an insult in Arabic. The connotation is negative. Sexuality and sex are not an issue that is spoken about in our societies, in Arabic, in the mainstream media for example" (personal interview, July 6, 2015). She adds, "we get acquainted with these issues mostly through the internet, especially if you're LGBT or queer or whatever, and you are learning about your identity in a language that is not your language. Therefore, the inner thoughts and constructs that are related to your queer identity [*al-hawiyya al-queeriyya*] come from an English

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[88] Members of Helem have also discussed language deficiency in awareness materials for HIV/AIDS that were unavailable in Arabic (Helem, 2008, p. 40).

original. The word itself, *queeriyya* [queer], does. And hence, you have this distance, this alienation from Arabic" (personal interview, July 6, 2015).

As Chow points out, the inevitable confrontation between languages in a colonial education, rather than leading to the replacement of one language by another, positions the colonized subject in an interesting and conflicted ontological situation "in which there can be no pure linguistic practice because the use of one language is habitually interfered with by the vying availability of others" (p.37). The medium of language, in her account, is a vehicle that speakers and writers adapt, transform, and repurpose (p.38). This is how queer becomes *queeriyya,* and how new identities find expression. Media scholar Noor al-Qassimi (2011) uses the example of "*Boyah*" in the Arab Gulf to describe the emergence of new butch identities through languaging. "*Boyah*" is a lexicalization of the English "boy" followed by the Arabic feminine suffix -ah. As al-Qasimi notes, the word refers to the self-stylizations and aesthetics of lesbian butch identities in what has become an increasingly visible subculture within Arab Gulf States. *Boyah*'s semiotic power lies as much in its queering of normative femininity, through its visible performance of female masculinity, as it does in its transgression of monolingualism. The Arabic female suffix -ah queers an otherwise English word and the result is neither English nor Arabic. This term, an amalgamation of multiple languages and genders, registers a new and local form of queer embodiment and self-expression. In fact, the question of interlinguality that Chow poses has been broached by scholars of postcolonial and non-Western sexualities.

Writing about the transnational circulation of a gay rights discourse, Iranian

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historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008) considers the subversive potentials of appropriation and translation and the possibility of reiteration with a difference: "Perhaps one of the problems with the current heated debates between proponents of 'global gay' and opponents of 'gay international' resides in the presumption, common to both groups, that 'I am gay,' or 'I am transsexual' means the same thing anywhere it is pronounced (p. 37). She explains that loan words and expressions such as *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *transsexual*, *homosexual*, *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile*—largely picked up from the media—are pronounced in Persian just as they are in English and are freely used in discussion. But, she adds, these enunciations mean differently and do a different cultural work in different contexts (p. 37). To the extent that the adoption of the terms gay and lesbian into Persian nomenclature can be viewed as some sort of mimicry, Najmabadi argues, it is a strategic move to shed the cultural stigma" of local words (p. 40). Moreover, whether these language moves work or fail is not determined by "the cultural power domination by a presumed 'gay international' that is exporting its identity categories in imperial fashion" (p. 40). In his study of queer subjectivities in Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff (2003) proposes the notion of "dubbing culture" to conceptualize the relationship between persons and the cultural logics through which they come to occupy subject positions under contemporary globalizing processes. He argues that *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities do not originate in the "West" (and are not perceived as diasporic), nor are they a hybrid of "West" and "East," but are distinctively Indonesian phenomena formed through a sense of linkage to distant but familiar Others (p. 226). [89] Looking at queer cultural

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[89] Boellstorff italicizes *gay* and *lesbi* to keep them distinct from the English terms.

production in Taiwan, Fran Martin (2003) interprets the complex mix of Chinese and English terms in lesbian magazine *Ai Bao* as an instance of "cultural translation" (p.4).[90] This compels us to ask, following Chow (2014), "is not such a state of bilinguality or interlinguality – often in the form of puns, jokes, ellipses, silences, awkward turns of phrases, erroneous or estranged uses that mark the entanglement of different voices and compositions – something with which we have yet to come to terms?" (p.38).

To do so, Chow uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain transformations that occur at the level of language. Rather than account for the fixity and reproduction of practices, habitus as a structure of durable dispositions becomes perceptible, according to Bourdieu, during experiences of adjustment when people adapt or abandon deeply-entrenched social practices to function under new historical conditions. It is, in Chow's formulation, a "way of conceptualizing a kind of experience – what may be described more precisely as a practical *transitioning* – that people accustomed to an older socioeconomic order […] have to go through in order to participate in a new one" (emphasis in original, p.25).[91] Once we consider language as habitus, at once resilient and adaptable, we may read appropriation, translation, and adaptation as process of creative reinvention rather than passive accommodation. By

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[90] She highlights that there is not one but many Chinese words used to translate "queer." The term tonghzi appeared in Taiwan Mandarin via Hong Kong as a translation of the English term queer but then shifted to signify lesbian/gay identity. "At issue here, then, is not simply a translation between English and Chinese, but also the translations between 'lesbian/gay' and 'queer' and the translation of that translation into Taiwan's cultural context" (Martin, 2003, p. 4).

[91] Bourdieu developed his theory of the habitus in his examination of the workers of Kabyle society in Algeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where he observed the transformation of precapitalist economic activities such as gift exchange and debt caused by the onset of a new colonial economic order, one that is based on the spirit of calculation under capitalism and modernization.

considering the role of languaging in the emergence of LGBTQ identities outside the West, I want to de-essentialize language as an inherited and fixed system of representation in order to interrupt the seamless continuity between sexual desire and practice that is often assumed in theorizations of Arab same-sex desire.

In this regard, it is instructive to note the tension that queer writers – and non-queer writers too – express between the use of written classical Arabic (*fusha*) and the spoken Lebanese dialect of everyday life. Writers often talk about the difficulties of translation between the two, for example in the book launching event for *Bareed*. In December 2009, Meem held a public reading at al-Madina Theater,[92] with two narrators reading selected stories in English and Arabic.[93] As Joelle, the Arabic narrator, explains, the translation process was difficult. "It was going to be alienating to go on stage and read in *fusha* which would create a distance from the text. We don't normally tell our stories in *fusha* so it made sense to translate them and read them in colloquial Lebanese. Colloquial is much closer than *fusha*" (personal interview, July 1, 2015). Many writers in fact choose to write in colloquial Lebanese, often using Latin letters instead of Arabic. In a post titled "*Ma3mal l 3elab*" (The Factory of Boxes), the "3" in "ma3mal," for example, stands for the letter "'ayn" in Arabic (people use it because it looks like an inverted "'ayn"). The entire post is written in what could be described as a Latinized Arabic, commonly referred to as

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[92] The theater is located in the commercial and residential district of Hamra in the heart of Beirut.
[93] Sunbula: Arab Feminists for Change and the Global Fund for Women staged two readings of *Bareed* in San Francisco and Berkeley in December 2009. In a letter addressed to Meem and posted on Bekhsoos, Saida, one of the event's organizers, writes: "Our readers have expressed their gratitude at participating in this project – many have told me they are finding it healing to read others' words so closely reflecting their own experiences and reading as a way to send healing energy to the original 'owners' of the harshest words and celebrating the joy inherent in other loving sequences."
http://www.bekhsoos.com/2009/12/staged-readings-of-bareed-mista3jil-in-california/

Arabish, which is an informal transliteration system mostly used in online chatting to write Arabic in Latin letters, creatively transliterating Arabic sounds that cannot be expressed with Latin letters by using numbers instead. The boxes the writer refers to are the labels that are forced upon her, as a girl then a woman: "infidel, whore, deviant, crazy, slutty, emasculating, mannish, loose!" [94] (Crimson, December 21, 2009). In another post titled "Mouto: A Feminist Rants about Non-Feminist Women," the same author paints a portrait of the norms governing the lives of Lebanese women. By urging them to die at the beginning of every verse of her poem – literally, *Mouto* means "die" – she expresses her refusal to uphold or abide by the norms of female behavior dictated by society as feminine virtues: "Mouto faking orgasms kel 7ayetkoun; Mouto 3azara; Mouto diet; Mouto tharthara 3ala el jiran; Mouto zaha2 min hayetkoun; Mouto jorsa" (Die faking orgasms all your life; Die virgins; Die from diet; Die from gossiping about the neighbors; Die from boredom in your life; Die from scandal) (Crimson Curls, December 6, 2009).[95] Reflecting on the use of the Lebanese colloquial in *Barra*, Ahmad Saleh notes that some contributors thought that it was more hip and accessible, while others believed *fusha* was clearer and had more legitimacy. He explains that while colloquial is more practical and accessible when spoken, once put in writing it is hard to read and understand. "You have to say it to understand it. There were articles where we suggested a mix of the two, to make it more conversational while maintaining the coherence and structure of *fusha*" (personal interview, May 1, 2015).

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[94] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2009/12/masna3-l-3elab/
[95] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2009/12/mouto-a-feminist-rants-about-non-feminist-women/

This distance between the written classical Arabic and the oral Lebanese dialect must therefore be examined apart from the question of Arabic-English translation. During a 2010 campaign on the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia, Lebanese queer activists attempted to reclaim the word *shadh* through a campaign slogan that read "*Eh ana shadh*" (yes I am a deviant), which lead to lengthy discussions and disagreement in the community (Lynn, personal interview, January 13, 2014). The word *mithli* had been largely adopted by Arab queer activists and some media outlets as the politically correct alternative to the commonly used *shadh* (deviant). Unlike its English counterpart, *shadh* still carries the stigma of deviance in a Lebanese and broader Arab cultural context, and the debates around the use of *mithli* versus *shadh* thus revealed broader tensions and schisms around queer versus LGBT politics. Internal translations between lesbian/gay and queer, as Fran Martin (2003) explains in the context of Taiwan, intimate the inadequacy of a binary transnational framework in which 'English' always confronts a local indigenous language, such as Chinese or Arabic, as its mirroring other (p. 4).

Furthermore, writers often tackle English terms and expressions they deem problematic. In a *Bekhsoos* post in French titled "Shemale, Shemale, Shemale!" Randa problematizes the use of the term to refer to trans women, explaining how it reduces the transsexual woman to "an exotic sex object, a mythic creature of modern times."[96] By using this common terminology, she writes, "we refuse the 'shemale' her identity as a woman" (September 8, 2011). Similarly, in a story titled "Butch" in *Bareed*, the narrator explains her unease with the categories "butch" and "femme,"

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[96] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2011/09/transsexuelle-ou-shemale/

frequently used in the community and which she finds reductive. For her, "butch" and "femme" designations reproduce gender stereotypes in the lesbian community and fail to capture nuances in gender performance and presentation (p.153). In this regard, it is worth revisiting Massad's use of "same-sex practitioner" as a more accurate descriptor than "homosexual" or "gay." By avoiding reference to "homosexuality" as fixed identity category to eschew essentialist sexual binaries, the term "same-sex" brushes over the complexities of gender. What kind of erotic attachments and configurations are excluded from the category "same-sex?" To quote Najmabadi (2006), adopting the concept of same-sex "may have trapped our thinking of human relations bound by the contours of the 'same-sex-ness' of those relationships," making "sex" the truth of these relations and "regenerating the binary of male and female bio-genital difference as the defining mark of that truth" (p. 17). Thus, the concern with the neo-imperialist underpinnings of a globalized language of sexual rights and identities, and attempts to redress linguistic representations, may misfire in their reification of a gender binary, and the essentialization of gender in biological sex, that are enacted by a category like "same-sex." Naming Arab sexualities is a contentious and fraught endeavor, Georgis (2013) argues, because "there is no easy way to make sense of the historical entanglements of precolonial traditions, colonization and sexual shaming, and gay epistemologies in the lives of present-day Arabs" (p.237). Refusing labels and evading taxonomies, rather than liberating sex and gender, may have the adverse effect of perpetuating the invisibility of gender and sexual diversity and the fixity of existing categories that remain unchallenged.

As Frederic Lagrange (2000) notes, research on same-sex eroticism in Arabic

literature "has been very cautious with its vocabulary, preferring in place of 'homosexuality' terms such as 'homoeroticism' or 'same-sex sexuality'" (p. 171). In fact, the very need to use sexual labels and categories is called into question. For Pratt Ewing (2011), "Muslims are less troubled by sex and desire in all their possible forms than they are by the peculiar modern practice of naming our sexualities as the basis for secular public identities" (p. 89). Here, naming one's sexuality amounts to "essentializations" that are themselves part of "the coming out stories foreign to Muslims (Pratt-Ewing, 2011, pp. 93–94).[97] In her insistence that the public naming of desires as identities is out of sync with non-Western local contexts, Pratt Ewing not only delegitimizes such identities where they do exist, but she also ties in such acts of naming with secular politics, and ultimately depicts secularism itself as undesirable to and incompatible with an unspecified public of "Muslims." Publicity, in such accounts, is never conceptualized as a desire. It remains an opaque category, invoked in debates around "gay rights" but never contemplated as a question of everyday life. As the narrator of *"My bisexuality,"* explains, "I don't mind labels. On the contrary, I spent almost half of my life trying to label myself. I have gone from calling myself straight to lesbian to bisexual to lesbian to bisexual more times than I can remember in the past 10 years. Although I never liked people labeling me, it was still very important for me to give a name, a category, an identity of sorts to myself" (p.48).[98] Because of a lack and inadequacy at the level of language, the editors explain, "queer

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[97] It is worth noting that the author uses the category "Muslims" without further qualification or specificity throughout her piece.

[98] Naming Arab sexualities is a contentious and fraught endeavor, Georgis (2013) argues, because "there is no easy way to make sense of the historical entanglements of precolonial traditions, colonization and sexual shaming, and gay epistemologies in the lives of present-day Arabs" (p.237).

people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identity in English or French because that's where these words exist more freely and where we find internet pages and papers written about sexuality" (p.7).

In the book's opening story, titled "Sou7aqiyyeh" (latin transliteration of the Arabic word for lesbian), the narrator explains her unease with Arabic words that are commonly used to identify her like "*souhaqiyya*" (lesbian), "*shazzeh*" (deviant), and "*mistarjli*" (mannish woman): "Lesbian is such an ugly word to me. It makes me cringe – especially the French version that is more often used in Lebanon 'lesbienne' (with an elongated 'ieeeen')" (p.34). Part of the job of a lesbian community, she adds, is to rethink these terms in Arabic and Lebanese, and to deconstruct the images associated with them. "We do need to present the public with alternative words and images. And it's not just terms related to homosexuality. Think of the Arabic word for vagina, for clitoris, for masturbation […] Arabic is our language too, and languages are alive. People give meanings to words, and people can change the meaning of words, or invent new words altogether, or simply refuse using offensive words" (p.36).

The Politics of Visibility: The Uses of Anonymity

As I have stated earlier, the process of collective coming out as a community through writing does not rest on the self-revelation of individuals. Anonymous authorship is thus a critical feature of this feminist queer counterpublic. Websites, blogs, social networking sites, and online magazines allow public expression while maintaining a degree of individual anonymity

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and privacy. This ambiguous structure allows for degrees of publicness rather than a public/private binary. *Bekhsoos's* decision to publish the authors' pseudonyms or first names only, Lynn explains, was motivated by a desire to avoid internal hierarchies where people who would write using their full names would be seen as more progressive or bold. One can choose to use nicknames or full names as necessary; one can choose to be out on her Facebook profile while maintaining higher levels of privacy in a more public forum. Michael Warner (2002) writes, "the individual struggle with publicness is transposed, as it were, to the conflict between modes of publicness" (p.424). By allowing for "modes of publicness," the internet was an ideal space for expression for queer activists who want to circulate a new discourse and address a bigger public but wish to avoid social stigma and its ramifications.

This is not to suggest that the Internet is free from social control, a space where culture is necessarily subverted. Representational visibility does not automatically translate into power, and the Internet as a virtual space of sociality replicates many of the structural inequalities of the non-digital world (Nguyen, 2001). Indeed, while early representations of cyberspace denied sexual difference by positing the Internet as a gender-neutral zone, a space where one is freed from the constraints of identity, feminist scholars have demonstrated the limits of this utopian vision of the possibility of physical disembodiment online. The work of Lisa Nakamura (2000) and danah boyd (2012) among others has shown the resilience of race, class, and gender as markers of identity online. More recently, the Gamergate

controversy around the role and representation of and violence against women in online gaming cultures exposed how gender difference operates within new media technologies and digital platforms. But cyberspace, Dietrich (1997) writes, offers "the potential for virtual communities, or 'consensual loci,' where women can join voices/texts to articulate (and activate) issues pertinent to them (Stone, 1991). "In an effort to reconstitute a feminist 'subject' in the context of postmodern decenteredness," she continues, this task becomes an effort both to inscribe textual space and follow through with active (political) choice. In this instance, cyberspace becomes a narrative space, a potential authoring site in an economy where textual circulation can recover political agency" (p.180). Following Bukatman (1993), Dietrich describes text, in this instance, as a tactic – a technology – that challenges masculinist formations in cyberspace. Indeed, the limits of representational visibility, and the shapes it take online, have been acknowledged by the creators of *Bekhsoos*. In an article titled "Framing Visibility," first delivered as Meem's speech during the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) conference in Sao Paolo in 2010, Lynn, the zine's English editor, asks:

> Had our visibility at Meem been constructed differently, had we tagged
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> our foreheads with the words 'lesbian', 'queer' or 'transgender' and went
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> on national TV shows and discussed our own sexualities and genders,
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> our own struggles, and we publically linked our first and last names to
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> our sexual identities, had we exposed our faces as 'leaders of the LGBT
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> movement,' would we have been able to be as effective in our
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> community and movement building as we have been so far? (2010)

What Lynn proposes is a strategic flattening of the in/out binary that's been the subject of much queer theoretical writing. What Lynn suggests is a form of visibility that is better-suited for local realities and in sync with a national context in which "exposing faces" and publicly revealing first and last names either are not, or cannot, be a priority or a desirable political objective. Lynn goes on to explain that "There's obviously an ambiguous space that comes with this kind of visibility," adding "we take that ambiguity, that space, to our advantage." As Nina Wakeford (2000) explains, cyberqueer spaces are "necessarily embedded within both institutional and cultural practices, means by which the lesbian/gay/transgender/queer self can be read into the politics of representation and activism confronting homophobia" (Wakeford, p.408).

Indeed, anonymous publicity is one of the major affordances of digital writing. Anonymity online, as Papacharissi (2002) has noted, assists one "to overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly" (p.16). In the case of stigmatized identities, this anonymity is often the only way that stigmatized individuals can express themselves without facing social retribution. As such, anonymity lowers the costs of participation in this public discourse. But, Papacharissi cautions, "The same anonymity and absence of face-to- face interaction that expands our freedom of expression online keeps us from assessing the impact and social value of our words" (p.16). The anonymous expression of dissent does not automatically translate into social change, and while new technologies offer new tools for expression, these do not transform social norms or displace dominant cultural logics.

Identification, the choice or state of being recognized by individuals, society, or the state as a particular kind of subject, is not a requirement of visibility. Anonymity is a way to render the subject opaque to the regulatory gaze. The use of pseudonyms in publications, the refusal to appear on television as the "leaders" of the "LGBT movement," are strategic choices, Lynn argues, that have allowed for effective community and movement building. It is the desire for a sustainable collectivity that guides and motivates a group like Meem. Visibility cannot come at the expense of collectivity. Visibility, however, is essential for movement-building: people need to recognize each other to come together. Visibility, according to Meem's logic, can be managed. It is not a question of being in or out. It is not a binary, but a spectrum, and is about ways of being in public: how to make a movement or a community present, recognizable, and therefore reachable while taking into consideration the constraints of the political and social reality in which this movement exists. In its reframing of visibility, *Bekhsoos*'s strategy is to be visible while managing those constraints, and without necessarily being known. As I discussed in chapter one, this visibility comes through what Jose Esteban Munoz calls disidentificatory acts that occur in the public sphere. While talk show performances constitute one example of such acts of disidentification from dominant norms through a public avowal of sexual or gender deviance, writing in *Bekhsoos* constitutes another example. In an Arabic post titled "*Seen: Sou'al, Jeem: Sourakh*" (Q: Question, A: Screaming," the writer attempts to answer frequently asked questions by his straight acquaintances: "why do you have to keep talking about your sex life all the time? Why do you have to tell everyone that you are a homosexual?" "I need the whole

world to see me, because if I don't speak, everyone will consider that I don't exist or that I desire the opposite sex (God forbid!)" (Gholam Abi Nawas, February 28, 2010).[99] The writer must constantly speak of his queer sexuality, he insists, because it is nowhere to be seen, whereas heterosexuality is everywhere: at his aunt's house, on the bus, in school, in movies and advertisements, at the dinner table, and on the street. His speaking out takes the form of insistent disidentification from the heterosexual norm that suspends the erasure of gender and sexual diversity from public view. Doing so makes alternative desires, identities, and communities known and therefore accessible to the uninitiated. As one writer explains, "it's usually the most marginalized that find their way to the group [...] it's been the young, the working class, the isolated, the trans persons, the abused, the questioning that have been sending that nervous and hopeful email to coordinator[at]meemgroup.org asking to join Meem" (Lynn, May 22, 2012). The act of reaching out is fraught with anxiety yet driven by the hope of finding someone to talk to.

Conclusion

In the editorial of the first issue of *Barra* (Out), Helem co-founder Ghassan Makarem writes, "Homosexuals have a history that hasn't been written, but it exists in the folds of literature, art, poetry, and the human sciences [...] homosexuals also have a present that they have to historicize to illuminate the causes and effects of the repression they are subject to" (Makarem, March 2005). Makarem uses the word "*ta'rikh*" – meaning to historicize – to describe the function of the practices of

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[99] http://www.bekhsoos.com/2010/02/q-question-a-screaming/

inscription put forth by a magazine like *Barra* to record and document the existence of minoritarian subjects whose lives have historically been erased from public consciousness. Practices of inscription have been integral for the formation of a queer counterpublic in Lebanon. From the early days of Internet chatrooms to the openly queer print and digital publications of Meem, media has proven to be a vital for community building and self-expression for those whose gender identities and sexual desires are a source of shame and stigma. By writing about shame, the writers and editors of Meem's publications exposed the repression that gender and sexually-non-conforming individuals – and women in particular – are subjected to, opening up a space to critique the patriarchal and heteronormative logics that repress their flourishing in public. Whether it is restrictions around gender expression or the unspeakability of same-sex desire, writing about the difficulties of navigating the public/private divide that structures queer lives in contemporary Lebanon is a defining feature of the anti-normative drive of a collective like Meem. The anti-normative charge of Meem's politics lies in the refusal to perpetuate the silence and secrecy that shrouds bodies, desires, and intimacies that do not fit within prescribed social norms. The movement from silence into speech, the act of speech and "talking back," as bell hooks (1989) reminds us, is a gesture of defiance for the oppressed (p.9). This movement, hooks points out, makes "new life" and "new growth" possible. As this chapter has demonstrated, writing, recording, and documenting queer experience enabled experimentation with language and the creation and circulation of new terminologies of sex and gender.

Once we recognize the individual and collective labor of self-making that members of Meem – and of the queer community more broadly – undertake to craft viable subjectivities, Massad's claim that the emergence of LGBT and queer discourses in the region is the result of the Gay International's unchallenged imposition of foreign sexual categories and labels becomes tenuous. As Ritchie (2010) has pointed out, "Globalization is a hierarchically structured process in which certain ideas and discourses move, with greater force, in certain directions." However, he continues, "in dismissing self-identified Arab queers as essentially inauthentic replicas of their Western counterparts, Massad overlooks their capacity to act as conscious agents and risks 'circumscrib[ing] the sorts of defensive and offensive actions that might be taken,' and in fact are taken, against the missionary project of the Gay International" (p. 567). Ritchie's work with Palestinian queer activists demonstrates that, like their Lebanese counterparts, they do not un-self-consciously heed Israeli "healing calls" (p. 569). Rather, the anti-homophobic and anti-normative discourse they produce is mediated by their staunch anti-occupation politics. Arab queers in Lebanon and Palestine are cognizant of the social terrain they must navigate between a Western discourse that claims them as victims of their cultures and a local discourse that rejects them as the brainwashed victims of Western imperialism. They are aware of the cost of their visibility as it gets highjacked by imperialist and reactionary politics. As Haneen Maikey, chair of Al-Qaws, explains, visibility does not figure into the organization's goals (Ritchie, 2010, p.569). This ambivalent relationship to visibility is echoed by Rauda Morcos, former chair of Aswat, who explains that there are different kinds of visibilities, and that

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"Western and Israeli queer activists do not generally understand that their kind of visibility 'does not work for everyone'" (Ritchie, 2010, p.569).

Like Aswat and Al-Qaws, Meem's ambivalent relationship to the politics of visibility reveals the critical engagement of Arab queer collectives – which took shape over the past decade – with Western LGBTQ politics. It is this critical engagement that is made visible in the public writings of Meem. Visibility, then, is less about the public declaration of a sexual identity. Rather, it is about using language to articulate new subject-positions, making them available for recognition and identification. This coming to writing, I argue, has defined the visibility of Meem as a feminist queer counterpublic. As Cixous (1976) reminds us, women's "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as the springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (p.879, italicized in original). Meem's writing, and the practices of translation and reading it enacts, together constitute a precursory movement of the transformation of the social and cultural structures that govern sex and gender in contemporary Lebanon. Meem transforms the social meaning of non-normativity by converting the shame associated with queer bodies and desires into shame associated with homophobic and sexist gazes and discourses. This displacement of shame, through writing, is precursory inasmuch as it rejects the normative constraints of the social order and conjures an alternative mode of being.

Media technologies are instrumental in this regard, as they open up previously non-existent channels of communication, self-expression, and self-representation. As Zakia Salime (2014) notes in her discussion of the politically-motivated self-

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publication of nude portraits online by young Arab women during the Arab uprisings, we can trace a new form of feminism that "prospers in the fluidity, connectivity, and interwoven maps of cyberspace.[100] Its cultural imaginaries are projected through the production of images, sounds, and signs through cyberspace" (p.18-19). Meem's writings online can similarly be characterized as new forms of "microrebellions" which, according to Salime, are less in tune with older forms of feminist mobilization in the region which tended to prioritize the reform of state laws while marginalizing the body and sexuality (p.16). Cyberspace thus allows for "moments of counterpublicity" (Munõz, 1999) where women seize the representation of their own bodies in textual and visual forms. And while a print anthology like *Bareed* can also interpellate readers as queers, feminists, or both, the scope and speed of its circulation is not comparable to that of a digital text or image. However, as Warner (2002) notes, "no single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse" (p.420). Therefore, to understand the counterpublic that Meem's texts call into being, we must necessarily consider the different media through which Meem's feminist queer discourse circulates. "Texts themselves do not create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time" (Warner, 2002, p.420). Meem's digital and print publications must be considered in tandem, for the power of their public address – their ability to interpellate their readers as members of a counterpublic – lies in their intertextual, citational, and cross-referential nature. In addition, if a public is the

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[100] Salime discusses nude protest actions by nineteen-year old Tunisian woman Amina Sboui and twenty-one year old Egyptian woman Aliaa Magda Elmahdy in the context of the Arab uprisings.

social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse (Warner, 2002), then the practices of reading and interpretation that these texts enable are also central to the formation of this counterpublic. Meem's writers and their readers both constitute these publications as a precursory movement towards social change, because "between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction" (Warner, 2002, p.420). This interactive social relation of a public is premised on an author/reader relation.

CONCLUSION

The Afterlives of Counterpublics

"Good morning Adnan. Beirut is becoming beautiful again. Do you want to return?"

Wadad Halwani, August 29, 2015

In this dissertation, I examined the visibility of non-normative bodies and desires in the media to probe the shifting boundaries of the public realm. I explored visibility's relationship to publicness, and how this relationship is shaped and reshaped by media genres, platforms, and technologies that trouble the distinction between "private" and "public," that make the personal available for public recognition and contestation. Through the analysis of voyeuristic television talk shows, feminist films, and autobiographical digital and print publications, as well as interviews with their producers, I argued that media representations are instrumental for the collective imagination and contestation of what is normal gender behavior. But they also constitute, through their circulation in discourse and their reception and interpretation by differently-positioned audiences, a necessary node in the constitution and expression of new publics that take gender and sexuality as orienting vectors in their collective politics.

The media and cultural productions I have examined in this dissertation publicize the personal and intimate symbolic and material violence endured by women and sexual minorities. They circulate real and fictional accounts of the effects of patriarchal, masculinist, and heteronormative social orders on vulnerable and stigmatized bodies. They are therefore vital for the articulation of gender as a site of

power and resistance, and of sexuality as a vector of regulation, surveillance, and control. Whether they represent the multiplicity and variability of sexual desires and gender roles, challenge the social normalization of gender-based violence and discrimination, or reproduce the normative logics of appropriate gender behavior, cultural representations make these questions available for public recognition and contestation, thus creating the conditions of possibility for their social transformation. The enactment of new and more just social relations is not possible without first disturbing society's "privilege of unknowing" (Sedgwick, 1988) the scope, nature, and extent of the violence it harbors against non-normative subjects. The main contention of this dissertation is that gender domination cannot be activated as a question of social justice if the hierarchies of power that produce gender are to remain enclosed within a secluded and private sphere of human action or explained away as inherent cultural features of society. Visibility, in this regard, is a political necessity for social change.

"Looking at someone who looks back at you is, in a sense, the beginning of all society" (Brighenti, 2010, p.1). In his theorization of visibility as a concept for social theory, Andrea Brighenti (2010) explains how media technologies transform conditions of vision and practices and modulations of looking. The act of looking, as he describes it, "prolongs in all sorts of different directions towards different activities involving thought, awareness, understanding, appreciation, recognition, talk, manipulation and control" (p.3). By transforming relations of looking, the media become integral to account for changes in the social perception and recognition of gender and sexual diversity. They constitute difference as a social problem, erode the

neat distinction between the private and public realms, and interpellate publics and counterpublics into being. The visible, thus, entails more than the sensorially perceptible; it is "a field of inscription and projection of social action" (Brighenti, 2010, p.4). The mediated visibility of the abnormal thus reconfigures the boundaries of public life, turning implicit, hidden, "private" practices into observable and audible ones. And it is here that we must rethink visibility.

Visibility, as I have shown in this dissertation, is not the emergence of non-normative subjects from an originary maw of darkness – a waving of rainbow flags in the broad daylight of public life – but the articulation of new modes of social intelligibility that enable these subjects to see and recognize themselves, to themselves and others, as something other than figures of abjection to be fixed, saved, or discarded. Reframed as such, visibility is the inscription of sexual and gender diversity in culture, an assertion that other erotic desires, bodily comportments, and forms of attachment are livable, desirable, and real. It is a refusal to succumb to heteronormativity and the social structures and institutions through which it is articulated in everyday life – in the oppression of women, the gender binary, the nuclear family, reproductive sexuality, and conjugal domesticity. Visibility is the necessary condition for the re-articulation of sex and gender beyond what Hall (1986) has called the "magnetic lines of tendency" (p.54) of heterosexual definition. The infrapolitical mode I identified across different media genres is a condition of possibility for such a re-articulation to take place. Rather than assume a teleological trajectory that reproduces the "coming out" narrative, whereby sexualities move from darkness to light, from shame to pride, conceptualizing the infrapolitical allows us to

account for the indeterminate social space between privacy and publicity that queer people have cultivated and occupied, and sometimes even resisted. This indeterminacy is reproduced and mirrored in the mode of representation of the non-normative captured across the previous chapters.

Taking the television talk show as a site of social inquiry, chapter 1 examined how this form of mediated talk, with its focus on televised self-disclosure, refracts otherwise muted differences of class, sect, and gender in the national public sphere. By analyzing the performance and discussion of sexual deviance as a matter of public concern, I show how sexuality is deployed in the articulation of sectarian and religious, but also secular and progressive social discourses. In the process, I demonstrate how television represents a national public to itself through a spectacle of democratic deliberation, but also how it shapes the visibility of stigmatized subjects, simultaneously redrawing and challenging the boundaries of normalcy and of the public sphere. In chapter 2, I examined the depiction of femininity and womanhood in the work of filmmaker Nadine Labaki, including its local and transnational reception, to tease out the norms that structure female subjectivity and sexuality and their expression in private and public. In the process, I also traced the place of gender – and of femininity in particular – in the construction of postwar national identity. Finally, in chapter 3, I analyzed print and feminist queer publications to demonstrate how language and technology allowed the public expression of symbolically-marginal and socially-stigmatized subjectivities, providing a space for individual self-fashioning and affirmation, community-building, and socio-political engagement. Together, these different cultural productions and the

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media platforms enabling their circulation constitute a locus for the study of the visibility of non-normative gender roles and sexual desires and practices, and the role of media in the transformation of the status of women and sexual minorities in public life.

If the public sphere is a sphere of communication through visibility and accessibility (Brighenti, 2010), being visible is a necessary condition to enter the public domain, to exist socially. It is about who and what can appear in public and under what conditions. In this regard, the dissertation showed how secrecy, reticence, and anonymity are modes of visibility that make non-normative and stigmatized bodies and experiences public. Whether it is the use of anonymizing techniques on television talk shows, pseudonyms in the writings of the queer feminist collective Meem, and rhetorical and visual reticence in the narrative films of Nadine Labaki, cultural producers devise creative strategies to circulate controversial messages in public. They evade censorship and social condemnation through techniques of disguise, dissimulation, and masquerade that can be described, following James Scott (1990), as infrapolitical. Masks, pseudonyms, and metaphors demand a reconceptualization of visibility as a spectrum rather than a binary, displaying as they do the forbidden through fugitive gestures that allow the circulation of non-normative subjectivities and experiences in public. Narratives of leading double lives on talk shows and in Labaki's *Caramel* (2007), of secret female conspiracy in *Where Do We Go Now*? (2012), and the difficulties of proclaiming and inhabiting alternative gender roles and sexual desires described in the publications of Meem, reveal how women and queers bear the weight of social scrutiny, which forces them to navigate the

boundary between their private and public lives very vigilantly. Shame is a structuring force in this regard, mandating a code of secrecy around socially-unacceptable behavior and routinizing practices of self-surveillance and censorship.

Whether it is Hannah Arendt's (1958) definition of the public as the "space of appearance" or Erving Goffman's (1971) conceptualization of the public realm as an arena for the intervisibility of actors, visibility's relationship to publicity has long been theorized by philosophers and sociologists. The public sphere, as Turkish sociologist Nilufer Göle (2015) has argued, "does not initially appear as a democratic space providing equal access of all citizens to a rational-critical debate on public issues, but it emerges as a stage on which modernist patterns of conduct and living are performed" (p.109). Commenting on the visibility of modern Islamic subjectivities in conventionally secular public spheres, Göle explains that disputes over gendered lifestyles and the regulation of social encounters between male and female citizens, "far from being a trivial issue of individual choices or changing trends, define the shrinkage or expansion of the boundaries of the public sphere, which in turn defines the stakes of democracy" (p.116). Her observation on the moralization of the public sphere through the prescription of appropriate gender behavior can be expanded to include non-conforming expressions of masculinity and femininity.   When regarded as an appearance in public, visibility is both a burden and a necessity. A central claim of this dissertation is that the appearance of alternative, non-normative life forms in public is essential for social transformation. If masculine domination and the injustices it engenders are to be challenged, the articulation and dissemination of new discourses of gender and sexuality is necessary. Visibility, as the total sum of

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processes of mediation that shape how certain bodies and social experiences, deemed abnormal, deviant, and shameful, come to be regarded, apprehended, and resisted as such by members of a society. Investigating the visibility of the non-normative therefore matters insofar as we recognize normativity as a social force that is integral for the reproduction of the socio-political order. Thus, attributing transformations in gender and sexual discourses, such as the rise of LGBT publics in postcolonial and Global South societies, to the universalization of Western discourses of women and gay rights (Abu Lughod, 2002; Massad, 2007) ignores the role of local cultural politics in redefining gender norms and roles. This redefinition is predicated on making marginal, dominated, and non-normative experiences visible, and therefore knowable. My aim was to locate the different mediated spaces in which this process of redefinition, or re-articulation, takes shape, and to show inconsistencies as well as recurrent patterns therein. When searching for such moments of articulation, one needs to look in unlikely places.

In the summer of 2015, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Beirut demanding the fall of the sectarian regime and an end to its structural corruption. On July 17, 2015, the Lebanese government's contract with Sukleen, the company which has been granted exclusive rights for garbage collection in the country since 1994, expired.[101] At the same time, the country's main landfill in the

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[101] The Sukleen contract with the Lebanese government has its origins in the postwar reconstruction era of the 1990s, in what many consider a non-competitive bidding process. Nevertheless, this contract had since been renewed several times, each time at a higher cost. In July the government did not renew the contract on the grounds of excessive pricing and failed to

coastal town of Na'ameh, south of Beirut, was shut down under popular pressure when locals blocked access to the dumping site to protest ecological damage and health hazards. As a consequence trash collection services ceased, and garbage started piling up on the streets of the capital and around the country. In the face of government inaction on the matter, civil society initiatives sprung around what became a full-blown "garbage crisis." A group of activists created a campaign, #YouStink, calling for protests in downtown Beirut against the government, parliament, and the political ruling elite. On August 19, footage showing scenes of police brutality against protestors during a demonstration facing the government building in Beirut's central commercial district went viral, inciting people to take to the street in much larger numbers on August 22. Within a week, what started as a protest campaign against the state's failure to deal with the garbage crisis metamorphosed into a protest movement, *haraak*, against the corrupt sectarian postwar regime.[102]

Twenty-five years after the end of the civil war, people took to the streets to hold political elites and the state institutions they control accountable for their

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reach a consensus on a new one. For more about Sukleen and its relationship to the Lebanese state, see Mohammad Zbeeb (August 27, 2012). "$5million a year: The tip of the Sukleen waste pile." *Al-Akhbar*. http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11479

[102] On August 23, teenagers from the most deprived urban areas of Dawra, Burj Hammoud, Khandaq al-Ghami', Sabra, Tariq Jdideh, and Shiyyah joined the demonstration. As the protest movement's demands expanded beyond the resolution of the garbage crisis, and as it brought together different social classes around shared socio-economic grievances, the government escalated its repressive tactics and erected a concrete wall, "the Wall of Shame" as it was dubbed on social media, between protesters and the building of the Prime Ministry. On the night of August 25, riot police chased protesters out of the downtown area, pulling those fleeing the scene out of taxis, beating the injured, and arresting dozens in police stations around the city. By August 28, at least seven recognized groups/collectives had emerged from the protests.

endemic failure to provide basic services such as water, electricity, waste management, public transportation, and healthcare. In his account of the political events that culminated in a movement against social injustice, Beirut-based journalist Moe Ali Nayel (August 28, 2015) pointed out that it is important to look at the street and the forces that reclaimed it to understand what is being referred to as an uprising. "Many Lebanese at this particular moment," he explains, "are breaking away from the confines of their social-sectarian boxes." At the core of this protest movement, he notes, "is a mix of anger and vengeance by jobless, impoverished, socially-alienated youth from different sects; LGBT individuals and activists who have been subject to violence and harassment by a patriarchal state; a variety of grassroots leftist movements; feminist activists and networks that have become increasingly active and visible in recent years; young mothers and fathers who struggle to provide an adequate life for their children." Feminist and queer activists and collectives, including members of Meem interviewed in chapter 3, have been involved in the #YouStink mobilization since the beginning of street demonstrations in mid-July.

What transpired through these events – and the discourse produced about them by new political collectives, the media, political parties, the government, civil society activists, intellectuals, journalists, and observers – is a prolonged episode of public contention around citizenship, as an identity, a right, and a practice, and its relationship to social identity. Protests against the corruption of the ruling class, the accumulating failures of the state, and the inefficiency of the sectarian system opened up a physical and figurative space for the resignification of the political. The groups and collectives that emerged through and crystallized around public protests are

working to unsettle the deeply-entrenched sectarian and partisan lines of contention that have defined Lebanese politics since the end of the civil war in 1990. By reclaiming the street as a site of direct confrontation with the authorities and using social media to create and circulate their counter-discourses, protestors have demonstrated a commitment to call a politically disenchanted public into being. Mobilizing around demands for social justice, beginning with the right to live in a garbage-free society, they punctured the hegemony of religious sect as a politically defining social cleavage and the master signifier of national difference. Through their signs, chants, and online posts, they addressed "the poor," "the sick," "the disenfranchised," "the repressed," "the unemployed," "the women," "the immigrants," not the usual "Christian," "Druze," or "Muslim" publics interpellated by the ruling political parties. Indeed, through their manifestation in public, protestors turned the garbage crisis into a political event, the starting point of something else. Ongoing street protests and police arrests have sustained the movement which is accumulating enemies and doesn't seem to be losing its momentum yet. The garbage crisis, the invasion of public space by the waste materials of everyday life, called a counterpublic into being. #YouStink is a public declaration of the failure of the state, hashtagged to maximize networking, association, and visibility. In Arabic, *tol'et rihetkom* captures the accumulative nature of stench, its eruption into the sensory field. A key symbolic and metaphorical contribution of #YouStink, as Marwan Kraidy (2016) has argued, "was to make this political rot hyper-visible by not only investing into the symbolic capital of garbage, with its tropes of putrification, odor, dirt, nausea, disease, corruption, but by insisting on a notion of citizenship grounded

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in a body politic imagined to be non-sectarian and subject to the rule of law" (p.22). While it may have fell short from securing tangible victories at the policy level, the movement articulated social justice as a cause for popular struggle, displacing sectarian attachments as the basis of collective political identification in the public sphere.[103]

Gender inequalities and injustices were visibly present in the protests, through the banners and signs demanding rights for women, such as the abolition of the exploitative sponsorship system that regulates the work of foreign domestic workers – the majority of whom are women from Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and the Philippines – and a citizenship law granting Lebanese women the right to pass their nationality to their non-Lebanese spouses and children. This was also evidenced in the movement's rhetoric and poetics, especially in the insistence on the use of the feminine – along with the de facto masculine form – in the Arabic social media posts of the different groups that have organized around the #YouStink campaign. Like most languages, Arabic is a highly gendered one where the masculine form stands in for the universal subject. The use of feminine pronouns and suffixes was therefore a deliberate move to interrupt and question the masculinist hegemony over language and political discourse. In addition, images of female protestors and journalists, on the frontlines of confrontations with anti-riot police, were widely circulated in the media, igniting commentaries on the status of women in public life. In a column in the pan-Arab daily *Asharq al-Awsat*, Lebanese journalist Diana Mukalled (August 31, 2015) noted

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[103] Posts and discussions about Lebanese racism against Syrian and Palestinian refugees as well as critiques of classist attitudes among progressive civil society activists were prominent on social media.

that "the transformation of the images of ordinary female protestors into a subject of debate returns us to square one, to the normative view of woman and the historical stereotyping of Lebanese women." Mukalled, along with other journalists and commentators, compared the relative freedom and safety of Lebanese female protestors to the harassment, abuse, and rape that women endured in protests and public spaces in Egypt and other Arab countries since the beginning of the uprisings. In a post on the feminist website *Sawt al-Niswa* (The Voice of Women)*,* Lamia Mughnieh and Stephanie Gaspais (September 7, 2015) asks: "Is the Lebanese woman's ability to protest in the street without harassment or rape the most we can ask for? Do we measure the ability to express and make demands through the number of female bodies in the square?"

Feminist activists, journalists, and writers were quick to assume the task of commentary and documentation. *Sawt al-Niswa* is a network and community of feminist writers, activists and artists, "working towards changing their realities by building a space that critically reflects on the social, political and intellectual experiences of women living in the Arab region" (About, 2015). Members of *Sawt* have been recording testimonies from female protestors about their participation in the movement, posting audio broadcasts on their website and social media accounts and encouraging women to share their frustrations and demands in shared digital documents.[104] *Sawt's* website also featured feminist critiques of protest goals and tactics, such as the reliance on masculinist forms of political expression predicated on the performance of violence (Al-Ammar, August 28, 2015). Should resistance to

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[104]https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1OpCtLb1WLFlUDzmb4tXc2RZh3Ql5Gb7ZHfZMfQlg wnc/viewform

masculinist authority only take the form of an insurgent counter-masculinity? Are women supposed to remain silent in the face of slogans such as "we want to fuck this whore state" in order protect the movement's momentum? By recording and documenting women's experiences and perspectives about and within a political realm that systematically excludes them, *Sawt*'s media initiatives constitute one more instance of the publically-mediated disclosures compiled in this dissertation. Like the media artifacts and performances discussed in previous chapters, such testimonies interrupt the ordinariness of masculine domination by exposing its violence, silences, and exclusions. In a public post on the Facebook page of the Leftist collective "*#Al-Cha'ab Yourid*" (The People Want), one of the main groups mobilizing protests, feminist writer and activist Farah Olfat Kobeissy (September 1, 2015) shared her testimony about a transphobic incident that occurred during a demonstration at the Ministry of Environment, where protestors insulted two transgender women and forced them to leave. □"I'm writing this to say that our struggle is not on one front. It's not only against the 'system' but all the prevailing ideas that this system has created. One of them is masculinity […] □we will continue to slander every sexist chant and behavior because we want to build a real alternative to the system and new social relations" (September 1, 2015). Kobeissy's comment exposes the exclusionary normativity that endures in progressive political discourse, but it also conjures an oppositional "we" that should also struggle against the repressive force of normativity. Among the consequences of conjoint action, John Dewey (1927) notes, is the way in which it "forces men to reflect upon the connection itself; it makes it an object of attention and interest. Each acts, in so far as the connection is known, in

view of the connection" (p.24). Kobeissy's intervention, in this digitally-mediated space of protest, constitutes such a reflexive moment where the premises of connection and its exclusionary logics are interrogated, but where this connection is re-affirmed in her collective "we." The expulsion of trans bodies from the public space of politics does not go unnoticed. It is witnessed first-hand and re-interpreted as a discriminatory move, and in the process of its circulation as event, articulates a sense of collectivity not premised on the erasure of difference and a display of sameness, but borne from a joint recognition of the bodies that matter and those that don't, and an insistence on social marginality as a subject-position that takes on many forms. Digital media technologies and social networking sites allow the cultivation of self-reflexive counterpublics where the marginal status of women and sexual minorities, as subjects and citizens, is articulated as a political issue among digitally-networked protestors and the audiences they address.[105] In their introduction to a special issue on the relationship between social media practices and popular contestation, Thomas Poell and Jose Van Dijck (2015) argue that public space is not readily available for today's citizens and activists, but is "conquered and constructed through processes of emotional connectivity" (p.226). An important challenge for researchers of contemporary activism, they explain, "is to trace the dynamic exchange between social media communication and street protests, an exchange that very much revolves around the channeling of emotions" (p.228). Thus, the authors speak of "flashes of collectivity" which "do not provide the basis for the construction of stable

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[105] A group of protestors organized an open forum in Riad al-Solh Square in downtown Beirut, the main location of protests, on August 28, 2015, about the relationship between women's rights and anti-government protests as well as the relationship of homosexuality and gender to the sectarian system.

social movements, but they do keep people emotionally invested in the protest event" (p.228). "It is through the mass sharing of emotions that (temporary) public spaces are constructed" (p. 228). Poell and Van Dijck describe these spaces as "fundamentally transient" (p.228).

Protests activated existing yet amorphous networks of civil society activists, journalists, union leaders, intellectuals, lawyers, and students who took to the internet in their address to an imagined public. Members of that public recognized themselves in digital iterations of a collective "we." In a Facebook post published on her personal page on the morning of August 29, 2015, Wadad Halwani, founder of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared, addressed her missing husband, abducted from their home in Beirut in 1982. "Good morning Adnan. Beirut is becoming beautiful again. Do you want to return?" As a counterpublic that emerged and grew in response to the state's failure to address the enduring injuries of the civil war, the Committee – under the leadership of Halwani – had sustained the memory of the war, now a distant event, into the present by relentlessly exposing the state's ongoing failure to address the crimes that resulted in the disappearance of 17,000 persons and the political demands of those who survive them. Halwani's intimate public address to her disappeared husband summons a dormant counterpublic by insisting on its connection to a nascent one. Having participated in the largest #YouStink demonstration on August 28 as a representative of the Committee, Halwani shared her feeling of political optimism with her followers, asking them and herself whether the struggle needed to be revived. Halwani's post, and the intimacy of the singular "you" in its address, is yet another instance of the

politicization of personal trauma that has guided the Committee's work since its establishment. In its singularity, the "you" – the missing person – functions as a point of access to a shared collectivity that feels and acts together, that recognizes the structural nature of personal injustice and therefore the need to de-privatize it. Halwani, too, was imagining a "we" upon which she can project her personal loss, always with the purpose of politicizing it. Since its establishment in November 1982, when hundreds of women responded to Halwani's radio call for a street meeting that turned into a demonstration, the Committee continuously disrupted public and official silence about the war's history and legacy through popular campaigns, press conferences, newspaper op-eds, media appearances, and an open sit-in in downtown Beirut. For Halwani, the present political moment seemed ripe to galvanize the long struggle for the right to know the fate of the disappeared by integrating it with an emergent movement for social justice and political accountability.

"The decisive element in every situation," writes Gramsci (1971), "is the permanently organized and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favorable (and it can be favorable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit)" (p.185). For Gramsci, a situation is favorable only insofar as there is an existing force that can interpret and capitalize on conditions of favorability. This force, in its presence, transforms social reality. The vocabulary it creates, in its process of self-articulation, transforms the way in which this reality is apprehended. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, where counter-hegemonic projects can emerge as a threat to the dominant order, is about the possibility of political agency. The force of which he speaks exists only insofar as it is organized,

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and organization is a long-term, collective project. Political opportunities do not emerge from thin air. They often reveal themselves, gradually, through a slow and extended process of accumulation, and are articulated as such by social actors who transform the event into an opportunity for the resignification of the status quo. The visibility of women *as* women in this emergent protest movement is the result of social sedimentations that are irreducible to one cause. Cultural productions and the collective processes of meaning-making they put in motion are integral for the formation of a counter-hegemonic discourse. The anti-sectarian, anti-masculinist, and anti-patriarchal rhetoric in the discourse of anti-government protests in the summer of 2015, and the clear articulation of gender as a vector of oppression and domination therein, can only be understood in light of the social initiatives, campaigns, collectives, and cultural productions that have politicized gender by making the relations of domination governing it knowable as such.

Social campaigns for civil marriage, citizenship rights for women, the criminalization of domestic violence against women, and the abolition of article 534 of the Lebanese criminal code which punishes sex against nature have all come under attack from the state, the political elite, and religious institutions and met with official disdain, hostility, and indifference. Social mobilization around gender and sexual rights and personal status laws is seen as threatening to the sectarian socio-political fabric of the country. Claims for personal and civil rights are undercut by a sectarian religious discourse that has shaped the contours and cleavages of the country's public sphere since the end of the civil war in 1990. While the war was a protracted conflict involving regional and international powers – including Syria, the Palestinian

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Liberation Organization, Israel, the USSR, and the United States to name a few – it was primarily framed as a civil war between Muslims and Christians. This framing necessitated and fuelled the production of an official postwar ideology of national reconciliation and common living where religious sect constituted a primordial and socially-fracturing identitarian difference. In this context, religion bears heavily on the articulation of social difference around class and gender. The visibility of gender and sexual differences and the constraints on their expression in public is therefore structured by the moral imperatives put in place by the hegemony of religious sect as a master signifier in the political, social, and cultural life of the postwar era.

While the increased social visibility of issues like domestic violence and gay rights can be attributed to civil society campaigns and initiatives, it must be understood in the context of a changing media landscape where all sorts of boundaries – between the national and the transnational, the local and the global, the private and the public – have been reconfigured. The leakage of the "private" into the public realm, and the moral crises it engenders, expose the relations of domination that constitute gender. The confessional talk show, feminist film, and queer autobiographical writing examined in each chapter are genres that formally and thematically challenge the public/private binary by making the effects of the violence it conceals visible. Whether they do so for sensationalist or progressive purposes, these representations reveal the structuring force of normativity in everyday life, depicting its operation in intimate, familial, and public spaces. Televisual, filmic, and digital media reflect dominant gender ideologies and the hierarchies subtending them, but they also make the experiences of the dominated and marginalized visible in the

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public domain. The discourses they generate are socially and politically meaningful insofar as they create counterpublic moments where subjects imagine and rehearse alternative life forms and identities, ones whose effects outlive the ephemerality of mediation.

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