

Building Theory Across Struggles: Queer Feminist Thought from Lebanon

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Dima E. Kaedbey

Department of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies

The Ohio State University

2014

Dissertation Committee

Guisela Latorre, Advisor

Christine (Cricket) Keating

Theresa Delgadillo

Nadine Naber

Copyright by  
Dima E. Kaedbey  
2014

## Abstract

This dissertation is an analysis of theoretical innovations emerging from the queer and feminist movements in Lebanon. I argue that the queer feminist thought that is being produced in Lebanon today is rooted in histories of women's participation in local immigrant, labor, and anti-colonial struggles. Whereas these movements are often seen as separate, I put forth an indigenous queer feminist methodology that challenges the compartmentalization of movements. I also argue that queer feminism in Lebanon is breaking away from linear concepts of time and providing a cyclical temporality to show the interrelatedness of historical and current events. Finally, I examine the different ways that self-identified queer feminists reflect on the tensions and divisions within their communities. The process through which these local tensions are highlighted are critical of power structures within activist spaces, but they also aim at creating transnational connections with women of color in the U.S and with feminists of the Global South.

## Acknowledgements

I do not take for granted my luck in having a wonderful and supportive committee, who were always there to listen, to give advice and feedback, and to write letters of recommendation. I could not have wished for a better adviser than Dr. Guisela Latorre, whose diligence and compassion pushed me to do my best in the shortest time. Guisela has survived all those bad first and second drafts of all my chapters, as she kept (kindly) pushing me forward. Dr. Cricket (Christine) Keating always gives great critical feedback, and every meeting with her has been a great conversation about queer anti-racist transnational feminism. I would like to thank Dr. Theresa Delgadillo for taking the time to read more than one draft of selected chapters and for always having the most insightful feedback that challenged me to strengthen my arguments. And of course, Dr. Nadine Naber, who has always been supportive in all the ways I asked her to support me. And I will always be grateful for one memorable telephone meeting where Nadine walked me through the ways to strengthen my analysis.

I am thankful for my parents, Leila and Ezzat Kaedbey, My 3amtu, Najat, my brothers Basil and Jad. And for Basil and Reem for giving me the new role of a 3amtu. Spending the summer of 2013 writing at home in Lebanon reminded me how amazing my family is in giving me the space and the sustained support to be the solitary intellectual.

A huge thank you goes to my chosen family and friends as well. Sara Abu Ghazal has been a sister, an intellectual partner, a teacher, and a friend throughout the years; her love and her faith in me have been the rock that I can always lean on. I am grateful to have found Faouziea A. AlChahal, whose brilliance and kindness makes her the bestest friend anyone could have. There are multiple places in this dissertation that acknowledge Samia Abou-Samra as someone who opened new ways of thinking for me about indigenous and U.S women of color politics. Samia was also always there to listen during some difficult days of grad school. The conversations I've had with my colleague and friend Brena (Yu Chen) Tai have always been stimulating and have helped me develop my own arguments. And I thank Ally Day for her friendship, and for reading and commenting on chapter four. Leila Ben-Nasr's friendship and company during our Bloody Mary Fridays have helped me get through the fatigue of the final year.

In the final days of writing, wonderful people helped with the format guidelines. Mirna Haidar for offering; Rania Abou Samra, for her help. Nia Witherspoon for putting me in touch with people. I especially want to thank Emily Morehouse, who saved the day with her formatting magic.

A nudge of deep gratitude goes towards women of color and indigenous feminists in the U.S who have been shaping my own politics for the past few years. Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, Andrea Smith and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence are a few of those names. I also owe much thanks to the activists and thinkers that I have included here, and many more whose name does not appear in this work. To Dajij, Pazuzu, Zee, Lynn, Nadz, Chant, Rasha and all the feminists who

developed theories about their lives and about queer feminism in Lebanon. Your critical thinking has deeply influenced me and this dissertation would not have been possible without you.

## Vita

- May 2001 ..... B.A in English Language, American  
University of Beirut (Beirut, Lebanon)
- May 2007 ..... Jehane Majzoub Excellency Award in  
English Literature (Beirut, Lebanon)
- May 2007 ..... M.A in English Literature, American  
University of Beirut (Beirut, Lebanon)
- 2009-2014 ..... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of  
Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies,  
The Ohio State University (Columbus, OH)

## Publications

“Is Brown the Color of Sexuality?” In *Politics, Culture and the Lebanese Diaspora*. Ed.  
Paul Tabar and Jennifer Skulte-Ouassis. New Castle: Cambridge Scholars, 2001. 336-  
347.

## Fields of Study

Major Field: Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies  
Specializations: Transnational Feminisms; Arab Feminisms; Chicana Feminism and  
Indigenous Feminism

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>Vita</i> .....	<i>vi</i>
<i>Table Of Contents</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
Chapter One: An Introduction To Queer Feminist Thought.....	1
Queer Methodologies .....	5
Queer Feminism From Lebanon .....	13
Knowledge Production In Activist Spaces.....	15
Women’s Rights Activism In Lebanon: The Unfollowed Leaders.....	28
The Iconization Of The Women's Movement.....	44
Where Do Sexuality And Queer Activism Fit Into The Story Of The Women’s Movement?.....	49
Chapters Breakdown .....	55
Chapter Two: Presenting Our Feminist Past: Women’s Labor Histories In Queer Feminist Thought.....	59
Serpentine Time .....	64
Presenting The Past With Bread And Sweat: Feminism In Workers’ Struggles .....	70
Chapter Three: Needles, Pens And Guns: Interweaving Histories Of Women's Resistance In Lebanon .....	91
A Vignette .....	93
Confined Resistance?: Women In Prisons .....	101
Women Fighting For Peace.....	117
Chapter Four: Queering Each Other Is A Reaching For Each Other: Rethinking The Position Of Migrant Workers In Queer Feminist Thought.....	129
The Compartmentalization Of Domestic Migrant Workers.....	133
A Transnational Lens.....	135
The Sponsorship/Kafala System.....	143
Migrant Women's Resistance .....	147



Feminist Tools And Tactics .....	152
Queering Migrant Workers .....	161
Feminist Travels: Mundane Heroines At Home And Abroad.....	175
Chapter Five: Fissures, Tensions And Interconnections Within Queer Feminist Thought .....	187
Methodologies Of Introspection.....	191
Queer Feminist Thought Produces 'Mail In A Hurry' .....	197
The Transnationality Of Looking In, Or Seeking Surrogate Foremothers .....	210
Epilogue .....	221
Bibliography .....	226

## Chapter One: An Introduction to Queer Feminist Thought

نحن الساعون الى التحرر الجندي والجنساني لا نسعى اليه بمعزل عن تحرر سياسي واجتماعي واقتصادي " شامل. لا نقبل ولن نقبل تحررنا ملقى علينا "متجزىء مفتتاً"

Sunila Sunbula, "Sajjil, Ana Arabiyya."

The above quote, from an activist writing in *Bekhsoos* reads, "We who are seeking gender and sexual liberation do not seek it in isolation of a comprehensive political, social and economic liberation. We don't accept, and we will never accept our liberation to be cast upon us in fragments and crumbs." This quote, in its insistence on gender and sexual liberation in context of comprehensive and collective liberation, represents what this study is seeking to do. *Bekhsoos*, where this quote appears, is an online queer feminist space, launched by Meem, a community of queer women and transgender people in Lebanon. *Bekhsoos*'s repertoire includes raw emotional pieces by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBT) people on love, heartbreak, family and friends, information, speeches by members of Meem that were presented in international conferences, as well as different pieces on queer politics. It is the latter aspect of online spaces and activist print publications, that is, the politicized face of queerness, that I explore here.

Though I have started with Meem and its magazine, *Bekhsoos*, this research

recognizes that queer feminist thought from Lebanon is not the property of any one organization. Rather, it can be seen at work in different individuals and groups, sometimes co-existing or in tension with other paradigms and thoughts—such as reformist feminist thought. Therefore, this study does not explore specific organizations per se, but it does rely on online spaces that are, or have once been affiliated with specific groups. As *Bekhsoos* is affiliated with Meem, *Sawt al Niswa*, for a period of time, was a project within Beirut’s feminist collective, Nasawiya, and then became its own independent endeavor. *Sawt Al Niswa* is a feminist online space run by feminists in Lebanon seeking to produce and highlight an Arab feminist discourse that “critically reflects on the social, political and intellectual experiences of women living in the Arab region.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the larger project that examines the history of this queer feminist anti-racist transnational thought and its contemporary manifestation in queer feminist organizing today, this introductory chapter focuses on my methodology, highlights activist/academic debates, and compares queer feminism to mainstream women's rights organizing. Firstly, I introduce the multiple methodologies that I am relying on throughout the dissertation. These queer methodologies aim at challenging heteronormative narratives, seeing the tensions even within queer writings, and bringing together struggles, communities and time periods that are considered separate. Through this chapter, I also situate my work within a literature that tackles the topic of academic/activist hierarchies, examining the

---

<sup>1</sup> “About Us.” *Sawt al Niswa*. [http://www.sawtalniswa.com/?page\\_id=19](http://www.sawtalniswa.com/?page_id=19). n.d. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

challenges of knowledge productions in both academic and activist settings. Much of the literature that I will present is by people of color scholars in North America who also identify as activists, and who are thinking of these issues transnationally. I show how similar tensions and hierarchies are at work in activist spaces in Lebanon as well.

This chapter also argues that in order to better understand the queer feminist thought and organizing that is at work in Lebanon today, we have to put it in conversation with the mainstream women's rights narrative. The latter movement, from the early twentieth century to contemporary times, approached activism mainly through philanthropy and lobbying, and I will show how it is constrained by a politics of respectability. Prominent feminist scholars such as Suad Joseph, as I will later show, rely on the patron/client relationship to analyze women's rights groups. The service oriented work of these groups reflects the clientelism in political relations (Joseph 57). I also find that the iconizing of movements, or the reduction of the movement to a few exceptional figures, has been another key characteristic of the women's rights movement. Moreover, because of the politics and strategies of these women's rights groups, women's sexuality has not been a topic that has been taken on. Queer feminist organizing as it exists today, on the other hand, is characterized by its inclusion of sexuality and different gender expressions, its interweaving of struggles, and its favoring of the margins (at least conceptually) over respectability politics.

This dissertation makes use of both activist productions and scholarly disciplines in order to break hierarchized binaries between academia and activism in creating knowledge. It is the product of and participates in Arab feminist and gender studies. But it is equally indebted to, and makes use of, radical women of color and indigenous feminist theorizing on intersectionality, interconnectivity and queerness. In traversing boundaries of communities and national borders, this is also a study that contributes to transnational feminism and queer studies. Yet it is first and foremost, a continuing conversation with communities and individuals who are taking part in a queer feminist movement in Lebanon, and in Arab countries generally. One question at the heart of this study is: What has feminist and queer organizing in Lebanon produced in terms of a radical thought that tackles gender and sexuality, but does not further marginalize groups that are already marginalized? What kind of history can this feminist thought narrate that is different from mainstream history, and even a mainstream feminist history?

The answer comes in an analytical feminist lens that is intersectional and interconnecting, transnational, and grounded in its multiple histories of oppression, struggle and resistance, some of which do not originate in Lebanon. In later chapters, for example, I argue that immigrants in Lebanon use tactics of struggle and survival that are rooted in their home countries, and in older ways of community support that travel with them. This is the case with both Armenian women who have settled in Lebanon in the early and mid-twentieth century, as it is with domestic migrant workers who are working in Lebanese homes. It is for this reason that I do not name this

thought as Lebanese, even though it mainly falls within the man-made, colonial-drawn, nation state<sup>2</sup>.

### Queer Methodologies

This project started in my first years as a Lebanese feminist who had recently left Lebanon and its feminist spaces and landed in a women studies department in the U.S. Nostalgically, I found that I could write about little else other than the organizations to which I belonged, and which had influenced my feminist politics. Slowly, however, a study of specific organizations turned into a desire to highlight and analyze a political thought that I had observed, as well as participated in, before I came to the U.S. Though focused on the local, it was also a thought that also spoke to, because it was deeply influenced by, radical indigenous women and women of color in the U.S— many of whom identified themselves as third world women living in the first world.

The idea for this project came to me after I started reading Patricia Hill Collins' influential monograph *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). Centering the experiences of Black women, Collins assembled a Black feminist thought from multiple voices of Black women in the U.S— from different historical periods, ages, socio-economic backgrounds to analyze politics

---

<sup>2</sup>In calling it a feminist thought from Lebanon and not a Lebanese feminist thought, I have been inspired by the blog Marxist from Lebanon, in which its anonymous blogger identifies her/himself as “I am a Marxist from Lebanon. Not a Lebanese Marxist. Big Difference Folks.” *Marxist from Lebanon*. <http://marxistfromlebanon.blogspot.com/>. n.d

of self-naming, of sexuality and relationships, work, and dominant representations. Her Black Feminist thought thus came from and aimed to speak to Black women, rather than to assimilate within hegemonic academic frameworks (vii- iii). It was then that I realized that I wanted to document not the emergence of contemporary feminist and queer groups and the work that they do (that's a whole other project), but the queer feminist thought that comes from activist spaces, as well as from other spaces that do not identify as activist or feminist.

I rely on multiple methodologies throughout the different chapters to highlight the queer feminist anti-racist thought that is coming from Lebanon, but that is neither solely centered on Lebanese people, nor always contained within the country's borders. The foundation of this project is the voices of queer women and feminists who are making theories that are radical and relevant to their lives. I therefore bring together activist theorizing from online spaces about gender, sexuality, and social justice. I connect these activist productions with scholarship that focuses on gender and labor rights, gender and citizenship, and domestic migrant workers in Lebanon, in order to create an analysis of the interconnections of struggles, historically and to this day.

As I address the mainstream women's rights narrative in this chapter, the following two chapters will generate an alternative genealogy of feminism, grounded in histories of labor struggles, militant activism and anti-war organizing. To do this, a cyclical temporality is required to see how these histories are at play in present day organizing. Such cyclical, or serpentine, temporality, as I call it, are rooted in

indigenous West Asian and North American conceptions of time, and therefore aim at decolonial frameworks. A serpentine temporality also allows me to bring together struggles that are taken to be distinct from one another. I use a similar methodology of interconnecting struggles when theorizing the relationship between domestic migrant workers and queer feminism.

My methodology is heavily influenced by Jacqui Alexander's questioning of the separation of disciplines, practices, and temporalities, where physical segregation reflects psychic and disciplinary divisions (5). Therefore, Alexander urges that we seek interdependent frameworks. Such frameworks are needed “to interrupt inherited boundaries of geography, national, episteme and identity” that have been entrenched through the state, and the hierarchical divisions that have been the legacy of colonialism (281). This project also seeks to show that is through an interweaving of struggles, communities and spaces, and through recognizing history in present organizing that we can build an alternative discourse and theories for change.

Combining scholarship, human rights documents and activist writings allows me to challenge the compartmentalization of different movements. Close readings of activist texts, as well as autoethnography are also methodologies that I use throughout. Close queer readings of texts, following Sandra Soto, makes visible the tensions in the process of community building. In addition, an autoethnographic strain runs through the pages, as I position myself as “insider” to the feminist spaces that I am writing about and the thought that these spaces are producing. It is through autoethnography that I reflect on the privileges of being a middle class feminist from Lebanon.



I also mobilize queer methodologies in multiple and connected ways. I do use the term “queer” as an umbrella term for those identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as for those who refuse fixed labels to explain their gender and/or sexuality. Queer can thus be an identity category, as well as “practices and orientations that could not be named” and refuse fixed labels (Georgis *Better Story* 117). These are anti-assimilationsist (activist) uses of queer that do not want to conform to sexual norms. Queer methodologies also shift in every chapter, as I explain the different uses of this term, as anti-identity category, as a de-stabilizing of heteropatriarchy, and as a tool of interconnecting communities and struggles in the context that it arises.

Cathy Cohen, in the tradition of women of color such as Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective, uses a queer analysis beyond the queer/heterosexual binary. Cohen interrogates heteronormativity’s vilification of Black working class women bodies, even though they are heterosexual, because of their race and class (440-2). Cohen’s work, and that of queer radical women of color, has inspired this dissertation, and Cohen’s analysis becomes particularly productive in my reading of migrant women’s position outside the Lebanese norms of citizenship, class and race.

As queer studies moves away from subjects who identify as queer (Warner xxvi; Smith 44), the work of queer theory becomes about “interrogating... normalizing logics” (Smith 44). Queer of color and queer indigenous theories explain that queer studies’ ability to move beyond identity categories into “subjectless critique” also reproduces a white middle class subject (Smith 44; Muñoz; Gumbs 50-1). Both white

supremacy and settler colonialism are reemphasized when queer theory does not interrogate these normalizing logics (Smith 45). Part of the work that queer of color theory does is trace a genealogy that does not assume the people of color are late-comers to queer theory (Soto 4; Johnson 124). Queer of color critique is therefore not only related to racialized sexualities (Soto 8-9), but to U.S liberal capitalism (Ferguson 2-4) and U.S multiculturalism (Puar 24-32).

It is also queer people of color critique that guides José Estban Muñoz's into his theory of disidentification. Muñoz challenges the political binary of identifying/counter-identifying, assimilating and counter-assimilating. While “indebted to anti-assimilationist thought,” he is also attentive to the constant negotiation with power that makes a fixed oppositional stance impossible (18-9).<sup>3</sup> Muñoz's queer methodology also participates in bringing together anti-assimilation with everyday, or mundane resistance (11-2).

Following Cohen, Muñoz and the literary and organizing legacies of Black women in the U.S, Alexis Pauline Gumbs' reads queer mothering of Black women as acts of collective and individual survival and self-love in the face of dehumanization. Importantly too, Gumbs rejects queer theories' dismissal of the maternal, especially the criminalization of Black mothers and Black mothering. Instead, she puts forth theories of Black queer mothering built into the works of Black writers, poets and activists, such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan. This methodology becomes

---

<sup>3</sup>This is also similar to Chela Sandoval's theorizing of women of color's differential consciousness (Muñoz 7). See Chela Sandoval. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.

particularly productive in my discussion of the resistance of migrant workers in Lebanon.

In addition, relevant to my theorizing of a non-linear temporality has been queer theories engagement with the issue of temporality. Jack Halberstam writes that “[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined” outside of normative experiences with community, family and reproduction (2). A queer temporality challenges the linearity of marriage and reproduction that requires stability and respectability (4-5). In the following chapter, when I look at the position of women laboring in factories in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mount Lebanon as queer, I see both conceptions of time and gender norms being challenged. Of course, as Gumbs and others show, queer futurities, or imagining of different queerer futures, have always been a facet of Black women's survival in the U.S. (Gumbs 51).

Elizabeth Freeman also challenges a linear mode of thinking and asks that we examine “relations across time and between times” (quoted in Puar xxi). Jasbir Puar makes use of Freeman to explain how different histories are at play in any given act, or discourse (xxii). These are frameworks that are important for my own thinking about temporality. The different histories that I ground queer feminism in reveal a completely different picture of movements and struggles than one rooted only in a mainstream women’s rights movement.

For Puar, queer is “not an identity nor an anti-identity;” instead, she theorizes “queer” as an assemblage that explores what certain bodies signify, and the work that

they do” (204). In my own queer reading, it is the position of certain groups, because of their gender, sexuality, class, and/or ethnicity, that I read as queer. Young women in factories become signifiers of a crisis in patriarchy, as Akram Fouad Khater explains (332); the gender presentation and sometimes the sexuality of militant Palestinian and Lebanese women also signified a crisis in heteropatriarchy. Migrant women's positions also lead me to see their resistance as queer too, because their opposition also disrupts hegemonic representations of ostracized communities. Therefore, while this dissertation does examine the politics of self-identified queers, particularly in the final chapter, I am mostly interested in social positions of marginalization, which as Gayatri Gopinath maintains “may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian” (11).

Soto, who refuses to take for granted the queerness of texts that self-identify as queer remains an important foundation for my queer methodology in the final chapter. Her work builds on queer theory's disruption of binaries through the contradictions and excesses of normative structures and texts, but she also relies on the queer theories centered on people color to show the “heteronormative conditioning” (49) as well as the racial (il)logics (37) of texts. Similar to Jean Scott's critique of experience-as-evidence, Soto's queer methodology looks for the tensions and gaps within the texts, in order to learn from them (17). In chapter five, in a close reading of *Bareed Mista3jil*, the anthology of writings by queer women and transpeople in Lebanon, I find that the anthology does more than make visible the stories of self-identified queers. Instead, I argue that it is creating a process of community building where it is

deliberately and not-so-deliberately illuminating the tensions and contradictions in order to challenge stereotypical misrepresentations of “a typical Lebanese lesbian” (*Bareed* 8). These tensions in *Bareed Mista3jil* gather a new sense of urgency when I put them beside texts by feminists and queers, written at a later stage, to show the unraveling of power dynamics within activist communities.

On the other hand, when queer studies engage with Middle Eastern studies, it seems to be in constant conversation with Joseph Massad (Amar and El Shakry 332). Massad critiques a “universal schema of sexuality” that creates categories such as queer, gay and lesbian, “where they do not exist” (qtd. in Georgis *The Better Story* 118). While Dina Georgis agrees with Massad, she also disagrees with his binary of “East” and “West” (119) and does not take seriously how colonization “changes people” and alters subjectivities. Still, in the margins of post-colonial geographies, in practices, desires and languages that betray and express what has been repressed are the sites for post-colonial queer investigations (120). As my final chapter is a conversation with Georgis, I also pay attention to the language and ideas that fall somewhere between “East” and “West” and challenges this binary at the same time.

The mission of queer studies of the Middle East, as Paul Amar and Omnia El Shakry explain, also disrupts militarized normativities. Through Puar and Achille Mbembe, queer theory from the Middle East examines and challenges normative and repressive regimes of gender and sexuality (333). Queer frameworks are also mobilized as a “transdisciplinary reading practice” that finds the gaps and points of instability in identities and practices, in history, literature and legal texts (334). My queer

methodologies do not focus on canonical texts and discourse to disrupt their normative logics; instead, I borrow the aspects that the above methodologies share, which is a desire for interconnecting struggles, and for questioning norms and centers even within marginalized spaces and texts.

### **Queer Feminism from Lebanon**

Queer feminism, on the other hand, is not a widely used concept, but I am not the first to use it either. It is a feminist framework that embraces the margins, and that tackles imperialism and racism as well as sexism.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this is a study of feminism from Lebanon that does not dismiss or erase queer(ed) subjects, experiences and points of view. Because of a long tradition of repressing gender non-conforming peoples and sexualities that fall outside of outside the (monogamous, marriage) heterosexual norm in the Lebanese women's movement, as I will later show in this introduction, I emphasize queerness in feminism by calling it a queer feminist thought. It is equally an anti-racist thought as well. In short, queer feminism in this study stands for a transnational, interconnecting, anti-racist queer feminist thought.

Furthermore, the relationship between feminism and the women's movement in Lebanon is fraught, as many women's rights activists do not identify as feminists. Similarly, many women fighting for social justice issues may also not be part of the women's movement, and may not call themselves feminists; accordingly, I refer to the

---

<sup>4</sup>See Mimi Marunicci. *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory*. London: Zed Books 2010.

mainstream movement for women's rights as a women's movement, recognizing that it does have elements of a feminist consciousness. I do use the pronoun "we" and "our" sometimes, to refer to a contemporary self-identified feminist consciousness in Lebanon. Yet this "we" is always fractured, because the approach I take here is about inclusivity and interconnections—or by the possibility that many communities that I do want to include here do not want to identify as feminists.

I confess that when I started this study, I had hoped to find a term, or a phrase, that can be a good translation of "queer feminism". The closest to it may be "نسوية" (نشادة), (deviant feminism); some would use the term "نسوية كويرية" (nasawiyya queeriyya), thus transliterating queer and Arabicizing it. Another way would be to accept the term "radical feminism" without having it carry the burden of the history of a particular radical feminist movement in the United States, that is, the predominantly white, sometimes separatist, movement that peaked in the 1970s. Would it suffice, then, to call a queer feminist thought a radical feminist thought "فكر نسوي راديكالي", one that is about going to the root causes of problems—as Angela Davis describes it (14), one that is welcoming of different genders and sexualities, and bodies on the margins? In the end, I had to accept that the term itself in Arabic, in Lebanese, is not my priority here. Instead, my goal in this project is not to unearth an Arabic term that would mean "queer", but to show what queerness in Lebanon entails, which is different than what queerness in Sweden, or in the U.S, is. Queerness in Lebanon is the result of norms, histories, and power relations that are specific to it, though, of course, not unique or uncommon elsewhere.

This project is also an attempt to engage with Arab feminists and—given my location in a U.S academic institution, with women of color in the U.S (which includes Arab American feminists), and with feminists working transnationally. My readers should always assume that I am not generalizing about other locations, or movements in other countries. When I am talking about another country/community, I do specify that. Moreover, while I do want feminist, anti-racist and queer issues to be clear to readers from all backgrounds, I do not spend too much time elaborating on the civil war, on the issue of sectarianism and its histories, nor on the consecutive colonization of Lebanon, from the Ottomans to the French, and later the heavy Syrian (Baathist) occupation/interference in Lebanon. These issues emerge as context for queer feminist organizing and thought in Lebanon, yet they are better documented elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Religion and ethno-sectarian belonging, however, though important factors in Lebanese politics and social relations, have not been key issues in feminist and queer activist writings. Instead, secularism, largely a reaction to sectarianism and sectarian wars, is dominant within civil society and activist groups in Lebanon. As a result, religious identities do not take any significance in my work.

### **Knowledge Production in Activist Spaces**

*“What is worth knowing? Who are our teachers? Where do they reside within our communities? How do we find and support them? How does one acquire*

---

<sup>5</sup> See Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press, 2007. Makdisi, Jean Said. *Teta, Mother and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women*. London: Saqi, 2005. Ussama Makdisi’s *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley: U of Californian P, 2000.



*knowledge? How does knowing increase within our communities? How do we best learn? And of course, for what purpose, what result, do we educate ourselves and our children?"*

*-Cherrie Moraga, Loving 188*

In this section, I examine the tensions and challenges of producing knowledge in academic settings, but I also show that there are hierarchies operating in activist spaces as well that may reflect similar challenges. Activists who are highlighting power dynamics in activist communities, which is an issue I will pursue further in the final chapter, allow us to see that both activist and academic spaces are interconnected. These dynamics challenge any polarizing of the issue. Moreover, my methodology, which connects activist theorizing with academic scholarship show that both spaces are producing knowledge that is critical and reflective of community needs (Alexander *Pedagogies* 112-6).

Hegemonic knowledge is built on the repression of alternative epistemologies, representations and truths—producing what Charles Mills calls an “epistemology of ignorance.” It is the knowledge that is propagated by those in power, but it is also sustained through the “structured blindness” of people who benefit from their ignorance of the repression of groups and their points of view (18-21). This is one aspect of the work of transformative social justice movements: to challenge the “common sense” of dominant knowledges and perspectives by showing how they are normalized (Santos 21), and to push for a more radical lens and body of knowledge. Thus, “cognitive liberation” remains a foundation of resistance movements (McAdam 48), and many social movements realize that it is a different epistemology of

knowledge that they need to offer, and not simply different information (Santos; Rojas 200-2). My work, on queer feminist thought from Lebanon that I am putting together in an academic context, engages with these theories on activism and academia.

The literature that I discuss here also brings together activist and academic theories in order to amplify social movements. But they also present the challenges of writing about activism in academic contexts. In “Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production,” activist scholars Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor explain that “the intellectual work that takes place in movements frequently goes unseen,” and the process by which this work is produced also remains invisible (1). While recognizing the limitations of reifying an academic/activist binary, Choudry and Kapoor—who are situated between Canada, India and Aotearoa/New Zealand and theorize from a transnational perspective-- call attention to the demands of academic institutions. Academia, they argue, requires originality and individual authorship, which “contributes to a tendency to fail to acknowledge the intellectual contributions that have been forged outside of academe, often incrementally, collectively, and informally” (2).<sup>6</sup> That is, it is easier to cite published academic works that we are in conversation with than ideas that we have participated in nurturing in informal collective settings. I recognize the importance of

---

<sup>6</sup> See also *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Ed. Charles Hale. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008. *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics and Social Movement Scholarship*. Ed. David Croteau William Hoynes and Charlotte Ryan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. *Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community*. Ed. Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello. NY: Monthly Review Press, 1990. On transnational activist/academic collaborations, see *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Ed. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar. NY: U of New York P, 2010.

informal learning because it has been paramount in shaping my own thinking about queer and feminist politics. Integrating the theories of activists, who I also consider to be intellectuals who have influenced this dissertation, is my way of reflecting on the importance of activist thought in shaping theories about social justice.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an indigenous scholar in New Zealand, pays particular attention to scholars undertaking “insider research” and the need for respect and reflexivity about their own “taken-for-granted views.” Smith argues for interrogating the relationships between the researcher and the community instead of taking them for granted (139). Thus, she suggests “developing trust, sharing information, strategies, advice, contacts and ideas” and consistently reporting back to the community (15). Concerns of confidentiality are also paramount, where scholars with “insider knowledge” may find themselves torn over issues of confidentiality (Naples 11-2; L. Smith 139). The requirement of individualized intellectual work, for Smith, is negotiated through a long deliberate process of sharing with communities, one that does not end at the end of the project (15).

As for my own process of writing about activists and activist spaces that I belong (or have belonged) to, I confess that I have spent the entire dissertation period from its conception to its conclusion torn and hesitant about writing it. A large part of it was that I was working on it from inside a U.S academic institution. This project was going to be yet another intellectual production created in the “West” about an “other”. It was yet another work written in English, reemphasizing English as the primary language of intellectual productions about the entire world. Moreover, the geographical

distance, the individuality of producing a monograph about collectives and coalitions, and getting credit for ideas, thoughts and politics that has been produced in a collective context were all tensions with which I was living.

Writing about Western hegemony over knowledges produced by indigenous peoples, Smith declares that the “globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge” (63). Academia (in the U.S, but higher education in Lebanon too) thus establishes networks of legitimate knowledge, scholars, presses and books, and legitimate ways of transmitting knowledge. The need for academic legitimacy leads not only to a hierarchy of knowledge and knowledge-holders, but also to a censorship of alternative epistemologies, peoples and practices (11-12).

Additionally, as Nancy Naples says, I carried the “fear that taking a critical stance would be read as betrayal,” and as washing dirty laundry (12). Part of my anxieties was about the space in which I was producing this work. Would a dissertation written from afar be the right space to be critical, instead of voicing my critiques directly, or through the usual Lebanese feminist online spaces? And while I have shown parts of this work to a few activists, especially those who I reference here, I recognize that has not been enough in terms of sharing information and reporting back, as Smith suggests.

There are other challenges about being an “insider” writing about activist issues in an academic context that I have encountered. One main point of anxiety has been that dissertation chapters are too long, and activists have their lives to live, they have

their activism, their jobs, their families; we have time conflicts, and therefore activists are not always able to read and comment on the drafts. As an “insider” to feminist communities, too, as time goes by, we have conflicts, we drift apart, and the people who first inspired this work may no longer be part of my life. And thus while I naively imagined always referring back to the people whose voices are foundational to this work, I realized that this is easier dreamed than done. I was also encouraged at every step of the way to embrace these tensions and doubts, and incorporate them into the project. The bridging of activism and theoretical work is, after all, what this project is about, as it is about tensions, contradictions, and interconnections. My personal voice is thus present throughout this work, and I make my biases evident from the beginning.

The primary bias is being an “insider” who has participated in many of the spaces that I write about here; I know, or am friends with, many of the activists in Lebanon whose work I rely on.<sup>7</sup> I make clear that as someone who has been an editor to online spaces mentioned here, including *Sawt al Niswa* with whom I am still affiliated. Hence, I am not only aware of what is being produced, but I also act as a gatekeeper of ideas. In addition, having participated in feminist spaces, it is my politics that this dissertation is reflecting. The politics, of course, are not mine alone; they have been forged in a collective. My biases are also in what I take to be queer feminist anti-racist transnational thought, and it is not meant to be representational; my aim is to highlight what I see as an important thought in the midst of other ideologies

---

<sup>7</sup> See also Nadine Naber's discussion of accountability and being an insider in Arab American spaces that she critically examine in *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism*. NY: New York UP, 2012. 20-4.

and feminist frameworks operating in these spaces. Importantly for me too, this is the thought that has been influenced by, and is in conversation with, radical queer women of color theories from North America.

Activist spaces too are entrenched with their own hierarchies, and these are connected to the larger socio-economic structures, as well as to academic influence. In other words, the position of some activists as leaders may depend on their academic access, and on critical frameworks and languages that they have learned in academic contexts. Hierarchies may also be based on (unspoken) middle class values of “proper” ways of meeting, talking, and organizing. Thus, the “tensions over whose voices are heard” are as real in activist spaces as they are in academic spaces (Choudry and Kapoor 2). To put it more directly, the voices that are listened to are likely to be of someone middle class and who has a university degree.

Moreover, the voices I include here have already claimed some space in certain activist circles, while many other voices and lives have not been sufficiently documented. In short, the process of learning and of producing and disseminating knowledge is not inherently egalitarian. While learning in activist communities can be a powerful tool of non-hierarchical knowledge production, it can also fall within entrenched power distribution, and thus reifies the status quo (Choudry and Kapoor 3).

Despite these challenges, one of the most transformative aspect of activism remains its pedagogical work. Activist spaces, in other words, are places to produce knowledge, and to learn (Kelley 8). Social justice movements commonly have an

element of educating about histories of social change (Kelley 8). Writing in a U.S context, Nancy Naples talks about women activists who “ensure the continuity of community activism by educating others in their communities about successful fights for social change and economic justice” (2).

The same can be said of queer feminism in Lebanon, and in the following chapters, I show how the past is being invoked by activists, as older movements for socio-economic justice are being interlinked with contemporary ones. Additionally, when I turn to theorize queer feminist thought’s relationship to migrant workers, I push the desire to learn about “othered” subjects further when I ask that feminists and queers travel metaphorically to Sri Lanka, in order to further de-center a middle class Lebanese subject. Learning about women’s resistance in Sri Lanka also allows us to better understand Sri Lankan women’s resistance in Lebanon. I therefore expand on activist pedagogies of interlinking struggles and thinking transnationally to bring together communities, and to bridge activist and academic productions.

I have been arguing here that writing about activism and social justice issues in academic settings produces a set of challenges, particularly for those who are “insiders” to movements. Yet I also want to show that grassroots communities and activist spaces that produce critical knowledge and important theoretical frameworks are also complicit in power dynamics as much as academic networks are. These hierarchies are investigated amongst activists and scholars in both Lebanon and North America, making clear similar patterns at play. These shared experiences across geographies allows me to move between them more easily as I show the ways

activists self-reflect on hierarchies within their communities. Many of these patterns are connected to a crisis mode in society as well as in activist spaces (Naber 11-2), to racism, classism and sexism in these spaces, and to organizational and economic disparities.

In Lebanon, given that the history and continuing reality is one of crisis and crisis- management, where security and other political/sectarian tensions claim higher priority, women and queers struggle to gain a central space in mainstream consciousness. Writing about the delayed justice for women, immigrants and queers, queer activist Lynn describes it as being in a constant “waiting room,” where one is waiting for crisis after crisis to end, in order to be taken into consideration. These “waiting rooms... are getting more and more crowded” as its occupants wait for the “more urgent national priorities at hand” like the thousands of Palestinians waiting for social justice in Lebanon and liberation of their land, immigrants workers waiting for appropriate labor laws, and queer people waiting for legal justice (“Waiting Room”). Of course Lynn is being ironic here about the need to wait; she is emphasizing that one cannot wait, and that feminists and activists throughout Arab history have not waited to be heard by those in power. On the other hand, living, theorizing and organizing in the context of crisis also makes feminism less relevant if it does not address its economic, political and social environments.

Yet it is also important to remember that a crisis mode is operating in many activist spaces as well. In *Undoing Border Imperialism*, community educator Harsha Walia calls for more reflexivity in movement building—as she writes about the North



American context (Turtle Island). Walia argues that absent among activists is a culture of analyzing the movements to which they belong. The reasons that activists do not push for widespread self- reflexivity and analysis, she believes, are:

the crisis-oriented nature of community organizing, skepticism about intellectualism stemming from a misplaced conflation with the elitism and inaccessibility of academic institutions, and our own personal fears and defensiveness about unsettling existing movement practices in which we are invested or implicated (173-4).

In other words, Walia is pointing out the continuous sense of urgency that activists operate in, the binaries of academic and activist knowledge production that may lead to a dismissal of intellectual work, and the fear that individual and collective accountability can delegitimize and weaken the activist, or the movement as a whole.

In Lebanon, when people are living in a fear of national security, bombs, sectarian tensions, and survival, it is alleged that “women’s issues” are secondary. Activism, which constitutes constantly highlighting and fighting discriminations and oppressions from the “outside,” uses it as a justification for lack of accountability over internal hierarchies and oppressive practices. The fear of weakening the movement, as Walia notes, can lead to self- censorship as well as censoring from one’s activist peers. In Lebanon, too, in addition to existing power dynamics between activists (Abu Ghazal), there is also lack of class and racial/ethnic intermixing that leads to limited knowledge outside of one’s group. Queer activist Ghoulama argues that class, race and gender divide the movement, and that “we as sexual rights activists are not the mercy of the law.” Ghoulama explains that class privilege protects activists from state persecution based on their sexuality, for “how many of us have sex in their cars because they do not have the means to lead a financially independent life?”(*Bekhsoos*).

Ghoulama is pointing to what may be described as a “a politics of respectability,” where activists do not include working class queer people, and transgender people who are doing sex work, because they want to be accepted in middle class mainstream eyes.<sup>8</sup> This privilege also prevents people from associating with Sri Lankan and Syrian workers, for example, who may also have same sex relations (“A Debate in Tactics of Homosexual Organizing”). Ghoulama’s analysis that sees the intersections of privilege with classism and racism within queer communities also implies that knowledge production about sexuality in these communities centers a middle class perspective.

Furthermore, activist spaces are as riddled with power dynamics as much as academic spaces through organizations and funding mechanisms. Choudry and Kapoor stress the importance of questioning “NGOs and civil society” and their knowledge production. Though NGOs may market themselves as presenting “alternative accounts,” individuals and groups, such as Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, have demonstrated the limitations of organizing within non-profit organizations (6-7). Indeed, Incite! can be credited with a rich and very important critical analysis of the “non-profit industrial complex.” Adjoa Florencia Jones de Almeida argues that the structure of NGOs and the work they demand as “mini-corporations” limits imagination of alternative methods of organizing, while also limiting alternative ways of living that they may otherwise explore (187).

---

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Faouziea Al Chahal for drawing my attention to the concept of respectability politics. See Dwight McBride’s essay “Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin and Black Queer Studies” for a critique of heterosexist politics of respectability in African American literature.

In Palestine, for example, the analysis of scholars Islah Jad, Isis Nusair, Sophie Richter Devroe, and Zeina Zaatari demonstrate the way NGOs depoliticize and weaken a national liberation movement, turning it into single issue causes. NGOs working with Palestinian women use a “conflict resolution” framework that assumes equal relationships of power between groups in conflict, when many Palestinian feminists are committed to analyzing the intersection of colonization and gender relations (Richter-Devroe 158; Zaatari qtd. in A. Smith “NGOization” 176).

In the midst of these challenges to efforts of collective knowledge production about social issues, one approach I find productive is what Cricket Keating terms “coalitional-building consciousness.” This coalitional form of knowledge production differs from the operation of both academic institutions and NGOs, though it can take place in both spaces, and outside them. Coalitional-building consciousness legitimates different forms of knowledge and constitutes a “self and collective education toward coalition.” It is a “radical democratic [learning] practice” (86-7) that challenges multiple sites of oppression and practices a way of learning where people and issues are situated within a historical and geographical context, and where differences are not glossed over (91-2).

I end however, with more challenges inside activist spaces, because these are issues I take up again in the final chapter. It is in midst of tensions within communities, as I will show in chapter five, that alternative knowledges and perspectives are outlined and explained. One example includes the critique of the monolithic view of sexual minorities, for example. Some points of tension, however,

prove to be more destructive. Elizabeth Martinez, a veteran Chicana anti-imperialist and anti-racist activist, urges feminists to be mindful of the “spiritual violence that women working together for social justice sometimes inflict on one another.” As she elaborates, “[t]o deprecate or humiliate a sister out of competitiveness, or out of habits of domination that accompany leadership skills and intelligence” cuts through individuals and collectives alike (192-5). Such patterns have been at work in queer feminist spaces.

The direct perpetrators, the silent witnesses, those who dismiss the emotional/verbal/ spiritual abuse, and those who are in denial about what is happening, all collaborate with destructive patterns within activist communities. And oftentimes, with such violence, it is those who are the most privileged who survive. Consequently, the perspectives of the privileged activists are also most likely to be documented within the movement. And therefore, looking for the undocumented voices would necessitate searching in personal blogs, in anonymous submissions on feminist and queer spaces, for example. These are lessons I have learned through experience and personal observations. But I also know about unhealthy patterns within communities invested in social change has also been a collective lesson, one that I’ve learned from members’ talking to me and writing about intra-communal violence.

In this section, I have discussed knowledge production in activist and academic spaces, particularly those that I have been facing as I was writing this dissertation. Following this discussion, I turn to situate the queer feminist organizing from Lebanon in relation to the more mainstream women’s right movement. I argue that by learning

the history, and the attributes of the women's movement, we can better understand what this queer feminist thought is coming from, and what it is resisting.

### **Women's Rights Activism in Lebanon: The Unfollowed Leaders**

Presenting a chronological narrative of women's rights activism, then, allows us to see a multi-sited, cyclical thought that connects with this narrative in some instances, but also moves beyond it, and is sometimes in tension with it. In the next chapters, the multiple roots of feminism in Lebanon today will become clearer as will my temporal framework that interconnects different struggle at different historical periods. Here, however, I want to show a mainstream narrative that shifts with time and that has its own internal tensions, and whose origins are sometimes contested. There are also common threads that run through this chronology. Its elitism and its focus on philanthropy and lobbying are two of its common characteristics. Women's groups are also service-oriented and are aware of themselves as not enjoying a large grassroots following. Thus, I call them unfollowed leaders here, based on self-critique by a women's rights leader. I narrate the story of mainstream feminism by relying on a personal narrative of my experiences and exposures, which reflect a middle class feminist experience.

Though I was never taught about Arab or Lebanese feminism in school, the early calls for Arab women's liberation that are canonized, and that I was exposed to in the classroom, were of the Egyptian judge Qasim Amin and his call for women's education. Indeed, it is not uncommon for scholars to claim that the path for women's

rights had started with prominent Arab men calling for women's access for education; a few also called for women's unveiling. In these claims, women are portrayed as late-comers to their own struggle for liberation.<sup>9</sup> Exploring the intellectual renaissance on Arab women's rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, George Kallas examines works by prominent Arab intellectuals, predominantly men, adding that women approved of this discourse, and that they "took a rational stance on the issue of [their] right to education" (my translation; 22). Such origin points participate in the erasure of women's resistance to the conditions of their lives. Instead, women become mere audiences and consumers of a discourse about them that is produced by elite men. As a result, the structures that have given well-off men access to education (including being educated on women's position), and the privilege to voice their opinions publicly, are reemphasized in the recounting of our feminist history.

Over the years, my own journey into learning about feminism always started with "western" feminists, as I had more access to middle class white feminism, though I was not immediately aware of the privilege of this position. Growing up middle class myself, and going to private schools that prioritized English as a language of instruction, language and access intertwined and added to my alienation from my own history. It was when I started working on my M.A thesis that I became aware of women

---

<sup>9</sup>See Mervat Hatem's "Matha Tureed Al Nisaa: Nahwa Kharita Naqdiyya Lil Itijahat Al Mustaqbaliyya AlNasawiya AlArabiyya." [What do Women Want: Towards a Critical Mapping of Future Directions for Arab Feminism]: Beirut Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2012. Hatem's is a critique of this patriarchal narrative that places men as pioneers of the women's rights movement (103).

of color feminisms in the U.S and working class white feminists, and could finally appreciate a different perspective on class, race and gender.

As I started diving into feminist organizing outside the confines of my college campus, I would hear more about older generations of activists. When I was participating in preparations for an International Women's Day Event in 2009, I came to hear about Warda Butrus Ibrahim, a labor organizer who was killed during tobacco factories protest in 1946. I became more familiar with Nawal Al Saadawi during that year too, because she was a hero for some of the feminist activists I was meeting. I would come to know the name, Huda Al Shaarawi, the Egyptian feminist who is mostly remembered for her public act of unveiling upon her return from an international women's conference in Italy in 1923 (E. Freedman 243).<sup>10</sup> I became more acquainted with names of Lebanese veteran women's rights organizers, such as Laure Moghaizel, Linda Matar, and Wadad Shakhtoura, among others. Yet while I came to know their names largely because they had headed women's rights organizations in the past twenty years, their lives and movements behind them were less familiar.

For years, identifying as a feminist, I did not find my heart and mind captured by Lebanese and Arab feminisms. I did not see myself, all parts of myself, reflected in and nourished by, the works of Arab women that came before me. "The West" always seemed to hold more radical politics and more radical movements, because they tackled

---

<sup>10</sup> Al Shaarawi, Huda. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*. NY: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1987. Literature by Nawal al Saadawi includes *Woman at Point Zero* and *A Daughter of Isis*. For a short biography of Nawal Al Saadawi and an analysis of the (problematic) wide reception of her work in the "West", see Amal Amireh's "Framing Nawal Al Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World." *Signs* 26.1 (2000):215-49.

the intimate more openly. Yet the more I got immersed in feminist groups, and the more I learned about the feminism of the west's "shadow beast" (Anzaldua 42), that is radical women of color, the more I was convinced that we, as feminists in Lebanon, had our own shadow history to learn from and contend with. This history was not going to be handed to me, however; it required dedication to learning, excavating, and drawing my own questions and conclusions, given the scarcity of documentation, and the lack of intergenerational relationships between feminists and women's rights activists. I began to understand how the private schools that I had attended contributed to an internalized rejection of Arabic, and how dominant knowledge was built on a repression and marginalization of multiple histories.

Though no version of a feminist or women's movement was taught in my schools, I consider some strands of feminism mainstream because of their collaboration with the state, and their reformist politics. Its earlier face manifested in women's magazines, social groups and literary salons, while the later part of the movement saw women's NGOs pushing for legislative reforms. However, even the most elite narrative of women's activism in Lebanon intersects with other struggles, that of national liberation in the early twentieth century, labor struggles, and movements for women's rights in other Arab countries, mainly in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Another significant political issue that has influenced this movement has been the loss and colonization of Palestine in 1948 and the struggle for Palestinian rights. In other words, it is impossible to write about women's rights in Lebanon as an isolated movement.



The mainstream version, I argue, reveals three main facets of the movement throughout its history: one, that a large part of it is about the philanthropy of elite women. This aspect is reflected in women's organizations in Lebanon that operate in a patriarchal service-oriented fashion (Joseph 57). Secondly, it becomes clear that what we have inherited, as young feminists in Lebanon, are icons rather than a movement or a feminist thought, a point that I will elaborate on in the next section. Iconizing the movement, or reducing it to the accomplishments of few figures, has contributed to its erasures. Whereas we may remember the names and sometimes the resumes of accomplishments of a few activists, we often do not know more about the history of the entire movement and the complex relationships that are made and unmade in the struggle for women's rights. And thirdly, tied to the idea of the icon, I believe, is that elite women observed a "politics of respectability" in their organizing. Respectability politics is the activism that glorifies wives and mothers (see Ziadeh 187; Hemadeh). The icons of the women's movement that have survived erasure are those that are "respectable" and do not challenge the status quo in terms of their sexuality and gender presentation, for example.

Women, particularly those from well-off families, have been active in charity work since the 1890s (Stephan "Women's Rights" 114), yet the mainstream women's movement in Lebanon (and Syria) can be said to have reached its first peak with the growth of women's magazines in the early twentieth century (Abi Saab 37-42; Thompson 120-4; Stephan "Women's Rights" 114). Elite Women's activism emerged in the context of a struggle for national anti-colonial liberation against the Ottoman

and French colonization. The women could see that “because “because of their gender, they did not fully share the privileges of their class” (Thompson 94). During the first world war, charities and women’s groups increased and became more politicized due to the war and French colonization, transforming into a “self- conscious subaltern movement” (94).

In the 1920’s, then, women became active in publishing their own magazines, opening or participating in literary salons as well as charity organizations. Women’s groups called for women’s access to healthcare and education, prison reforms, and labor rights. For example, in Beirut, “in 1924... [Julia] Dimashqiya, [Ibtihaj] Qaddura and others founded the Women’s Revival Society... to protect women’s handicrafts threatened by imports.” In 1928, “Adalayd Rishani founded the Society to Stop Crime and Improve Prisons... herself pound[ing] on the doors of state bureaucrats until she won the right to inspect hygiene in prisons and deliver clean clothing to prisoners” (97).

Of the early twentieth century women’s movement, the names of leaders such as “Lubnah Thabit, Adele Nakhou, Ibtihaj Kaddoura, Rose Shihaa, Everlyn Boutrous, Laure Tabet, Najla Saab and Emily Faris Ibrahim” became well-known (Stephan 115). Salima Abu Rashid founded *Fatat Lubnan* magazine in 1914; Julia Dimashqiya (1883-1954), an Arab nationalist feminist, journalist and educator, was the first Christian woman to head the Makassed Islamic Charitable school for girls; she also founded one of the main women’s magazines, *Al Mar’a al Jadida (The New Woman)*, in 1921. Afifa Saab published *Al Khidr* (Thompson 120-1) in 1919, at the age of 19; she later co-founded a school for girls in Aley in 1925 with her two sisters (Kaidbey 313-4), despite a French

refusal to give her a license (320). The above names are icons of the movement that are half-forgotten, except in some women's rights and feminist circles.

One icon whose name has survived erasures and who has gained more mainstream recognition outside of feminist spaces is May Ziadeh. Ziadeh (1886-1941), born in Nazareth, Palestine, to a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, is one of the most celebrated icons in the early women's movement. She is remembered as a writer, intellectual, public speaker, but also because of her connections to prominent writers and thinkers, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Abbas Mahmoud Al Aqqad (Al Qawwal 11-2). These connections had been shaped through letter correspondence, but also through a literary salon which she held every Tuesday in her house in Cairo for twenty years, and was attended by women and men of the Arab intelligentsia (Al Qawwal 10-1; Al Madghari 133-4). Ziadeh's life and work demonstrate the interconnection of the Arab women's movement, for she was invited to speak and write about women's rights in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Undoubtedly though, her ability to move between these countries, and to pursue her interests in the arts, philosophy, and literature, speak of her socio-economic privileges as well as her desire for connections with other Arab feminists.

Like Ziadeh, in 1919 Dimashqiya started her own literary salon in her house in Beirut, where meetings addressed women's liberation, among other political, intellectual and literary issues (Al Madghari 134-5). In Dimashqiya's home also housed the offices of her magazine, *Al Mar'a al Jadida*, where Ziadeh published articles in. From a contemporary perspective, these pioneers do seem conformist in

their gender politics, and they did, in many ways, conform to a politics of respectability for women. Ziadeh, for example, propagated the sanctity of motherhood, domesticity and home economics as part of women's emancipation. Yet in an essay she published in *Al Mar'a Al Jadida*, she also observed that women are bound by "the chains of familial selfishness." Ziadeh understood that such selfishness amongst family members "aims at manipulating the woman's emotions—and not the man's" (my translation; 147-8). Thus, rather than labeling them as "radical" or "conformist," I see them as complex activists, holding beliefs in tensions, during difficult times, nationally and regionally. Like many women's rights activists today, they were both attempting to dismantle patriarchy as well as trying not to provoke men's hostility (Zaatari "Nahda Nasawiyya" 66).

Modernity and tradition were tropes that many elite women in the early twentieth century were negotiating. This discourse of modernity was influenced by, and can be read as a response to, French colonialism (Thompson 259). Ziadeh embraced modernity and modern ways of dressing (155), and advised that women formally learn home economics, to manage their homes and their lives, and to "preserve their dignity." (182). Similarly, Dimashqiya had an image of what liberated Arab women should look, and how they should behave, within the family, as wives and mothers. As writer Abir Haidar informs us, "Julia Tohme [Dimashqiya] asked the women of her country to refine their morals and not fall prey to life's false appearances, and to hold on to simplicity" (my translation; (Haidar "Palestine

PMC”).<sup>11</sup> Zaatari further explains that elite women took part in a movement for modernity in which they envisioned their roles as post-independence citizens of their countries (“Nahda Nasawiyya” 63). Haidar also notes that Dimashqiya called on society to not force women to veil, another trope of modernity that appeared in the early women’s movement, and culminated with Nazira Zeinnedine publishing, at the age of twenty, her book, *Veiling and Unveiling* (1928).

Zeinnedine’s book was the first monograph to be written by a woman on unveiling and on the rights of Muslim women (Cooke 129). She rejected the justification that veils protect women’s honor. Instead, she argued that “We must understand that honour is indeed rooted in the heart and chastity that comes from within and not from a piece of transparent material lowered over the face” (Badran and Cooke 273). Influenced by the Quran, as well as by the European enlightenment theories of John Stuart Mill, she called for women’s equality and in “their right to participate in running the affairs of home and society” (Cooke 82-3).

This discussion around unveiling also points to tensions in that period between modernization, and religious conservatism, between nationalism and western influence. Yet these were also debates that contributed to the growth of women’s activism, as they publicly participated in these discussions through their magazines. This debate around unveiling, however, seems to have been primarily an issue for upper class women of Arab society. Zeinnedine’s book, for instance, received attention from the elite of

---

<sup>11</sup>Haidar, Abir. “Julia To’me Dimashqiyya: 1883-1954.” *PMC*. 10 July 2012. <http://www.palestine-pmc.com/atemplate.php?id=21197>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

Lebanon (xi) to King Fu'ad of Egypt (64). Her ideas, therefore, were not marginalized, even if they were controversial. Today, the issue of wearing the veil is not debated widely in feminist or women's rights circles. Islamic feminism internationally has gained voice in arguing that the veil does not mean lack of freedom and empowerment. This argument, however, has existed since the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the position of women's rights organizer, Afifa Saab, in 1920's Lebanon (Kaidbey 318).

The end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s saw more philanthropic organizing by women's rights advocates. While some of these groups were religious, others favored secularism. By 1939, there were 36 women's groups in Lebanon, many of them religious and charitable in nature, supporting economically disadvantaged women and girls and called for women's access to education and healthcare (Thompson 96). Some of these groups gained more popularity and longevity than others, such as the Lebanese Women's Union. Rita Stephan documents that by 1947, there were two primary groups—the Lebanese Women's Union, founded in 1920, which attracted women with left-wing politics, and the Christian Women's Solidarity Association, which attended to poor women, yet had a dominant membership of well-off women (115).

Laure Mogheizel, one of the most famous women's rights icons, recounted her participation in “جمعية التضامن النسائية” or Women's Solidarity Organization, as a representative of the Phalangist party in 1949. She noted that most of the women there were well-off, and their approach to social justice was about humanitarian “assistance to the needy, improving prison conditions, and modernizing women's status in the

traditional way without delving more deeply into social reform” (Shqeir 37). Thus, we can observe a top-down philanthropic approach to activism that is common within these groups. And even though they were not merely focusing on women of their own class, their work with poor women was not built on solidarity, nor, as Moghaizel demonstrates, on the desire for structural change.

In the 1950's, women's rights activist moved into more lobbying, as they pushed for women's suffrage. In 1950, the two major groups—the Lebanese Women’s Union and Women’s Solidarity Association-- formed a joint executive committee which later became the Lebanese Council for Women. The primary concern of this new organization was to battle for women’s rights to political participation—a right that women won in 1953 (115-6). In 1963, Emily Bustani became the first woman to be elected into parliament (123).

A decade later, the feminist research institute, the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), was founded (115), and was headed by Julinda Abu Nasr for twenty four years. IWSAW came into being when the American Junior College for women, the first women’s college in Lebanon, turned co-ed (IWSAW website).<sup>12</sup> I include this information to show that the desire for women’s studies was a part of the movement. However, as women’s rights activist Iman Shaarani observed, the collaboration between feminist activists and academics have been scarce (Qtd. Hoteit and Al Qadiry 407). Two primary groups worked on women’s rights in the 1970s. The

---

<sup>12</sup><http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/about/history.php>

first was the League of Lebanese women's rights, whose work focused on political lobbying for legislative changes. Despite the onslaught of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, the Women's Democratic Gathering was dedicated to "combating violence against women." Their work also included campaigning for women's legal literacy and "adult literacy" (Stephan 122).

In the 1980's, more legal reforms were won, despite the ongoing war. Activists lobbied and won women the rights to travel without the permission of their husbands, to buy contraceptives, and to enjoy retirement benefits (123). The 1990's saw another shift in organizing towards more NGOization. In the early 1990s, the end of the civil war on the one hand, and the Beijing Conference on Women on the other hand, lent a new momentum to the movement. The implementation of the Beijing Conference resolutions became a cause to rally around, as activists formed committees and organizations to monitor and ensure that the Lebanese law embraces the resolutions. Other causes that mainstream women's rights activists have been championing since the late 1990's and to this day are labor rights and equality in the workplace, women's right to give her Lebanese nationality to her non-Lebanese husband and children, as The Collective for Research and Training on Development –Action( CRTD-A) is doing. There is also much lobbying and raising public awareness for a law that protects women from domestic violence, in which KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation has been a leading organization (122-3).

Despite the accomplishments for women's rights, especially on a legal level, what many women's groups share is a service-oriented structure that reproduces socio-



economic hierarchies as well. In a research that Suad Joseph conducted between 1968 and 1996 with activists in mainstream women's rights organizations in Lebanon, she showed the limitations of these groups in advancing women's liberation. Joseph noted the "reproduction of social systems of domination" within these organizations ("The Reproduction of Political Processes" 57). Thus she labeled these organizations as "shops," or "dakakeen," a term used by the Lebanese during the civil war to denote the patron/client services that militias and political groups offered to their constituency (78). The women's organizations that Joseph studied offered personalized social aid, or pushed for more general legislative changes, yet they retain the "authoritarian political processes" that characterizes male-dominated organizations (59). Analyzing another movement in Lebanon, environmentalism, Paul Kingston also finds the patron/client lens most apt to study the groups working on environmental issues. Kingston argues that in a society undergoing post-war reconstruction, a state-society framework is less relevant than one that looks at patrons and clients. Rather than a fixed one-way relation, Kingston proposes a more fluid understanding of this patron/client exchange as constant negotiation (55-6).

Similar to the "dakakeen" and to mainstream political parties, founders of women's organizations are usually its long-term, or life-long, leaders, who are charismatic, and very influential. Though the decision making process appeared democratic, it was not, as the leader was the real decision-maker (71). The hierarchy within the members and staff was also sometimes based on "indebtedness" to someone

in power for their services and support (72). Relationships among board members and staff were sometimes based on blood relations, but even when they were not, members of an organization were often referred to as “family.”

Moreover, Joseph found that many of the staff worked within their organization for many years, and they became familiar with their colleagues’ families. The staff attended each other’s important social celebrations, and they provided support not only to their colleagues, but to their colleagues’ next of kin as well (67). The organization also became a space for elite women to socialize with other women, Joseph notes, though sometimes at the expense of the staff’s working time. However, there was little solidarity, and more competition, between different women’s organizations, or branches of the same organization (77). While this framework of studying social movements and organizations through patron/client relationships is important and very relevant, in an effort to show other relationships at work, I highlight in chapter five more productive relationships that exist in the feminist and queer movements.

Mainstream women's rights organizing, however, is not monolithic. Tensions exist inside women's groups and amongst them. Yet organizers are also aware of the problems that beleaguer their movement. Some of the tensions and self-reflection are made clear though the debate of whether or not to call it a movement. Writing about women's activism in Lebanon and Syria under French colonialism, Elizabeth Thompson states that theirs was not a movement, but a series of campaigns inspired by women’s actions in Egypt and in post war Europe (118). Rita Stephan too debates whether women's activism “amounts to a movements.” Taking the viewpoints of Lebanese feminist scholars and leaders of

women's organizations, she notes the weakness of the movement, its lack of “public appeal” and even the absence of a feminist consciousness within it (“Women's Rights Activism” 118-9). In 2009, Zeina Zaatari argued that a more accurate description for a contemporary unified Arab feminist movement would be a series of movements, varied in their geographic and political characteristics, and largely unable to mobilize masses and work effectively (“Nahda Nasawiyya” 62).

In this dissertation project, despite sharing the hesitations of calling it a movement, I still do prefer the term “movement” and continue to use it here. The reason is that my methodology, where I connect struggles and movements across different historical periods, creates a constant motion. In the next chapter, I address the framework of cyclical temporality, or the “serpentine motion” across time. Therefore, I am less concerned with a linear temporal progression of a social movement. Instead, I look at how they are in constant flux, tension and connection with their environment, and with other (contemporary and historical; regional and transnational) struggles. In other words, from a lens that links struggles and time periods, we can see how, from an elite women's rights perspective alone, there may not have been much of a movement in the 1970s. However, women's participation in labor struggles during the 1970s means that there was still a movement operating at a different site.

As for the women's rights groups, like many queer feminists, they are also able to self-critique their strategies and frameworks. Iqbal Doughan, a women's rights leader, recognized that the movement has not succeeded in operating on a grassroots level. On this issue, she declared that “our women don't walk behind us” and therefore

even the women they are supposedly representing are not enthusiastic about their work (qtd. in Hoteit and Al Qadiry 403). It is for this reason that I call women's rights leaders “unfollowed leaders.” Fadia Hoteit and Nahawand Al Qadiry, moderating a round table discussion of various women’s rights groups in Lebanon, demonstrated the different orientations of these groups, and their limitations in working together, and in propagating a unified feminist discourse (419). Despite women’s rights groups’ critique of the socio-political sectarian structure of Lebanese society, Joseph’s research above showed that one of the limitations they faced was their inability to create more egalitarian and accountable structures inside their organizations.

Queer feminist organizing today, I will show later and in following chapters, can be described as a more irreverent, sometimes more confrontational, youth activism that is defying norms of respectability. Yet we will also see that the differences between mainstream feminism and queer feminist thought are not simply about a generational divide. What matters too is the movement and the communities to which feminism is aligned. It is true, for example, that many young feminists today are taking up issues of sexual equality, including LGBT rights. Yet foregrounding the history of working class women organizing in factories also shows us that women who had to work outside the home and be in contact with men have been charged with sexual indecency, as opposed to well-off women who did not have to work. It is for this reason that I see factory girls of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mount Lebanon, for example, as queered subjects. Moreover, queer feminists today are connecting struggles and reaching out to other communities not

through philanthropy, but through deconstructing their own privileges and challenging classist, racist and heterosexist norms.

### **The Iconization of the Women's Movement**

What has survived from the history of (elite) women's rights activism from the early twentieth century to this day, I argue, are icons rather than a well-documented movement. Such reduction of decades of organizing into a few exceptional figures continues to make the movement susceptible to the erasures that it has experienced. By highlighting these icons in this chapter and in the historical chapters that follow, I am better able to show that these tokenized figures represent tactics and ideologies of collective mobilization efforts.

The iconizing of the movement is symbolized, for example, in the way Miriam Cooke describes Zeineddine as someone who “singlehandedly took on the Islamic authorities of her day” (xi). The use of the word “singlehandedly” presents an image of a lone fighter having no personal or social support. Zeineddine's accomplishment in publishing the first monograph on unveiling is not to be dismissed; and writing against the hegemony of religious institutions required much bravery. However, as Cooke's biography of Zeineddine shows, the discourse around unveiling was supported by an elite class across Arab-majority countries, and therefore her book has to be situated within this context.

Iconizing is also demonstrated in the many biographies and biographical synopsis of women leaders, and in the scarcity of documented ideologies, tactics,

collaborations and tensions within women's groups. Works such as Nelda LaTeef's *Women of Lebanon*, Emily Nasrallah's نساء رائدات من الشرق (*Pioneer Women from the East*), Nadia al Jurdy Nowaihed's نساء من بلادي *Women from My Country*—all focus on pioneers and on a particular way of defining accomplishments.

Such iconizing reaches a peak through May Ziadeh in the early twentieth century, and another peak through Laure Moghaizel at the end of the century. Moghaizel, whose achievements have come to stand in for the accomplishments of the entire movement, does acknowledge the work of those who came before her. She pays tribute to “pioneers like Iptihage Kaddoura and Saniya Habboub” who preceded her. These pioneers’ “demands for civil and political rights” however, “were not specific” and therefore held no power over “deputies and parliamentarians” (qtd. In Lateef 208)

Moghaizel's strategy was shaped through learning from the mistakes of older generations of women organizers. As she said, “I decided to begin with political rights,” she stated, because “these are the easiest to argue and win.” To this end, she approached different women's association and they formed a committee to push for these political rights (qtd. In LaTeef 208). Writing about the joint committee established in 1950, which later became the Lebanese Council for Women, Rita Stephan explains that this committee “produced a shift from charity to political activism. It owed its inception partly to the monumental efforts of Laure Moghaizel, who showed in this her first success as a major architect of the institutionalization of women's political activism” (536). Yet rather than show the contributions,

conversations and tensions that gave way to this shift in women's organizing, biographers, scholars and fellow activists focus only on her exceptionalism.

Those who write about Moghaizel consistently portray her as an extraordinary woman, who had an exceptional activist partnership with her husband, Joseph Moghaizel. The couple is known to have worked closely together, in what Rita Stephan calls “couple’s activism.” Moghaizel's biographer, Iman Shams Shqeir, also narrates how Moghaizel, the professional lawyer, also often came home earlier than her husband, and she greeted him with flowers. “Joseph was her constant ‘guest of honor’.” (Dibo, Stephan “Couple’s Activism” 536). Moghaizel doesn’t “remember that she has ever fought with Joseph.” She was also an exemplary mother, where “Fadi, the youngest of Laure’s five children, never felt left behind despite her work and travel” (19; Stephan “Couple’s Activism” 537). In fact, the title of Shqeir’s biography of Moghaizel, نساء في امرأة (*Many Women in One*) is a phrase that Moghaizel’s daughter uses to describe her mother: many women in one. That is, Laure Moghaizel was able to be a great mother, activist, lawyer, and friend. In addition, Moghaizel is always remembered as being elegant, and someone who has always stood out, from an early age.

Stephan uses Moghaizel’s life, and her strong activist and professional partnership with her husband in her activism, to argue that “family structure provided the background” that nourished and supported her activism. What Stephan is calling for here is that the study of non-Western feminisms should be attuned to the role of the family in women’s activism (539). Stephan hence focuses on the positive role that family plays in many organizers’ lives. The centrality of the family, a common trope

in Arab feminism and Arab diasporic discourse (Naber 73-4) can also be explained as the “kin contract.”<sup>13</sup> In the kin-contract, family is the basic unit of social structure, and is “the core of social identity, economic stability, political security, and religious affiliation and the first (often last) line of security” (Qtd. in Stephan “Couple’s Activism” 535).

I do agree with Stephan on the importance of studying the family. What she does not critique more is that the family she is referring to here is heterosexual, and in Moghaizel’s case, middle class and nuclear. Families are no doubt central to women’s lives in Lebanon, and as Joseph argues, members of women’s organizations, even when they are not tied by blood relations, see themselves in familial terms. However, it is also important to question the tensions that arise when member of (particularly nuclear middle class) families challenge social norms, such as those pertaining to sexuality and gender expression, but also related to heterosexual partnerships with someone outside of one’s religion, class or ethnicity.

As with Zeineddine, my intention here is not to undermine Moghaizel’s brilliance and her achievements, nor her relationship with her family and peers. My aim is to question feminists and scholars’ focus on idealism. While Moghaizel may have succeeded in balancing her role as wife, mother, and professional activist, how do we talk about the many women who are struggling with finding this balance? What are the structures and resources that allow this balancing act to happen? There are other

---

<sup>13</sup>Naber explains that “the concept of Arabness as family resembles discourses that many communities have relied upon for survival in the United States,” as indigenous and people of color communities “have found collective strength in concepts and practices of family” (74).



questions that arise here, based on the absence of a documented detailed history of women's movement: What did communal work among these activists look like? What are the tensions that often emerged between activists and their family members? What are the tensions that arose between activists themselves, based on political ideologies, class, and different personalities? And is there a place for different women who are not Lebanese, in this narrative of women's rights?

And given that Moghaizel, Linda Matar, who I will talk about in the following chapter, and other women's rights leaders, do not identify as feminists, but as humanists (Al Bayati 2; LaTeef 206; Stephan "Couple's Activism" 540), does that imply that the movement is less likely to fall into the trap of narrow perspectives of "women's issues" or "gender" and instead be more intersectional? While this may be the case, more often we see classism dividing the mainstream women's movement. Not many working class women have become leaders of the movement-- with Matar being one of the few exceptions (Al Bayati 1). Furthermore, the elite movement remains invested in heterosexism, and I have yet to find traces of what can be read as lesbian, bisexual and transgender subjects within it (without necessarily attaching these labels to them). In the following section, I will show some of the tensions around sexuality in the women's movement, that demonstrates a continuing to queer feminism. Yet I hesitate to justify these tensions through a framework of generation gaps. Instead, I argue, a championing of a normative sexuality is, and has always been, a characteristic of elite women; working class women, and activists who align with the margins, have always had a different politics around gender and sexuality, as well as race and class.

## **Where Do Sexuality and Queer Activism Fit into the Story of the Women's Movement?**

In a mainstream movement that operated through philanthropy, and later through lobbying, respectability was a significant issue. Such respectability was partly founded on the repression of issues related to women's sexuality. Yet many feminists in Lebanon and its diaspora have long refused this silencing. Writer Evelyne Accad, in her *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks across the Middle East* (1990), wrote about the importance of centering sexuality in the realm of nationalist anti-colonial struggle and Arab feminist discourse. She warned that otherwise “the struggles for freedom will remain on a very superficial level,” because sexuality lies at the root of women’s problems (25). Accad dismissed the claim that poor women did not care about sexual rights because their socio-economic survival is a priority.

Different women in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, Accad revealed, had talked to her about their sexual experiences. They candidly complained to her about their status as women, about having to wear the burqa,<sup>14</sup> and about practices such as genital mutilation and polygamy. These dissenting voices, according to Accad, acquire significance not because they are representative of a majority of women in their countries, but through “the validity of these strong testimonies” (20). If anything, the importance of Accad’s argument is that it dispels the binary image of the repressed poor woman/free educated woman. Such an image is reflected in many elite women's activism, where in

---

<sup>14</sup>See Lila Abu Lughod. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013, for a critique of discourse of rescuing women from the veil, and violent practices such as honor killing.

the early twentieth century, as I have shown, they saw themselves as introducing a new modernity to the women of their nations.

Accad also compares two feminist conferences that happened around the same time period that shows how divisive sexuality is. The first conference took place in Illinois in 1983 under the title “Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives,” while the other, “What Feminism for the Maghreb?” was held in Tunisia in 1985. At the “Common Differences” conference, some of the participants professed that struggling against imperialism was more important than sexual rights, and chided lesbians for “overemphasizing sex” (19). Two years later at Tunisia’s “What Feminism” conference, women who brought up women’s sexuality into the discussions were marginalized and vilified (21). This volatility of sexuality, across geographies and cultures, for Accad, shows its significance in all aspects of the lives of individuals and nations.

Twenty three years after the Maghreb conference, Nadz, a queer feminist activist from Lebanon, would once again push sexuality into women's rights spaces. This time, she would not experience the marginalization that was felt by Accad and her peers in the 1980s. In “Queering the Arab Feminist Movement: Two Years in the Making,” Nadz recalled her participation in a 2008 conference in Morocco where she argued that “Arab women’s rights should talk about our vaginas.” She pushed participants to embrace issues related to women’s bodies and desires, including “celebrating women’s sexuality.” While a few people disapproved, most of the responses to her speech were positive. Nadz's experiences show that queer feminists do participate in events and in

conversations with mainstream women's activism. And her experiences also give evidence that mainstream women's rights activists do not wholly reject queer feminists.

In that same article, Nadz writes how two years later, at another feminist conference in Amman, Jordan, she gave a speech that surprised even her. She narrates how during her talk:

I find myself blurting out: 'what's the big deal in me being a lesbian?'... And I go on to explain that the big deal lies in the dangers that lesbians (and other queers) pose to heteronormativity, upon which a lot of the oppressive systems are built. (Bekhsoos April 19 2010)

And while Nadz recounts one homophobic comment from the audience, most of the women present, of diverse Arab nationalities and age groups, were supportive and compassionate. Hers is a perspective of a young activist who notices shifts in women's rights acceptance of queer sexualities. Nadz' experiences also show the perseverance and the bravery of many queer feminists who are pushing for more honest discourse around sexuality. Yet Nadz is not simply addressing individual homophobia here; her queer feminist discourse tackles structural issues, such as heteronormativity, and connects it to other oppressive systems. Queer feminist thought, therefore, is more concerned with structural inequality, and with interconnecting struggles and oppressive systems.

The challenges, however, are still present in the resistance of women's rights activists and scholars. In March 2010, Najla Hemadeh, a Lebanese professor of philosophy, wrote a scathing critique of activists who are allegedly emulating the West and calling for same sex marriage. According to Hemadeh, such activism is diverting

the focus on women's-- particularly mother's, rights and contributing to a devaluing of motherhood. Hemadeh was further disenchanted that her focus on mothers' rights at a conference in 2009 was considered far right, while those on the far left were pushing for sexual rights and same sex marriages (Abu Ghazal "Al Nasawiyya Al Arabiyya"). This 2009 conference was organized by Bahithat (the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, of which Hemadeh is a member), and was held in the American University of Beirut under the title "Arab Feminism" A Critical View." The papers were later published in a volume by Bahithat and the Centre for Arab Unity Studies.

In one of the presentations in that conference, Zaatari, presenting a "self-critique" of the movement, criticized Arab feminist thought's inattention to "sexual and bodily issues" (61). Moreover, she observed a tendency for tackling sexuality and bodies only in terms of "places of pain and hurt" instead of women's bodily sovereignty and healthy sexual practices (70-1). It was presentations such as Zaatari's, which insisted on talking about sexuality, that queer feminists in the audience, as I later indicate, responded to positively.

Despite the significance of Bahithat's *Arab Feminism: A Critical View* in putting forth critical essays about the past, present and future possibilities of Arab and Muslim feminisms, it does not address the struggle of migrant women in Arab and Muslim countries. In chapter four, I will show how migrant issues have been compartmentalized by many scholars and women's rights groups. It is a queer feminist anti-racist movement, I show, that is seeking to connect an anti-racist movement to a feminist movement. Moreover, mirroring Zaatari's critique of Arab feminism's

emphasis on the “places of pain and hurt,” scholar Monica Smith refuses a focus only on violence against Sri Lankan migrant women in Lebanon. To talk about the violence and neglect the ways migrant women pursue pleasure and autonomy, Smith argues, erases their agency. This discourse of victimization also reproduces gender norms of chastity and heteronormativity.

Returning to the Arab Feminism conference that provoked debates about women's sexuality, one queer feminist analyzed the importance of talking about sexuality openly in feminist and women's rights circles. Lynn, a young queer feminist activist who attended the conference wrote in an essay entitled “From What Doesn't Feel Like the Margins of Arab Feminisms”:

As young queer activists, it is essential for us to recognize that our sexualities have profoundly shaped our feminist consciousness.... As feminist queer activists, we have always been keen to theorize our own experiences, to challenge – as individuals and as a collective – dominant frameworks and discourses that either deny us or ignore our very existence. What is remarkable here, to me at least, (and this is addressed to you my dear fellow activists) is my own perception of our feminism as I write this article. While we often talk about “writing from the margins,” and “being in the margins” – our creative and dynamic feminism is so vibrant that this doesn't feel like the margins at all (“Written From”).

Queer feminism in Lebanon, therefore, is at the margins of the feminist/women's rights movement, and theorizes from different margins. What she is also expressing is a euphoria at having issues of sexuality discussed openly, in a way that she and other queer feminists no longer feel marginalized and silenced.

I include these voices from Hamadeh, Zaatari, and Lynn, to show the tensions within Arab women's rights/feminist movements around sexuality. Hamadeh's reaction to the conference is telling, because rather than have an honest conversation with the

young queer feminists who, for once, were not marginalized from feminist discourse, she simplified their demands. When queer feminists were calling for an intersectional analysis of women's lives, and not erasing women's lesbian sexualities from such an analysis, Hemadeh saw it only a focus on gay marriages. Hemadeh dismissed sexuality as an important aspect of experience by using the same tactic often used against Arab feminists, by accusing them of being western imports. This debate, or lack thereof, points to a key limitation of the women's movement, which is a reluctance to understand structural hierarchies and inequalities. Thus, rather than recognizing how queer feminists are being marginalized in a heteropatriarchal system, Hemadeh sees them as a threat.

The tensions that Accad observed in the 1980s between women's rights activists who dismiss sexuality and those feminists who desire a more intersectional analysis still exists to this day. Thus, while a generational gap may partly explain the tensions around sexuality, another reason is that elite feminism has long followed a politics of respectability where sexuality is a taboo. Queer feminists, speaking from the margins of sexual and gender norms, have been able to address this issue. It is no surprise, then, that queer feminists are the ones who are creating coalitions with other communities and groups on the margins.

Contemporary feminist organizing can be considered gendered youth activism. Alienated from a mainstream sectarian politics that is unwelcoming of and unappealing to queer women, feminist and queer youth began to participate in groups that called for gender and sexual emancipation and that defied sectarian and mainstream political

associations. While it is possible to see contemporary queer feminist activism as a progression of women's rights activism, and a reaction to some of their ineffective strategies, I seek a more productive framework. I hesitate to polarize the old and the young generations. This project argues that queer feminist thought and contemporary queer feminist organizing may intersect in some ways with the women's movement, and may have a lot to learn from it. But queer anti-racist feminism also diverges from it because it is grounded in multiple movements in which women participated. While queer feminists and women's rights groups collaborate in campaigns and demonstrations for nationality rights and domestic violence, for example, they also are critical of the heterosexism within women's groups. The following two chapters show that the multiple struggles for labor rights, nationalism and land liberation since the nineteenth century are also part of the history of queer feminism.

### **Chapters Breakdown**

What the next chapters will show is that queer feminist thought in Lebanon stands on tenets based on intersectional, anti-racist intergenerational and transnational analysis. The history of queer feminism lies in women's separation into multiple, often marginalized, struggles. The importance of queer feminism too is that it interconnects these struggles together. This is also the case in contemporary activism and thought where anti-racist feminists are interweaving a feminist anti-racist movement that does not separate between migrant workers and Lebanese women.



The two following chapters ground queer feminism in the local histories of women's participation in different struggles. Contemporary activists, I argue, are presenting the past, or showing past struggles at work in present organizing, which is an important principle of queer feminist thought. In chapter two, I establish the framework of non-linear serpentine temporality to study the legacies of women's resistance in labor movements that are still at work in feminist coalitions with labor movements today. This chapter therefore starts in 2012, delves into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then returns to women's labor organizing back to the present day. I also show how labor struggles interact with the mainstream women's movement, in coalition but more often in tension with it. In chapter three, in a similar cyclical framework, I bring together women's participation in resistance struggles, through writing, but also through militancy and through resisting the dehumanization of prisons. Connected to these practices too are women's survival strategies during wars and occupations from the 1980s to the present day, and a more mainstream anti-violence movement that emerged during the civil war. By interconnecting these strands of organizing, which are often considered separate from one another, I create an alternative history of feminism that centers different margins.

Chapter four builds on the interconnectivity of communities, and queer feminist thought's intersectional and transnational approach, as it moves into present-day organizing. Here, I explore the relationships between queer and feminist communities, and domestic migrant workers. A

Arguing that migrant issues are being compartmentalized into a cause of their own, I show that there exists an ant-racist feminist (and queer) movement that is challenging such compartmentalization by connecting women's issues. I therefore examine current tactics of coalition through activist writings on anti-immigrant racism in Lebanon, as I show how their work is more confrontational and more coalitional. Focusing on Sri Lankan migrant communities, I contribute to feminist anti-racist thought in two ways. Firstly, by queering migrant women's position in Lebanon, where queering, in this instance, becomes about recognizing how structural ostracism of migrants intersects with that of self-identified queers; queerness, too, I show, is related to migrant women's resistance, sometimes through insistence on pleasure, as well as through an act of collective "queer mothering" as Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes it. But I also urge queers and feminists to "migrate", metaphorically, or cross borders of knowledge about the Sri Lankan "other". That is, queer feminism has the potential of creating a deliberate strategy of knowing more about Sri Lankan feminism and women's resistance in Sri Lanka. Such a strategy would not only de-center middle class Lebanese feminism, and allow us to create stronger coalitions with migrant women. They also help us recognize that resistance is transnational; that resistance travels with the women from their home countries to the Lebanese homes where they work.

In the concluding chapter, I explore in more detail a framework of studying movements that does not focus only on client/patron relationships, but sees other modes of relating among different members of the same collective. This chapter seeks

to examine the different ways that feminists and queers address the tensions within their communities in different stages of organizing. For an earlier stage of self-identified queer mobilization, I do a close reading of the anthology by queer women and transgender people in Lebanon, *Bareed Mista3jil*. I show how *Bareed Mista3jil* aims at representing the tensions within the community that it is attempting to build and make visible. Through looking at feminist and queer writings a few years after the publication of the anthology, I demonstrate more critical ways that activists address intra-communal debates and dynamics. I analyze how these writings, through self-reflection, are also being coalitional and transnational, creating connections with feminists from the Global South and women of color in the U.S. I identify one aspect of these connections as being about choosing “surrogate foremothers” in order to create alliances based on histories, various margins, and multiple time periods as well.

## Chapter Two: Presenting Our Feminist Past: Women's Labor Histories in Queer Feminist Thought

Workers' organizing and the struggle for sexual and gender rights in Lebanon often appear to be moving in separate spheres. Though the Lebanese Labor Watch website, for example, does include news of demonstrations by women's groups for rights of women prisoners, and for the rights of migrant workers, these topics remain few and far in between. The labor rights reports on this website do not reveal gender differences in wages, unemployment, and discharges; non-normative sexualities and genders are also never accounted for in these reports. On the other hand, while feminist scholars have tackled issues of women's work and employment in the Middle East (Moghadam; Doumato and Posusney), these studies have not paid enough attention to the resistance of women workers, nor have they fully linked socio-economic politics of women across class lines, and across ethnic and national differences.

In my project of interconnecting struggles, this chapter explores women's participation in labor organizing against colonialism, capitalism and the state, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to this day. As I will show in the following pages, mainstream women's rights organizing often stood in opposition to these struggles of working class women. Thus, the history of mainstream women's rights activism alone is not sufficient to understand these struggles, and would not adequately reveal how these repressed histories are operating in contemporary activism. Instead, through a queer feminist methodology,

informed by multiple sites of struggle, and a cyclical temporality, I draw the connections between different movements throughout different time periods. This chapter seeks to challenge both the separation of feminism and labor organizing, as well as a linear conception of time and history.

Therefore, in this chapter, I highlight two aspects of feminist queer thought from Lebanon: one, that it is non-linear in its approach to history and time, presenting the past by acknowledging how the history of women's organizing is at work in present day activism; and secondly, that it is always seeking interconnectivity and finding connections across movements, events, ideas and individuals. Thus, the queerness of this thought appears in its act of challenging linear temporality, transgressing class divisions, and in challenging heteronormativity (Gumbs 59). What I include here is as much shaped by my own biases as it is by my access to resources. I would have wanted to include, for example, transgender people, women engaged in sex work, and more groups that women may have founded across Lebanon. I mention these not to point to what is lacking in this project, but to affirm the importance of these individuals and groups in queer feminist thought, and to acknowledge that their absence needs to be felt, and upturned (Alexander, lecture).<sup>15</sup>

Many of women who have been queered throughout Lebanon's history are rumored to have transgressed gendered sexual norms that confine “respectable” women/girls —such as factory women in the 1940’s, or the allegedly “sexually liberated”

---

<sup>15</sup>In line with her argument about women of color actively seeking to learn “each others' histories” rather than accepting dominant myths about each other (269), Alexander stated in a presentation at Denison University, in Granville Ohio, that we have to feel the absence and loss of what is not present (in terms of bodies) and what we do not know, so that we can seek it out (personal notes; Oct 9, 2013)

Communist women of the 1980s. Therefore, I mobilize “queer” in this chapter as a political tool that denaturalizes heteronormativity, but that also embraces a relationship between seeming paradoxes (Rodriguez 9). What emerges, I show, is a collection of narratives and “asymmetrical stories” of women from different movements, or who were not part of any political/social movement (Barkley Brown, qtd in Blackwell 21), forming a multifaceted feminist genealogy.

In this study, my personal longing for deeper involvement in feminist organizing in Lebanon comes with a desire to highlight or light a candle on past women’s struggles. I use the image of lighting a candle here because it symbolizes shedding a light on an issue kept in the dark while symbolizing commemorations as well. This chapter is a search for and a paying tribute to women who have organized and resisted, from their different points of struggle. It is not intended to be a comprehensive historical narrative of feminism or of women’s organizing in Lebanon. Rather, I am putting forth a methodology for constructing a history of feminist organizing; it is a way of interweaving struggles of women across varied social and political movements for justice. While in this chapter I focus on the historical participation of women in labor struggles as founding steps for feminist organizing today, the following chapter will continue to explore the history of women's organizing in times of internal sectarian wars and Israeli occupation. Thus I ground contemporary feminism in multiple histories and multiple sites of resistance (Blackwell 25; Naber 220).<sup>16</sup> In both these chapters, women's organizing

---

<sup>16</sup>Maylie Blackwell researches Chicana feminist histories as being intersectional and rooted in multiple sites of oppression and resistance (25-9). Nadine Naber looks at the “multisited feminist” strategies of “diasporic feminist anti-imperialism” embraced by Arab American feminists in the Bay Area who address both power relations within their activist communities, as well as between the U.S as an

intersects with the mainstream women's movement of the past, and with the self-identified feminist movement of the present.

Many feminist activists and scholars recognize how activism requires a coming to terms with history. Latina queer studies scholar Juana Maria Rodriguez describes activism as working with history's haunting memories. Activist work, she argues, is "a dialogue between the memories of the past and the imaginings of the future," which appear to us in "our own present yearnings. It is an encounter with the ghosts that reside within and inhabit the symbolic and geographic spaces that shape our world" (37). Be it about understanding how a socio-economic/political situation came to be (not naturally, but through a political process and power structures), or about acknowledging the work that has been done before them, activists' desire for change often opens doors to the past. There is still another aspect to linking past and present, which stems from recognizing the non-linearity of time, and which I will discuss further in the next section.

The questions that propel this genealogical methodology are the following: what do we—as feminists in Lebanon today, consider part of our feminist consciousness, and what constitutes our feminist memory? What do we take to be women's issues, and their tactics of resistance? Many of the movements I include here, and the women who are part of these movements, are not feminist, and I do not want to impose a feminist label on them. What I do want *is to "impose" their struggles on* contemporary feminists and queer feminism. This is because I do want their stories to be part of our queer feminist history, because I do want these stories and histories to shape our feminism and our

---

imperialist state and Arab-majority countries. These are strategies that she shows have also long been part of radical women of color, Black women, and third world women's politics (221-2)

queerness. Put differently, it is not enough to find a term in Arabic that corresponds to the word “queer” or “feminist”, but to root these terms in local histories of difference and resistance.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in this chapter, I take significant moments in feminist organizing today, by exploring vignettes that capture important contemporary social/political events. I thereby show how queer feminism recognizes the presence of histories of women's struggles operating there. Through a serpentine movement in time, queer feminist history becomes an amalgamation of different battlefronts, inside homes, on the streets, in workplaces, in prisons, and in refugee camps.

Within the larger aim of looking at the multiple histories of queer feminism today by centering queer(ed) women and their resistance, a secondary argument emerges: that queer feminism in Lebanon today did not emerge solely out of post-war reconstruction under the auspices of liberal ideologies and developmental policies. It is not simply a consequence of the spread of LGBT rights because it is not only focused on LGBT issues. Instead, it is more sustainable to ground it in much older traditions of women's organizing and resistance. I thus begin by grounding this chapter in a non-linear conception of time, arguing that it is indigenous to West Asia as it is to the Americas. After that, I turn to contemporary feminist alliances with the labor movement, which I demonstrated is rooted in decades of alliances and tensions between women's rights and labor rights.

---

<sup>17</sup>Similarly, in August 2013, *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* launched its special issue on Queer Affects, in which it explored instances of desire, madness, shame and lust in Arab and Iranian literature as “transformative sites for the emergence of queer identification (Samman and El Ariss 206).



## Serpentine Time

In the summer of 2011, the feminist online space *Sawt Al Niswa* issued a call for papers (CFP) for an upcoming new anthology, called *Banat Tariq*, that explored the histories of Arab feminisms.<sup>18</sup> The CFP was circulated at a time where a feminist movement in Lebanon seemed to be gaining momentum. It also came in the context of North African and West Asian popular revolutions, with their inspirational victories and painful setbacks, and the discussions that these uprisings stirred. The anthology was seeking to participate in these discussions, through a critical reflection of feminist positions in the political and social changes taking (or not taking) place. In addition, it aimed to push for more meditation on the past of Arab feminisms, and to invoke alternative narratives from women in Arab homelands and their diasporas. As the call for papers stated, “Writing about women’s presence while their past isn’t fully revealed is a dubious way to move through the future or change the present... When we look at our pasts, what pasts are we looking for or writing about?” (Abu Ghazal, email to anonymous mailing list). The anthology, then, recognized the political act of choosing what past to highlight in order to explain our present.

*Banat Tariq*, which looked as much towards the past as it did towards the present and future, was a child of a particular social and political moment in Lebanon and Arab countries. Yet it also pointed to a longer standing need for movements to ground themselves in their local contexts and to look for legitimacy and purpose in their history,

---

<sup>18</sup> *Banat Tariq* can be translated as Daughters of Tariq, although as the anthology makes clear, it refers to “a tribe of Arab warrior women who lived on the periphery of the new-found Islamic community” (*Banat Tariq* CFP).

rejecting colonialist lenses, and accusations of being “westernized.” It also reflected the need for many feminist groups to challenge male-centered histories, and feminist narratives seen solely through middle and upper class women’s experiences. *Banat Tariq* proposed that writers connect to West Asian and North African indigenous myths and figures to re-assess the present, while also relying on the women’s lived experiences to personalize history. What this anthology offered may not be a mainstream feminist position in Lebanon, yet it is similar to tried feminist strategies around the world that search for women-centered, non-western paradigms (Anzaldúa; Moraga; Allen; Perez).<sup>19</sup>

For Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa, the serpent represents a feminine energy that moves through paradoxes and different levels of consciousness to make manifest what has been suppressed by patriarchy and colonialism (48-9). The serpent is the repressed and feared sexual and instinctive feminine energy of individuals and their collective (57).<sup>20</sup> I use the image of the serpent in my work to show that a non-linear movement of time also glides across various histories and geographies, making temporality multi-dimensional. This temporal concept, rooted in indigenous thought, is at the core of the feminist genealogy that I present here. I am mainly influenced by discussions of temporality presented in the works of Okhi Simine Forest and Jacqui

---

<sup>19</sup>In Sri Lanka, the 1970s saw a feminist longing for a mythic pre-colonial past (Jayawardena and de Alwis 250). See also Robin D.G Kelley's *Dreams of Freedom* for a discussion of Black activism through looking at the past. Here, I would also like to thank Samia Abou Samra for initiating discussions of indigeneity with me back in 2008.

<sup>20</sup> For Anzaldúa too, the serpent was once revered, where for the Olmecs, it represented the earth (56), but that reverence was lost with colonization, as Christian religion propagated the virgin symbology, and emphasized the body/soul split. Thus, for Anzaldúa, to ‘enter into the serpent’ means getting in touch with instinctual ‘animal’ side, and acknowledging her body (59; 48).

Alexander, and I find useful the way artists and scholars such as Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Emma Perez and Maylei Blackwell, among others, mobilize pre-Columbian indigenous temporalities to reconstruct Chicana feminist histories. Similarly, I will show how a cyclical and multi-directional temporality is already operating in present day feminist organizing in Lebanon.

In *Dreaming the Old Council Ways: True Native Teachings from the Red Lodge*, Forest explains that for the Mayans, cycles of time move in “clockwise and anticlockwise motions” simultaneously, with “currents of energy penetrating each other.” She continues:

In their infinite concept of time, time itself cannot be seen as linear, for it is not a single continuum. Time is circular, moving inward and outward at this very moment.... Our current linear perception of time merely conceives of time as a line that goes away, in a progression of moments we are leaving and ones that we are heading towards. If humanity could adopt this new vision of time, clockwise and counterclockwise at the same time, we would have no need of making or holding onto human history. Our societies would be perpetually stable and centered (205-6).

Time, then, moves in different directions simultaneously— in a cyclical fashion, moving away and moving towards any given moment at the same time. History is not a series of events that we leave behind. And can such a concept mean that we may also access, on an individual and a collective level, a kind of hindsight, if future possibilities are already latent in present moments, just as the past is?

A unidirectional motion of time feeds into both historical amnesia and a disregard for the repercussions of our actions, while a multi-directional temporality acknowledges how the past lives in, and informs, the present. Forest visualizes this movement of time through the image of the “cosmic serpent.” In one illustration of this concept, she shows

two serpents, one facing clockwise and the other in the opposite direction, each holding its tail in its mouth, forming two layers of full circles. I too have found that the serpentine imagery is useful in this chapter, in interconnecting past and present, and in weaving together seemingly paradoxical themes.

Emma Perez challenges chronological historical narratives, and seeks to decolonize colonialist historiographies that have been marked by erasure of gender, sexuality and race. In making visible Chicana feminist subjectivities, she chooses a non-linear temporality, reflecting on how, as a historian, she imposes order on fragments of history. Similarly, Maylei Blackwell, in remembering the Chicana feminist print cultures of the 1960s and 70s, also relies on non-linear temporalities to explain the “multiple insurgencies” of Chicana feminists in the personal and political spheres of that time. For Blackwell, a uni-directional linear movement enforces the idea of an original oppression. Because of such linearity, in dominant white feminist historical narratives, feminisms of color “get added on to the end of the linear trajectory of history” (25-9). Like Blackwell’s Chicana historiography, in this chapter, I use a non-linear movement of time to assert an epistemological shift in the way we relate to and recount history in Lebanon, as well as a shift in the issues that we include in our feminist history (27). As such, queer organizing did not come in a later stage of social movements, but it has assumed many faces through time, even though self-identified public LGBT organizing only appeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lebanese mainstream history has been written in linear chronology. Warring ethno-sectarian factions, however, have given this history a postmodern characteristic: an awareness that each ethno-sectarian group may have a drastically diverging perspective

of their history from other groups, making a singular official narrative unlikely to be accepted among all factions.<sup>21</sup> What the different dominant narratives of the Lebanese religious/political sects do have in common is the erasure of women's experiences.

Yet in adopting a non-linear serpentine temporality, it is not a stretch to consider that it is as indigenous to West Asia as it is to the Americas. Although there is no study of indigenous temporality in this specific region, by looking at forms of narration in ancient Mesopotamian mythologies, for example, I can infer an understanding of time in the way storytellers recounted events. I rely on scholar Firas Al Sawah's analysis of structures of narration in ancient West Asian mythological texts, which as he demonstrates, combine different narrative models. He shows, for example, that there is a simple/straightforward model of storytelling in Mesopotamian mythologies, and there is another complex model. The first model is linear and chronological, carrying multiple meanings (49-50). The complex model of myths, on the other hand, is one where "events move in more than one direction, and intersect within a [more complex structure]" (50; my translation).

To begin with, the story that Al Sawah presents as an example of the complex model is an Babylonian origin story where the gods are creating the four directions; hence we see that the structure of the text, i.e its complexity, and the content of the text, on the four directions, mirror each other. In this particular ancient narrative, the sub-

---

<sup>21</sup> See Ahmad Beydoun's discussion of the questions over Lebanese history in his monograph *Al Sira'a Al Tarikh Libnan* (The Struggle Over Lebanon's History). There have been other historical accounts of the creation of Lebanon's history, such as Kamal Salibi's *A House of Many Mansions*, which shows the colonialist and nationalist ideologies behind the construction of certain historical narratives; Salibi addresses the "war over Lebanese history" (200). See also Fawaz Traboulsi's *A History of Modern Lebanon*, which emphasizes the socio-economic background to political conflicts.

stories seem to be disconnected, yet they ultimately return to each other. This is not unlike the complex cyclicity of *ألف ليلة وليلة*, or *A Thousand and One Nights*. In this epic tale, there are multiple connected stories and digressions, yet we always come back to the original point with the story of Shehrazad and King Shahrayar. This point of origin and return, then, is also the larger framework that holds all the tales together.

I infer from the study of these models of storytelling in ancient myths a different consciousness of time. Linear time does exist, just as the simple chronological model of narration exists, but it is to be understood within a bigger structure, a more complex model. Like the stories of Shahrazad and the Babylonian creation myth, time moves in cycles, patterns, and seeming breaks, yet it is always connected. As Forest explained it, movements of time are always meeting each other at any particular point. And as artist-scholar-activist Nia Witherspoon once said, indigenous thought “maintains several fundamental features” throughout different geographical locations (personal conversation, March 2012).

Caribbean-American feminist M. Jacqui Alexander connects multi-directional temporality with the decolonization of spirituality, and of colonial, heteropatriarchal capitalist history. It is no coincidence, then, that in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander opens her unit on the Sacred by remembering and honoring her feminist foremothers who took part in the creation of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Alexander explains that, because she was not part of the “birthing” of the anthology, keeping its memory alive is one way of continuing its work (260). For Alexander, part of an activist’s spiritual and political responsibility, as these two are tied

together, is a process of “rewiring the senses” (310). Such rewiring includes our sense of Time, so we are able to do the healing work of understanding “who walks with you” and thus of knowing the work that we are meant to be doing (300-3).

In other words, changing the way we perceive time is part of the spiritual and activist work of deconstructing how the past lives in the present. The spiritual aspect of this paradigm is something that I am aware of, but I do not engage further in this project. What I do pursue next is a history of women's labor organizing, often erased from mainstream memory, that challenges capitalist exploitation, as well as gender expectations. I start with a recollection of a critical contemporary event-- a workers' strike that took place in 2012, and I allow this event to invoke different histories of labor organizing. These histories will reveal that women were and continue to understand the importance of politicized memory.

### **Presenting the Past with Bread and Sweat: Feminism in Workers' Struggles**

A vignette:

*The beginning of May 2012 witnessed the contract workers of EDL (Electricite du Liban), Lebanon's electric public company, declaring a strike against layoffs, demanding permanent employment and fairer wages (Abouzaki). Holding their protest inside the EDL building and its courtyard, the workers wanted the public to know that their pay had been withheld, and that the injuries some workers suffered on the job had not been compensated. Twelve of their fellow workers had been killed on the job (Abouzaki “Electricite de Liban”; Kob “Intifadat”). The strikers were also making a statement*

*against privatization, arguing that it would take away their rights, their social security and other benefits (Kob). The strike would continue for two months, garnering national attention, both in sympathy and criticism.*

I am not claiming that all feminists in Lebanon engaged with this strike, yet the feminist thought that I propagate here is one that connects with labor rights, materially and conceptually. In true serpentine cyclical motion, I open this section as I close it, with a presentation of feminist responses to the events in the above vignette. I will show how these responses supported labor struggles from a feminist perspective, contextualizing them within older histories of workers' mobilization, and connecting them to different social struggles. Similarly, I also position this strike within the histories of women's participation in labor and labor struggles from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s. Yet I also call attention to the queer presence of women in factories, and the challenges that they posited to heteronormativity.

Feminist solidarity with the 2012 EDL strike appeared not only in feminist spaces, but pushed into more widely-read national publications. In an example of the latter, journalist Rasha Abouzaki wrote "Electricite du Liban: Striking Workers Test Their Powers" in *Al Akhbar* newspaper. Abouzaki gave an overview of the workers' demands and the government's response, yet she interviewed only women strikers, of different political backgrounds. She was thus reminding readers that women are a central part of the demonstrations. And when workers burned tires in the company's courtyard in protest, Abouzaki revealed, it was the women workers who were "closer to the smoke than the men. Their voices rising with others calling for an end to the injustice." In other words, if



feminist journalists, scholars and activists, do not deliberately focus on women and document their participation in organizing, the history of labor struggles will continue to be told in the male pronoun. Centering women in the narrative allows us to see continuity in women's resistance, and the gendered anxieties around their labor.

When Abouzaki interviews women workers, she highlights their struggles-- the human suffering, as well as their radical voice, and their coalitional consciousness. The significance of this tactic is that public opinion of the strike was cut across political (and sectarian party lines), as well as class lines; political analysis that dismissed class struggles, or that was loyal to the Minister of Water and Energy and the political party he represented, portrayed workers as angry and irrational people (Kob). Workers were thus accused of trying to score a political gain rather than fighting for their rights.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, Abouzaki may have introduced the women's voices to counter such reasoning. Importantly too, Abouzaki presents the past, by recalling history as a cyclical movement, thus drawing connections between the current event and a demonstration that drew national attention in the 1970s.

In November 1972, workers of the Ghandour candy company went on strike to demand “higher wages, equal distribution of wages between men and women, and the right to organize in unions” (Traboulsi *A History of Modern Lebanon* 167). Calling attention to the “echoes of the Ghandour strike” that she believes were still reverberating

---

<sup>22</sup>For newspaper articles that report biases against the workers, see Ibrahim Al Amin, “Lebanon's Electricity Crisis” *Al Akhbar English*. Jan 12, 2012. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/lebanon%E2%80%99s-electricity-crisis> last accessed Feb. 27, 2014; Farfahinne, “Intifadat al Mouyawimeen.” *Farfahinne: Socialist from Lebanon*. <http://farfahinne.blogspot.com/2012/06/blog-post.html> last accessed Feb. 27, 2014.

in the 2012 protests, Abouzaki writes that in 1972 “1,200 workers from the Ghandour candy factories took action that shook Lebanese public opinion. Their demand was similar to those of EDL’s contract workers, but their numbers were less.” The 1972 demonstration were met with brutal suppression, as police fired on the demonstrators, killing and injuring workers (Abouzaki; Traboulsi; Abu-Mjahed).<sup>23</sup> What Abouzaki does not mention was that one of the workers killed was a woman organizer-- Communist party member Fatima Khawaja, and Yusuf al Attar, another communist organizer. While a mainstream middle class perspective may not remember the histories of labor organizing, women face double erasures. As rebellious women workers who actively participated and led past struggles, the erasure of their experiences makes it even more difficult to be remembered by contemporary feminists.

Looking through a serpentine framework reveals that the strikes of 2012 and of the 1970s were themselves a continuation of earlier movements from the late 1960’s. During the labor organizing of the 1960’s, workers demanded “equal pay for men and women, family allowances, maternity and sickness leave” as well as “outlawing sexual harassment” that women faced in their jobs (Traboulsi *A History* 167-8). Women, therefore, were able to include their demands and experiences into the labor movement. And in order to demand protection against sexual harassment, the workers must have talked openly about their experiences, therefore breaking what we assume has always been a taboo subject for women. Moreover, in 1972, the heads of the Ghandour company must have acknowledged women as leaders, because both men and women were

---

<sup>23</sup>Abouzaki writes that three workers were killed, while Traboulsi names two, Fatima Khawaja and Yousef Al Atar.

considered agitators, and were not allowed to go back to work when the strike ended and the company resumed operation (Traboulsi *A History* 168; Traboulsi “Al Harakat Al Ijtima’iya fi Tarikh Libnan”).<sup>24</sup> Labor struggles, therefore, have long been feminist sites; these are sites where women took leadership, and where they called for gender equality as part of improving work conditions. Yet if we only link feminism to a mainstream women's movement, and labor organizing only to men's experiences, these feminist stories will continue to be repressed.

While Abouzaki presented the past in terms of workers' organizing against exploitation and confronting state violence, what was still being erased in her piece-- and in Lebanese collective memory, is women's active involvement, and martyrdom, for labor rights. It is in the midst of this historical erasure, including her own, that Abouzaki chose her interviewees in the 2012 strike to be all women. The journalist also observed that the workers she talked to, who are often from poor families, worked collectively. Amhaz, for example, was not only striking for her own benefit, “but for those of all her colleagues.” Hers was therefore a collective consciousness that insists on justice for everyone involved in the struggle. Another interviewee, Rida, countered negative publicity that showed them greedily agitating for unearned rights. Rida declared “we are from good families, we have

---

<sup>24</sup> Fawaz Traboulsi's article is the source I use where he states that men and women—a hundred of them, were not allowed to go back to work, punished for allegedly leading the strike. <http://history8archaeology.yoo7.com/t31-topic>. Last accessed 20 April 2013. Fawzi Abu Mjahed, on the other hand, on the Lebanese Communist party website, writes that the company (and the government) terminated the jobs of four people, and not hundreds; yet he does not say if they were men and women. Abu Mjadeh, Fawzi. “A Nidaa 211: Mahatat Nidaliyya fi Tarikh al Tabaqa al Amila wa al Haraka al Niqabiyya.” *Lebanese Communist Party*. 8 May 2013. [http://www.lcparty.org/website/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=2120:-211-](http://www.lcparty.org/website/index.php?option=com_content&id=2120:-211-). Last accessed 20 April 2014.

pride” (Abouzaki).

I pay particular attention here to Rida’s quote “we are from good families,” as a response to a history of questioning the morality of women working in factories. It is this history that I turn to next, as I show that queer feminist thought and organizing is grounded in multiple sites of historical struggles that are still operating today. I read the 2012 strike as containing echoes of women’s struggles dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to consecutive decades, such as the 1940's tobacco strikes that led to the killing of labor organizer Warda Butrus Ibrahim.

Historically, women’s entry into the workforce has been a dilemma for the heteropatriarchal system in Lebanon. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mount Lebanon experienced its entry into the global capitalist system, with the French-backed silk industry, manufacturing the silk in factories, and exporting cocoons to Europe. This industry changed the economy and its labor, from one based on land to one that is part of capitalism and factory work; but it also transformed gender and class relations and expectations, as women and girls from poor families were the prime workers in silk factories (Khater 325-6). Akram Fouad Khater describes the changes in peasants' economic patterns, where “French mercantile houses” would lend farmers money to purchase silkworms, thereby tying them to debt. In addition, with the monopoly over the industry, farmers were no longer growing food that sustained them, they had to borrow more money to buy basics, such as wheat and other grains (328). Fluctuating prices (and French control of these prices) meant that the peasants were not prospering (328).

The poorest of the peasants, threatened by debt with the loss of their lands and

livelihoods, had no choice but to send their daughters to work in the factories. For those who could not--or would not, have their daughters work in factories, male immigration to the Americas was the only other option (329). Yet women were also seen by the French industrialists as better options for industries. They were considered more submissive and therefore less likely to protest their conditions than men; they were believed to be naturally endowed with “nimble fingers”; and they were undervalued, and could thus be paid less than their male counterparts for work they were supposedly better suited at (329-30). Fawwaz Traboulsi also writes that the girls and women recruited from orphanages were not paid at all (*Hareer wa Hadeed* 128).

By the 1880s, “one out of every five families had a daughter working in these factories” (Khater 330). And they worked in horrible conditions. Girls (some as young as seven) and young women labored in the cramped, dark, unventilated, hot spaces for ten to twelve hours. On the one hand, the money they earned did eventually give them “the power of independent and individualized decision-making” in their families, which they did not have before (333). On the other hand, their work in factories “tainted” their reputation. Eyes followed them disapprovingly when they passed by the village. Their job, which included contact with men, meant that their morality was questioned. As a result, their chances of marriage were also jeopardized (334).

The image of the factory woman/girl turned into a salient image in Lebanon, and it was one that attracted negative connotations. Parents would reprimand their daughters by yelling at them “are you going to behave like a factory girl?!” (331). Thus, the “factory girl” became a queer presence in her context, a representation of what “good

girls” should not be and behave like. Khater describes this change in gender and class dynamics as a “crisis in patriarchy” (332). Yet a crisis in gender relations and expectations was also a crisis in heteronormativity, as the “factory girl” disrupted gender roles, and triggered anxieties around families’ “honor”. Thus when Rida, the organizer in Abouzaki’s piece declares that “we are from good families,” her statement carries the hauntings of this past, where women working outside the house damaged their reputation as good women, just as agitating for their rights damaged their reputation as good workers.

Patriarchy may have been challenged, but not smashed in the process of these economic and gender changes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mount Lebanon. In fact, it was women’s work in the factory that allowed men to not work there, and to continue to do the more socially accepted labor in the fields (331). Still, when we look at the intersection of sexuality, gender relations and class positions, we see how this historical period created a new queer(ed) segment of society, and an image of the factory girl that represented this crisis. It may be worth noting here that after the decline of the silk industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the factories were said to have been turned into brothels (*Al Raida* Women and Work editorial 3). From factories to brothels: another venue that the most impoverished women would work in, and would be further queered by. One factory was converted by the educator, Emily Trad (whose father was the owner of the factory), into a school that was devoted to orphans (*Al Raida* 3; Khairallah 235).

Furthermore, a queer analysis which is more interested in the relations amongst the women themselves, would also pay attention to the shifts in relations amongst women

workers, as what bound them was not blood relations, but shared spaces of exploitation and struggle. Even though the factories were commonly too loud to allow conversations during work (Khater 333), it is likely to have produced different ways of relating to women from outside one's immediate kin networks. What were those relations, and how were they lived, sanctioned, and forbidden? While such homosocial relationships are not the focus of this project, they are worth pointing out to. Though we may never have answers for these questions, they are nevertheless part of queer feminist thought because they are part of the histories, relationships, and resistance that have been erased, particularly because they were threatening to heteropatriarchy, and to colonial domination.

Given that women were seen as less likely to defy those in power at the factories, the threat they posed was both effective, and unexpected to colonial and local patriarchal powers. Women in the silk industries gained awareness of competition among different factories, and started to negotiate with management for better salaries. The women would have factories compete for them by offering them better wages, and they would choose the factory that offered the best deal (Khater 332). Therefore, women workers came to recognize the value of their labor to the capitalists, and they were thus able to exert agency in the hiring process. Workers also slowed down the pace of the work, in order to slow production. Yet women's resistance was also direct and public: the women resorted to strikes to demand better working conditions. In one particular strike, the workers were able to secure their demands within a week, as the managers agreed to grant them “twenty days of paid vacation and fourteen months of pay per year” (332). The resistance

and victories by women who had been queer(ed) because of their class and shifting gender relations are part of the queer feminist history

The above narratives lurk in the shadows of contemporary labor struggles and women's rights organizing; yet I see them as central to a queer feminist thought. Therefore, while queer feminist activists today may often find it hard to connect to icons of respectability within the elite women's movement-- as I have shown in the previous chapter, women in factories constitute a challenge to respectability, embodying gender and sexual politics on the margins.

Moving in a serpentine motion to connect past and present, when we come to understand the direct and indirect ways that women workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century resisted exploitation, we can start to recognize similar patterns of resistance in later decades. Furthermore, we can begin to see recurrent anxieties around gender and sexual norms that working women provoked. In the 1940s, for example, while women in factories pushed for justice based on gender, class and national independence, many elite women's rights activists stood in opposition to changing gender roles. The 1940s was a watershed decade in Lebanese (and Arab) histories. It is the decade that began in the midst of World War II, and ended with the loss of Palestine. It is also the decade that saw the independence of newly formed Arab nation states, including Lebanon. Elizabeth Thompson shows that the 1940s was a turning point in terms of colonial/nationalist and gender relations in the region. Class based struggles interconnected with nationalist aspirations, and gender dynamics. In the early forties, communist groups-- among other parties, organized hunger marches in Lebanon and in Syria, and women were at the center of organizing (233).



The Aleppo march went on for several days, as the women chanted, “*We’re hungry, we want bread!*” In Beirut as well, thousands of women filled the streets, and their slogans called for low bread prices (Thompson 233-4). These public acts of defiance focused on workers’ livelihoods, and were influential enough to lead to changes in the politicians’ rhetoric (which is what I also observed from the 2012 strike). One main reason that women played a large part in those mobilizations was due to dire economic circumstances created by the war, that propelled them (back) to work in the factories (Thompson 238-9). Anxieties were high that time; World War II had triggered memories of the famine and locust invasion that had devastated Lebanon during that previous transnational war (233), but many women may have also been carrying traumatic histories of genocide, exodus, rape and forced marriages, such as what Armenian women had experienced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century before they settled in Lebanon (Tachjian 66). These histories, from Armenia and from Palestine, also have to be remembered in the feminist history of Lebanon.

Thompson and Abisaab point out that well-off women responded to the economic difficulties of the forties mainly through charities, and through writing about socio-economic issues in women's magazines. Yet it was frequently a discourse where women’s domesticity was emphasized rather than challenged. Thus, well-off women supported those working in charities and in schools, but distanced themselves from women laboring in factories. It was more important, they stated, to make men appreciate the work they provide in the home “before even thinking of replacing men in the job market,” as stated in the women's magazine, *Al Mar'a al Jadida* (Abi Saab 40).

As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more women were entering the paid workforce in the early 1940s, which provoked (yet again) a crisis in gender relations, challenging the dynamics of the home and workplace (Thompson 238). It is through this crisis, Thompson argues, that in 1942, Mother's Day became an official holiday in Lebanon—to remind women that their personal glory and their patriotic contribution should happen through motherhood. In 1943, birth control was outlawed. In that year too, Bshara El Khouri<sup>25</sup> refused to grant women the right to vote. And that same year, the Women's Social Democratic League was formed by school teachers as a forum to reprimand working mothers (240-1). Simply put, in the midst of the struggle for national independence, colonial rule and the anti-colonial Lebanese elite were working together to ensure the institutionalization a specific concepts of gender that was upheld by elite women. Simultaneously, the activism of working class women, struggling against gender and class inequality, as well as against colonialism and capitalism, were being erased, even by women's rights activists.

Upper class women were therefore acting as the guardians of class-based heteropatriarchy and respectability. While they called for education and medical care to be available for all segments of society, it was more of a charitable stance than any of a desire for social change and cross-class coalitions. Instead, they considered only the well-off as the ones deserving of political participation. Rose Shahfa for example, head of the women's delegation to the 1944 Arab Women's conference in Cairo, stated her belief that educated women have “more right to political privileges than the ignorant man who enjoys these privileges” (Thompson 273). Clearly this was not an analysis of socio-

---

<sup>25</sup> The first president of the independent Lebanese state.

economic conditions and their effect on access to education for all, but an offense at the idea of “ignorant” working class men having more rights than upper class women<sup>26</sup>.

These classed dynamics are predecessors of what contemporary feminist activist, Leen Hashem, calls “حركات فنجان القهوة” or the “cup-of-coffee movements.” Referring to the social custom in which Lebanese/Arab women regularly visit each other and talk over coffee, Hashem sees a branch of organizing that is similar in its social conformity. The “cup-of-coffee” movements consist of socialites-- wives and relatives of wealthy men, who meet in luxurious spaces, take part in charities, and then advertise their charitable donations in magazines. Their organizing is thus centered on a politics of respectability, on maintaining their social positions and on preserving the status quo. These women, Hashem declares, seclude themselves from communities outside their socio-economic class and individuals who are not like them, including individuals and communities who defy heteronormativity (“Cup of Coffee”, *Sawt al Niswa*).

Hashem's critique of the wealthy and charity-based facet of the women's movement is crucial, because it challenges the privileged position of elite women as the primary women's rights activists. However, paying attention to working class women's struggles also reveals that women-centered practices such as visitations and meetings over coffee has been mobilized by working class women too, as I will later show. That is, less privileged women may also meet over “cups of coffee” and use these meetings as grounds for politicized and mobilizing for their communities; these tactics may

---

<sup>26</sup>In making this argument, I was influenced by Angela Davis' analysis of the women's suffrage movement in the U.S in her seminal work, *Women, Race and Class*, where she pointed the racism of the women's movement.

additionally hold some potential for alliances amongst feminists of different age groups and political orientations. Indeed, since then, Hashem herself has come to self-reflect on the term, and to see the potentials of “cup-of-coffee” organizing beyond that of “wealthy charity wives.” But she has also come to critique movements that profess radicalism and inclusion, and to see the elitism at work in them (personal conversation, August 2013). I will return to the cup-of-coffee movement in the following chapter, when I address militant Palestinian women's organizing against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and when I show how women from Armenian Lebanese communities in crisis organized their communities through seemingly mundane tactics like visiting each other.

Historically and presently then, it would be too limiting to circumscribe feminism only within upper class women's organizing—or only within young self-identified feminist circles. Searching for women's participation in various struggles also opens up different aspects of gendered relations. AbiSaab shows that in the 1930s, bourgeois women tied their anti-Regie discourse (Regie being the tobacco company, Régie Co-Intéresse Libanaise de Tabacs et Tombacs) to their position as mothers of their family and their nation. The women who worked in factories, on the other hand, had a different discourse and a different way of organizing, as their activism drew correlations between anti-colonial protests and demands for better working conditions (42-6). Abi Saab lists, describes and analyzes a number of strikes from the 1920s till the 1960s. One of the more prominent action was the 1946 strike in the Hadath branch of the Regie, which was predominantly organized by women (and which was helped by the solidarity of the workers in Syria).

During this particular 1946 tobacco strike, the management wanted business to go on as usual, with distributing cigarettes to the market despite the protest. Yet the workers, in Lebanon as in Syria, disrupted the trucks' movement. In Beirut and its suburbs-- Mar Mikhayil then Furn el Shebbak, the strikers—predominantly women, lay on the ground to block the truck from unloading, while shouting, “let the truck pass over our bodies!” The police, in line with management interests, rejected this act of rebellion, and they clashed with the protesters. One woman worker and prime organizer, Warda Butrus Ibrahim, was killed. As unionist, Dr. Mary al-Dibs, recounts, “some workers that day backed down [and] Warda yelled at them to return to their positions and stay put. Suddenly, a policeman stepped forward, drew his gun at Warda's chest, and fired” (qtd. in Al-Hajj, *Al Akhbar* 2012). Sixteen other women and thirteen men were wounded and rushed to Hotel Dieu hospital in Beirut. To help their injured peers, the workers raised money to cover the costs of their hospital bills and to provide support for their families (75-6).

This deadly confrontation between workers and authorities, as I have shown earlier, would emerge again in the late sixties and the early seventies, as with the 1972 Ghandour strike. Two workers, a man and a woman, would be killed in that strike, and others would lose their jobs. Yet the women are seldom remembered in these histories. Women workers are absent, for example, in the monograph of union leader, Aziz Saliba, whose work is an otherwise meticulous documentation of the history of the Lebanese syndicate movement in the agricultural valley of Beqaa. When Saliba mentions women, it is usually in official women's rights organizations, such as the branch of the Lebanese Women's Rights Committee in Zahle (in Beqaa, a region east of Beirut). Through the

Women's Rights Committee, women mobilized mainly around issues of teaching and education, gathering petitions and meeting with the Minister of Education around issues such as free education and building more public schools in the region (65-6). While Saliba notes women's participation in labor rights events (143), he does not address their contribution to labor movements in Beqaa.

Saliba does mention the renowned writer Emily Faris Ibrahim and her involvement in a festival for Labor's Day in 1946, though he does not give any details of what she may have said during her speech at the event. Ibrahim was an icon of the mainstream women's movement, as she headed the Lebanese Women's Council (LCW) for twenty one years. Like many mainstream groups, the LCW, which was launched in 1952 and is currently an umbrella group for hundreds of organizations, is focused on legislative changes. Its tactics include forming close connections with politicians and figures of power to lobby for change.<sup>27</sup> In 1966, Ibrahim published an important manuscript that documents individuals and organizations across Lebanon, and in different parts of the world, that are dedicated to women's rights. Her book, *الحركة النسائية في لبنان*, or *The Women's Movement in Lebanon*, was useful, for example, in my own search for groups that once worked on women in prisons, and on labor rights; her inclusion of intellectuals and artists was also informative; and her documentation reveals another significant issue: that women's rights organizers understood the importance of being aware of each other's work and networking with each other, despite their different approaches and backgrounds (Zeidan 44). That, however, may not always have translated

---

<sup>27</sup>See the "Friends of LCW" page on their website <http://lcw-cfl.org/en/Home/FriendsofLCW/tabid/319/language/en-US/Default.aspx>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

across class lines (38). Because despite women's networking with each other, *what should we make of the fact that Ibrahim was part of the Regie administration, working as its head of publicity?*<sup>28</sup>

But there are, and have always been, feminists (whether or not they identify as such) in different sites of protest,<sup>29</sup> from different backgrounds (though many of them were working class), who were able to articulate their position as women and as workers. Linda Matar is an icon who represents such a segment that held both feminist and class consciousness. Coming from a working class background, she has also been part of the Lebanese League for Women's Rights since 1953,<sup>30</sup> and she also headed the Women's Rights Committee in 1978. In one radio interview, Matar recollects how she left school at the age of 12 to work in a factory. Later, she would go to night school and work during the day. Having been employed in a silk factory as well, Matar experienced the realities of the workers. Their arduous labor, the discrimination they faced, long hours and minimal pay deeply impacted her politics (Bayati 1; *Sharika wa Laken* episode 5).

Thus, despite the ideological distance between the mainstream women's movement and the workers' movement, there were few women who connected these positions, and contributed to a feminist thought that is steeped in socio-economic justice as well gender equality. As I've been developing an analysis of these struggles

---

<sup>28</sup> Be'ayni, Najib. "Emily Faris Ibrahim: Muhariba Anhakaha al Yaa's." *Assafir*. 30 March 2011. <http://www.assafir.com/Windows/PrintArticle.aspx?ArticleID=233098&ChannelID=0&ref=Toolbar>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

<sup>29</sup> See Walid Dao's article on the history of workers' struggles in Lebanon for these different sites of protest. Dao, Walid. "Al Haraka al Niqabiya wal Ummaliya fi Lubnan." *Al Thawra al Da'ima*. March 2013. <http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/issue3/brief-history-oflabor-movement-lebanon>. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

<sup>30</sup> *Who is She in Lebanon?* n.d. <http://whoisshe.lau.edu.lb/expert-profile/linda-matar>.

historically, I also connect them to present day queer feminist organizing. That is, these histories relate to contemporary queer feminism that is not solely focused on identity politics, but that connects different struggles and multiple margins together. Present day manifestations of such connections were evident in 2012, as some activists and journalists used a feminist lens to show that women were principal organizers in the EDL strike, as Abouzaki did. In 2012, many feminists in the Beirut-based feminist anti-racist collective, Nasawiya, were at the forefront of the supporters, with members often joining the strikers and propagating the workers' perspectives and their demands. Farfahinne Kob, member of Nasawiya who constantly blogs on workers' rights and resistance in Lebanon, continues to follow up on this particular story despite its disappearance from mainstream news.<sup>31</sup> And in March 2012, journalist Fatin El Hajj reminded readers of women's accomplishments in Lebanese unions, historically and in the present day as she also narrated the story of labor organizer Warda Ibrahim (*Al Akhbar* March 2012). Like Abouzaki and other feminists then, remembering women's organizing today continuously evokes past struggles.

As the events of the 2012 strike were unfolding, Hashem wrote the essay “I am the (Female) Contract Worker... and My Tent Reaches the Sky,” (my translation), a feminist article that was published in *Assafir*, a mainstream Lebanese newspaper. In it, she personalized the workers’ struggles, identifying with the contract workers, working women, and working class women. Through this identification with different struggling groups, Hashem linked the struggle for labor rights to the feminist push for a legal

---

<sup>31</sup>Nasawiya's headquarters was also a few-minutes-walk away from the EDL company; Kob, Farfahinne. *Socialist from Lebanon* <http://farfahinne.blogspot.com/> last accessed Feb. 27, 2014.



protection of women from domestic abuse—another urgent cause that feminists in Lebanon are working towards. Hashem’s title phrase, “reaching the sky,” is indicative of workers’ pride, but it also represents the idea of expanding an issue as widely as possible, by showing its connections and parallels with other struggles.

The attack on women’s rights is therefore, she shows, similar to the attack on women’s bodies. She writes:

I know that who ravages my body by force and arrogance, supported by power dynamics that privilege men, is the same as that who abuses our rights as workers, male and female, supported by power dynamics that place its very wealthy corporations and its protectors on the necks of the hard workers (my translation).

In what is a clear feminist coalitional stand, Hashem makes connections between different groups who are oppressed and exploited by entrenched power structures. In her essay, she urges the exploited and abused to stand together in solidarity, as she also defies the shame and repression that keep both women and workers from rebelling against those who abuse them (Shabab Assafir). Feminist thought thus engages with current workers’ struggles by remembering earlier chapters of labor struggles and women’s participation in them. Feminists also call attention to the connectedness of different struggles against a historically entrenched social-economic and political system. Thus, they challenge a single origin of feminism, and a linear temporality that erases the connections between past and present struggles.

In conclusion, the queer feminist methodology that I am putting forth here allows us to question assumptions of women’s passivity, whether they are working in factories or in their homes. Instead, this methodology looks for resistance to different aspects of violence and exploitation. Queer feminism, for example, questions the absence of

documentation of women's resistance to familial and domestic violence. As activists Rasha Moumneh and Ghoulama argue too, women in abusive situations are more often portrayed as passive victims by Lebanese feminist and women's rights organizations (Moumneh, "Queering the Domestic Violence Law" May 2010; Ghoulama, Rihla 'ala Mal'ab al Dahiyya" Oct 2011). Also hidden inside the homes are the migrant workers, who have been historically Lebanese, Arab or Kurdish women, but since 1990, increasingly come from non-Arab Asian and African countries (Jureidini 77). Their stories and struggles, as I will show in chapter four, is also a central element in feminism from Lebanon. Migrant women, forbidden from creating or joining unions, as Amrita Pande argues, also form collectives that resemble unions in their resistance against exploitation and isolation ( 385-6).

Therefore, feminist queer thought contributes to the study of women in labor struggles is its non-heteronormative lens, making connections between gender, sexuality, and women's work. Hashem, in critiquing the "cup-of-coffee movements" and in interweaving varied women and movements, offers an example of how feminist thought does not shy away from pursuing these connections. Hashem is also inclusive of queer perspectives, as she holds these movements accountable to their heterosexism. Queer feminism in Lebanon today, I am proposing, can see itself as related to, or a descendent of, the queerness of the factory women who challenged class, gender and sexual dynamics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1940's. Just as it may find resonance with women in labor struggles calling for workers' rights and equality in the 1960s and 1970s. Queer feminism of today too may find its history in women holding guns, like the women who

joined the Communist Party, who were reputed to be sexually liberated, and prone to having “free and easy amorous exchange[s]” (Bechara 55).

### Chapter Three: Needles, Pens and Guns: Interweaving Histories of Women's Resistance in Lebanon

Following the previous chapter's discussion of the histories of women's labor organizing that reverberate in the feminist movement to this day, this chapter delves into women's resistance against occupation, state violence and war. As scholars Malek AbiSaab has shown, even prior to Lebanon's independence as a state, labor rights were part of nationalist anti-colonial demands, but the fight for labor rights were also consistently met with local state suppression (43). In this chapter, I interweave accounts of women's resistance from different communities across Lebanon, covering the period between the 1980s-- at the height of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and 2010, at a peak of contemporary feminist organizing.

This chapter also moves within the framework of a cyclical temporality, and a methodology of interconnecting struggles in different sites. As in the last chapter, though I am not recounting histories of women who are often not considered feminist or queer, I take queerness to be about instances where heteropatriarchy is in crisis, or is being questioned. In the pages that follow, through a feminist framework of cyclical temporality that links current events to historical ones, I examine these different histories, Palestinian, Armenian and Lebanese, in Lebanon that are being invoked by one Israeli attack on an international activist ship going to Gaza.

These histories include women's militant resistance and their resistance in prisons, as well as more mundane resistance during wars, occupation and crisis. Many of these forms of resistance do retain some gender conforming aspects, while they also allow women greater opportunities to organize for their families and their communities. Rather than distinguishing between radical and conforming activism, or militant and non-violent activism, I connect them together here as I show the different sites of women's struggles, and the way these sites influence feminist activism today.

And as I did in the last chapter, in order to connect past and present, I begin with a vignette and a feminist response to it. Here, the vignette recounts the 2010 Israeli attack on Turkish activists who were in solidarity with Palestine on board a freedom flotilla. Cyclically, I return to the incident at the end of the chapter in order to show how feminism can hold temporal and political perspectives that challenge mainstream narratives, including those that are supportive of Palestinians and their allies.

Importantly too, because there are more resources on icons of movements rather than nuanced discussions of women's participation in these movements themselves, I use these icons--from Suha Bechara to Laure Mgheizel, to explore the movement that produced them. I argue that icons of movements are not simply exceptional women, but it is the patriarchal construction of narratives that endows them exceptionalism. That is, patriarchal histories have a limited quota on stories about women, choosing to remember a few who often already have a degree of privilege, while repressing many other stories and perspectives that challenge these dominant histories. Whereas the myth of the exceptional woman does not always challenge gender relations on a larger social scale,

situating these icons within their political/social movements acknowledges the importance of collective mobilizing.

### **A vignette**

*On May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010, as part of the “Palestine Our Route, Humanitarian Aid Our Load” campaign, a flotilla of six ships, from six international organizations, was on its way to the besieged Gaza strip, carrying construction material, food and medical aid. Since Gaza’s airport had been bombed ten years earlier, the sea was becoming the most common entry way. Gaza was (and still is) living under a blockade that gives it its name “the largest open prison in the world.” With 70% of its population living on less than a dollar a day, and with scarce access to clean water, humanitarian efforts like these are urgent.<sup>32</sup> Yet on that day, as the ships were docked on international waters, the Israeli navy attacked and raided the flotilla (Barghouti 2006). On board the biggest of these ships, the Mavi Marmara, activists resisted. Nine of them were killed, and fifty were injured. The activists on board the other ships, who did not resist, were held for almost two days—with reports of ill-treatment, and then deported.<sup>33</sup> The incident triggered condemnations and demonstrations worldwide, including Lebanon.*

I begin with an incident that occurred outside of Lebanon, but that nevertheless provoked anger and sympathy, and, as I will show here, triggered collective traumas of war and genocide. Similar to the ways that contemporary feminists drew connections

---

<sup>32</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/31/q-a-gaza-freedom-flotilla>

<sup>33</sup>“Flotilla campaign Summary Report”

[http://www.freegaza.org/attachments/1234\\_Mavi%20Marmara%20Report.pdf](http://www.freegaza.org/attachments/1234_Mavi%20Marmara%20Report.pdf)

between the 2012 labor strikes and longer histories of women in labor movements, feminists also saw the Mavi Marmara tragedy as part of a cyclical history of war and occupation. In the days and weeks after the incident, the articles that appeared in the feminist online space, *Sawt Al Niswa*, were as powerful as they were beautiful, honoring and giving a new life to events that may seem, from a chronological position, distant and foregone.

One article that followed the flotilla attack is “Margaret Atwood, Lessons in Selling Out,” by Palestinian feminist in Lebanon, Sara Emiline Abu Ghazal. Connecting past and present grief, Abu Ghazal described the pain she felt when she heard the news of the flotilla as being very familiar and old, as “it was passed on to me from [my] grandfather.” That is, the flotilla triggered memories of Palestinian expulsion from their land and from the settler colonialist perspectives. About her Palestinian grandfather's pain, Abou Ghazal wrote:

He carried it for a few months, and just like all pregnancies, he delivered it with an even greater pain. He had acknowledged that he lost something, not a land, but a history.

Palestinians tend to feel that they only existed in 1948 and often get upset when Israel tries to push this precious date of existence to 1967. Our wounds feel so old that it could not have possibly been that recent (*Sawt Al Niswa*).

Thus, Abu Ghazal shows that one tragic story of the deaths on the flotilla contains within it another story that is the “point of origin” and frame of reference to all these narratives: that of the loss of Palestine and the constant attempts to repress its history. Moreover, the Palestinian right of return to their homeland is itself a perseverance of non-linearity, refusing that people just forget and move on; and by insisting on remembering 1948 and

not simply 1967, Palestinians are choosing their point of origin, and thus presenting their own past.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in the quote above, Abu Ghazal chooses to make women's pregnancy and giving birth into a metaphor for cyclicity. More importantly, I think, as a metaphor for the constant re-conception and rebirth of Palestinian pain, she does not attach it to women's bodies alone. Both she and her grandfather are pregnant with that pain in the face of erasure and manipulation with Palestinian memories. This feminist perspective on the flotilla therefore becomes a statement about cyclical temporality, coalition, and holding international feminists accountable, as much as it is about gendering metaphors of exodus and collective grief.

In her article, Abu Ghazal engages with Canadian feminist writer Margaret Atwood, who had accepted an honorary award from Israel, despite the call from Palestinians for the cultural and academic boycott of Israel. This boycott, inspired by the 1980s international ostracizing of apartheid South Africa, similarly aims for a transnational grassroots movement to bring about awareness of, and an end to, segregationist policies (Barghouti 63-84; Bakan and Abu Laban 37-8).<sup>35</sup> Feminists like Abu Ghazal are thus holding international (especially progressive) intellectuals and artists responsible for their actions and inaction. Abu Ghazal declared, "Israeli crimes are not only powered by the state. They are powered by all of those who remain silent about

---

<sup>34</sup>Although the dominant Israeli story is not always linear, as it is often being reinforced by the notion of return to the original homeland.

<sup>35</sup>Though technically, the League of Arab States have called for boycott since 1948, yet their call-out remains largely ineffective (Bakan and Abu Laban 34).



them” (Abu Ghazal, “Lessons in Selling Out”).

Moreover, queer feminist activists have integrated the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment campaign movement (or BDS) and “pinkwatching” into queer feminist organizing in Lebanon. Pinkwatching Israel is a campaign that monitors Israeli and international propaganda that presents Israel as a haven for LGBT rights, an oasis of democracy and gay-friendliness in an uncivilized Brown/Arab Middle East, while ignoring apartheid and human rights abuses of Palestinians, gay and straight alike (Moumneh, *Menassat* 2009). The website, Pinkwatching Israel, was established in 2010 by queer Arab-- including Lebanese, activists in an attempt to counter and deconstruct such propaganda. In 2011, feminist and queer groups from Lebanon endorsed a statement which critiques “separating ‘gayness’” from other forms of oppression and hiding behind claims of being apolitical” (The Queer Shadow Gallery Collective website). In other words, the queer feminism that is being produced is not only being attentive to gender-based violence and inequality, nor to the heterosexism in Lebanon alone. It is recognizing how colonialism benefits from discourse of LGBT and women's rights.

While activists involved in BDS seek to reclaim queer discourse from a racist pro-Israeli framework, Abu Ghazal uses writing to document her history. And while many women resist with politicizing mothering and domestic work<sup>36</sup>, there have also been women in the past decades, Lebanese and Palestinian in Lebanon, who have attempted to reclaim the loss with militarization. In order to better understand the loss and the resistance to it, I argue that women had to come to make amends with their history as

---

<sup>36</sup> See Nancy Naples' *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work and the War on Poverty* for a discussion of activist mothering in working class communities in the U.S.

women and as activists.

In the 1980's, in the context of internal war and Israel's invasion of Lebanon, women participated militantly. Examining the lives and politics of Palestinian women in the resistance movement in Lebanon's refugee camps in the 1980s, anthropologist Julie Peteet observed that they did not always connect to a history of women's activism. Peteet wrote:

younger women activists until very recently had largely discounted the early history of the women's movement... As a consequence, contemporary activists draw a distinct line between their activism and that of women in the pre-1948 period. They perceive their own action as innovative, radical and a break with tradition (39).

In the quote above, I focus on her use of the words "until very recently" to describe an young militant women's alienation from the "history of the women's movement." Based on my study of the elite women's movement in Lebanon, I speculate that the marginalization of Palestinian working class and rural women's militant mobilization, and the visibility of Palestinian elite women's organizing, young activists were not able to see the connection between their activism and that of their predecessors.

It is likely that many militant women considered the older generations of activists through a lens similar to that of Hashem's "cup-of-coffee movements," that I have addressed in the earlier chapter. That is, militant women may have thought of older activism as mobilizing through social and charity events, rather than through radical activism. Yet I believe that the more women got involved with organizing, the more they were able to feel the need to connect with their past, such as the militant participation of peasant women against British colonialism in 1930's Palestine (Peteet 52-4). Thus, even

though it may feel momentarily elating to consider oneself (be it an individual, group, or movement) as radical and as a break from the past, it is ultimately more strategic to connect to a past and show what it inherits from it, and where the present moment diverges from this inheritance.<sup>37</sup>

In her reconstruction of a history centered on Palestinian women, Peteet also highlights a feminist consciousness amongst Palestinian women in Lebanon (95).<sup>38</sup> Peteet pays attention to a “female consciousness” that may essentialize gender differences and does not call for changes in gender norms. However, this female consciousness is often radicalized in times of war. According to Peteet, women's radicalization is gendered and classed, as it is economically disadvantaged women who shoulder the responsibilities and face the most challenges during crises (93-4). Many Palestinian women, like many of their Lebanese counterparts, “stretched” the accepted gender roles assigned to them, expanding a status such as the politically committed mother, housewife and/or widow (208). I will return to this trope of mothering, and the mundane, as a political act, especially during the Lebanese civil war, in the last section of this chapter.

Some of the women that Peteet interviewed recognized that gender equality was “an integral part of national liberation,” even when they did not label themselves as feminists (98). I also read their positions and their activism through a queer feminist lens that is attentive to the ways certain bodies and certain practices challenge

---

<sup>37</sup>Patricia Hill Collins also discusses the problematic nature of being “the first” and the “only one” as a Black woman in the U.S in her preface to the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*.

<sup>38</sup>Though she states that there is no “self-defined Palestinian feminist movement per se” (98). For more sources on Palestinian feminism, see Moghannam; Islah Jad; Shalhoub-Kivokian for more on Palestinian history; Rosemary Sayigh for Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon

heteropatriarchy. Women's militancy, and their gender presentations, can be read as queer in their social context. Though many militant women were respected in their communities, they were also critiqued for allegedly losing their femininity and becom[ing] men” (153-4). Women who chose militant resistance were called “sisters of men” and “honorary men” (155). The latter term especially carries an image of a shift in gender, from women to men, yet not quite men either. While the common label “sister of men” conveys what Peteet calls women’s desexed position, as they are given a “gender neutral role” by their male peers. Peteet argues that use of the term “sister of men”, a common Arabic term, prioritizes kinship and relations as siblings, thus making the women sexually nonthreatening (155).

Sex and sexuality are at the heart of the term, by its denying of sexual connotations. The term “sister of men”, which can also imply being “like men” (brave, independent etc.) challenges gender expectations to a certain extent, even if it happens through a patriarchal framework that sees women as weak. In the context of organized resistance, being “sisters of men” and “honorary men” is also about resembling men in militancy. One study of militant women who fought during the civil war in Ethiopia showed them as adopting androgynous attitudes and appearances (Negewo-Oda and White). Beza Negewo-Oda and Aaronette White call this androgynous presentation a “liminal gender identity” (164). I believe the same can be said of many women in Lebanon who took up arms during the war. I read liminal gender identities here as a queer position that challenges gender binaries.

The argument for the desexualization of militant women is therefore insufficient

in fully capturing their agency in the face of both respect and criticism. Peteet discusses the constant threat of rumors and gossip about their sexuality/morality. Their capabilities as fighters were constantly questioned as well. Militant women faced more social surveillance, as well as the threat of losing the label “honorary men” if they transgressed the borders of “gender neutral” and “moral” (that is, sexual) behavior (157). On the other hand, women who were rumored to be “loose” did sometimes enjoy posthumous respect after their deaths in militant operations, as was the case of Palestinian fighter Dalal Al Mughrabi (155-6). In other words, I see these tensions between respect and criticism, between militancy and sexuality to be queer junctures where women are given rigid new roles-- to be stoical, “respectable”, and intellectual, and in which they transgress expectations of both militancy and femininity. Militant women are not easily contained within any label of femininity and masculinity, but challenge them both. They also defy easy categorization of sexual and asexual. As such, I read their position as being queer.

Though militancy meant, for many women, questioning or dismissing domesticity, as Peteet argues (153), still, the sewing needle-- a prime symbol of domesticity (and daintiness), took on new meanings when it was used by militant women in prisons. The following section focuses on political prisoners held for resisting Israeli occupation in Lebanon. I later interweave this topic with a discussion of Lebanese prisons as spaces and bodies important to queer feminist thought to challenge a politics of respectability and to center the perspectives of women and queers who have experienced violence in prisons.

## Confined Resistance?: Women in Prisons

Prisons are one of the most militarized of zones, yet they are also the most grossly confined by routine. I include prison resistance in this chapter on the history of women's resistance for three reasons. Many Palestinian and Lebanese women who took part in militant (and non-militant) struggle against Israeli occupation after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978, were sent to Israeli-controlled, Lebanese-run, prisons in then-occupied South Lebanon. Secondly, women in prisons are sometimes forgotten in feminist discourse. Thus incorporating them into feminist consciousness is part of the methodology of remembering marginalized resistance that I foreground in this study. I also include them because prisons are sites of resistance to violence and gender hierarchies.

In this section, through a reading of Suha Bechara's prison memoir, *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon*, and her co-edited collection of prison stories, أحلم بزنانة من كرز, (*I Dream of a Prison Cell [Made] of Cherries*), I integrate experiences of women in prison into a queer anti-racist feminist thought. Focusing on political prisoners in Khiam detention center, which was controlled by Israeli forces and their proxy militia in Lebanon—the South Lebanon Army (SLA), and through the lens of Bechara as icon, I later contextualize these women's experiences within the general situation of prisons in Lebanon. The feminist tactics of women in prison that I highlight include a refusal of shame, naming the torturers, giving “symbols of femininity” new and old meanings, as well as creating close relations with fellow prisoners. Resisting gender hierarchies, I show, are also part of the resistance of women in prisons. At the end of this section, I

argue that queer anti-racist feminist investment in prisons is not only a result of its intersection with nationalist and anti-colonial resistance, and its centering of Palestinian struggles. I also relate it to the fact that working class queer(ed) subjects, such as migrant women, and people accused of social or sexual indecency, are more likely to experience, or live under the threat of, imprisonment.

I use the term political prisoners deliberately here, even though many of the women in Khiam were militant, and imprisoned as a result of their militancy. International organizations such as the European Union and Amnesty International use the term “political prisoners” for individuals who have *not* committed any ‘terrorist acts’ (Strasser 1). Yet this definition does not separate between acts of resistance to occupation and settler colonialism, which may be misnamed as terrorism, and between ideologically motivated attacks against civilians.<sup>39</sup> When I use the term “political prisoner” here, I am referring to women who are in prison not because of a felony, but for their political views, whether they resist with the pen or with the gun. Suha Bechara, and many of the women in Khiam, were there because of their militant practices, or due to their affiliation with people who participated in attacks against the Israeli army or its allies in Lebanon.

Khiam is itself an icon because of its history of holding members of the resistance movement, but also because it became infamous for its inhumane treatment of prisoners. As a Lebanese icon, too, it is not exceptional in its record of abuses, but rather representative of the situation of prisons across Lebanon. Suha Bechara is arguably one of the most famous prisoners of Khiam, and in this chapter I link her organizing to

---

<sup>39</sup>[http://assembly.coe.int/Communication/2012-06-26\\_ENpressajdoc21.pdf](http://assembly.coe.int/Communication/2012-06-26_ENpressajdoc21.pdf)

different forms of activism during war and occupation. I also read her narrative and that of her fellow prisoners through a queer feminist lens that troubles violent gender hierarchies, as well as hierarchies between people inside prison and outside it. Bechara, who was a member of the Lebanese Communist party, took part in an operation where she attempted to assassinate the head of SLA, Antoine Lahed, in his house, after going undercover as his wife's trainer. Bechara was imprisoned for ten years, and was released in 1998. Five years later, she published her memoir. After Israel bombed Khiam into rubble during the July 2006 attacks, she and Cosette Ibrahim, also a former Khiam prisoner, edited a collection of prison writings from Khiam, to preserve the memory of what happened there.

The Khiam detention center, in the Southern town of Khiam, was established by the French as a military post in 1933. Because it overlooked the North of Palestine, which was under British colonialism at that time, it was seen as having strategic significance to the French. Its strategic status declined after independence, when the Lebanese army took over, and the South became economically and politically insignificant to the central Lebanese government. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978, Khiam became an interrogation center until the mid-1980s, when it was turned into a prison and detention center run by Israel and the SLA (Khiyam website).<sup>40</sup> In the midst of this loaded history, remembering, and presenting the past, as I will show, becomes an integral part of women's resistance in prisons.

What theories can be adequate to bear witness and explain the stories of physical, verbal and emotional torture, the years of solitary confinement, the monotony and

---

<sup>40</sup><http://www.khiyam.com/aboutkhiyam/kdc.php>



isolation, the censorship and lack of access to the basic necessities?<sup>41</sup> One anonymous contributor to *I Dream of a Prison Cell of Cherries* writes about the torture and its physical aftermaths, describing how the blue marks from the whippings and from the electric shocks remain for many months. Torture changes the women's relationship to their bodies:

We do not care about the color of our bodies or its rapid weight loss or its odor. Only the pain it suffers and that distant cry in us takes hold of us. Everything in us hurts and everything around us hurts... The return of menstrual cycle after months is the first sign that our bodies have recovered their balance (trans. 136).

The violence of occupation and of patriarchy is magnified in prisons, to a degree that it breaks the balance of bodies and biologies, as the torture interrupts menstrual cycles. Remembering what their bodies have suffered is a political act for women, as they resist the shame in talking about the invasion of their bodies and their vulnerabilities (Abboud 5).

Hosn Abboud, writing about the prison memoir of Zainab Al Ghazali, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activist, argues that the naming of the prison guards and of the torturers is a political act (5). Al Ghazali, who was imprisoned from 1965 until 1971, provided a candid description of the bodily torture she endured as a political prisoner during Gamal Abd Al Nasser's rule. Her testimony is therefore a refusal to be shamed and silenced when talking about the invasion of her body. This refusal to be shamed is something that many political prisoners' literature shares. Bechara and her fellow

---

<sup>41</sup>I use the term bearing witness as Leela Fernandes writes about it, as a (political/spiritual) feminist responsibility that breaks the dichotomy of theory and practice. Carolyn Boyes-Watson, in her book on *Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth* in the U.S, also talks about the power of witnessing in healing from personal and collective traumas (149).

prisoners, too, like many women of the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon (Bechara; Bechara and Ibrahim; Peteet 155), narrate their stories in order to push the physical and/or sexual violence against them out of the realm of the unspeakable and into their resistance narratives.

Within the larger framework of examining women's resistance during war, and the feminist cyclical concept of time that brings history to the forefront, these legacies of torture, pain and isolation, and of resisting them, are part of women's collective consciousness. And as I look at marginalized spaces of struggle and resistance, prisons emerge as important sites. Moreover, Peteet notes that Palestinian militant women's who experienced abuse in prisons were respected in their communities (156), and Bechara is also held as an exceptional icon for her Khiam experiences. Yet it is worth noting that many more women in prisons, and especially women from ostracized communities, are not afforded equal respect. What this chapter aims to do is therefore to re-imagine women's prison resistance as part of the history of queer feminist thought and activism by looking at prisons as sites of violence against queered people.

Prisons in Lebanon bring to the forefront existing violence and power structures, and the lack of accountability for this violence. It can also reveal the way women resist these dehumanizing circumstances. I show here how resistance can be direct and visible, but it may be kept hidden intentionally. In other words, while some prisoners have the ability, or choose to accept the consequences of direct confrontation, others choose to resist in less visible means. Caesarina Kona Makhoere, for instance, incarcerated under the South African apartheid system, stated that the government, and the prison

authorities, do not listen “until you take action... you must hit them hard” (41). Makhoere and her fellow prisoners' main strategy “was to nag them with all our complaints, and, if nothing was done, then we took action.” The actions they took included hunger strikes and refusing to wear the clothes they were given (34). With these tactics, women confront prison authorities with direct defiance.

At times, however, intentional indirect challenges to the institution are considered more effective. In Khiam, it was mainly the new prisoners who had bravado enough to carve leftist slogans on the walls, and who were were punished for it. Many of the veteran inmates, on the other hand, engraved their defiant slogans where it could not be seen and in tiny letters (Bechara 91), because it may not have been worth the trouble. In other words, women's bravery does not always have to be loud, and some prisoners chose their battles. Furthermore, effective means of resisting can also include trying to maintain a degree of normalcy and finding meaningful routine in the women’s lives (Nusair; Agah et al).

In Khiam too, finding innovative ways to document and communicate prisoners’ experiences, is a means of resistance kept intentionally hidden. Women wrote journal entries on toilet paper (Bechara 91). For prisoners in solitary confinement, devising instruments for communication became the focus of resistance.<sup>42</sup> Prisoners found ways to make needles and pens out of wires, and to turn pieces of cardboard from cheese boxes into writing pads. One prisoner narrated how they made sewing needles out of an electric

---

<sup>42</sup> Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window*, complicates the idea of “fighting back” and direct resistance that often puts U.S women of color to prison in the first place (97-112)

wire, following a long trial and error process. After the success of this invention, the needles became part of their rituals. The women presented the needles to newly arrived prisoners, for example, to honor their passage through torturous interrogations without betraying their colleagues (Ibrahim and Bechara 60-1). Therefore, sewing needles, a symbol of female domesticity, was used by militant women, who often challenge gendered social expectations, as a symbol of much-needed normalcy. Yet at the same time, it is also used as a symbol of surviving the violence of torture. These two instances, of seeking normalcy and defying torture, become deeply interconnected in prisons.

The title of the entry I refer to above is “in the beginning was the needle” (my translation). The title is a play on the biblical phrase “in the beginning was the word,” creating an alternative origin story centered on the “feminine symbol” of the needle. After all, words cannot mark any beginnings if a person is in solitary confinement and is not able to communicate with anyone. When the beginning is the needle, then the needle becomes a symbol of their ability to be part of the world, to communicate with it, and to resist its solitariness. The redirection into an alternative origin story bears a resemblance to the way Abu Ghazal uses metaphors of pregnancy and birthing to describe her grandfather’s pain; it also implies that the militant and the mundane are not polar opposites but are interconnected.

And if publicly remembering the torture, the torturers, and the isolation of prison is a political and feminist act, so too is the naming of fellow prisoners a politicized tactic of resisting invisibility and creating solidarity. The authors of *I Dream of a Cell Made of Cherries* remain anonymous-- bearing resemblance to *Bareed Mista3jil*, the anthology by

queer women and transpeople in Lebanon that I highlight in chapter five. However, in this collection of prison stories, while the authors are anonymous, the names of their peers are documented in the footnotes, along with the names of their hometowns and the years of their imprisonment. The collection therefore aims at remembering the names of women prisoners such as Kifah Afifi, from Palestine, Samar Alleeq from Arnoun, Wafiq Aleeq from Yohmor, Haniyya Ramadan from Beit Yahoun, Amena Diab of Hawla, Hanan Khoury from Deir Mimas. In doing so, *I Dream of a Cell* is centering women's struggles through naming the women and documenting their experiences, into resistance narratives.

Another common theme in women's prison writings is the importance of strong coalitions among women, often transgressing ideological divisions. These friendships are described by prisoners as therapeutic, acting as emotional anchors, giving women a sense of purpose (Parsi 206). While strong relations between women ensure their survival, in these spaces of enforced gender segregation among prisoners, violent heteropatriarchy is evident as a segregating and disciplining mechanism (Alexander 192). In Khiam, the only men that the women interact with are their guards, who are often their torturers. On the other hand, the men and women prisoners are kept segregated, and express a longing to see each other, and to communicate with each other. In *I Dream of a Cell Made of Cherries*, the women narrate stories of their attempts to break this segregation, even by catching a glimpse of each other, or hearing each others' voices. Even as the prison reinforces a gender hierarchy between the women prisoners and the guards, imprisonment and torture create a sense of gender equality between the inmates themselves.

Zainab Al Ghazali, criticizing Abed Al Nasser's socialist party, described "the

socialist nature of torture "اشتراكية التعذيب" —or better translated from Arabic as the unity of torture, among all inmates, irrespective of gender, age, and education” (Abboud 11-2). This unity of torture is evident in my own research on women in Lebanese prisons, be they political prisoners or common law prisoners. It is not only in prisons run by Israel (though the Khiam guards were in fact Lebanese) where abuse of women and men happened. Furthermore, torture was not only a war-time practice, but continued across Lebanese prisons, creating confined war zones long after the fighting stopped.<sup>43</sup> To think of prisons as war zones allows us to see the different ways that women are victimized during wars; but it also ensures that we address not only the end of physical manifestations of violence, but all the structures and systems that allow violence, including the violence of confinement, to occur.

After of the end of the war and of foreign occupation, and to this day, life in Lebanese prisons remains horrific, and the torture of women in detention is still prevalent. Prisons in the post-war period are overcrowded and the women are cut off from the world and held incommunicado, despite the illegality of these practices.<sup>44</sup> Whereas the law states that detainees should be released if they do not see a magistrate within the first 24 hours, the women are held for weeks before being interrogated (11). Political prisoners in the 1990s, whether they were accused of “collaboration with Israel” or engaging in activities “critical of the Syrian occupation”, were also subjected to

---

<sup>43</sup>Sylvanna Falcón writes about the U.S-Mexico border as a war zone, in order to show how militarization ensures the continuation of unaccountable “militarized border rape” (129)

<sup>44</sup>For a legal analysis of women in prison, see دليل العمل داخل سجون النساء في لبنان

torture, sexual abuse, and sexually abusive language.<sup>45</sup> Teenage girls as young as fifteen were held for years among adult prisoners, abused, beaten, sometimes by as many as ten soldiers, with reports of guards putting out cigarettes on their legs. In addition, “women accused of common law offenses often risk being abandoned by their relatives” and thus do not have the financial ability to hire lawyers (Amnesty International, Report 2001, 10-20). Therefore, prison activism in Lebanon is not simply about Israeli violence against Lebanese and Palestinians citizens, nor even about proxy collaborators versus members of the Resistance. Prison activism includes the way violence is normalized in these continuing war zones.

In addition, migrant women workers, who suffer various forms and levels of abuse in their workplace (in Lebanese homes) also experience violence by state authorities. Women who escape their employers can end up in detention, forced to return to their abusive jobs, or “held incommunicado without charge or access to lawyers.” Many migrant women, even after being acquitted or serving their sentence, are sometimes forced to stay in prisons. Often, they have no financial means to buy their tickets home. The General Security also holds them as foreigners who are “a threat to public safety” (20-2).<sup>46</sup> I address the situation of migrant workers in Lebanon in the next chapter, when I analyze the relationship between queerness and female migrant bodies.

---

<sup>45</sup>Arrests of people opposing Syria was especially taking place during the period Baathist Syria's occupation of Lebanon, which ended with the redeployment of its army in 2005, though Syria still maintains a strong influence in the country.

<sup>46</sup>Amnesty International. “Torture and Ill-Treatment of Women in Pre-Trial Detention: A Culture of Acquiescence.” London: International Secretariat 2001

One can imagine that racism at police stations exacerbates the situation, and that the women's lack of knowledge of the law or of the Arabic language, increases their vulnerability. In addition, women charged with prostitution may face torture, but so do women held for “trivial charges” (21). There have been reports that track very minor improvements in the last ten years (at least in terms of prison spaces, if not in terms of treatment of people in detention), yet the situation in prisons are still unacceptable (“Dalil” 81-91).

While reports such as those published by Amnesty or by the Institute of Women’s Studies Institute in the Arab World are important in showing the urgency of the situation, they also risk reifying women as passive victims, because they do not include tactics of resistance. A report like the “The Guide to Working Inside Women’s Prisons,” published by a Beirut-based Women’s Studies Institute, which holds prison authorities accountable and pays attention to the lives of prisoners is no doubt important. Such reports are made possible through collaborations between inmates and the researchers who interviewed them. However, when these reports are presented to the mainstream media and to political authorities, the faces of the inmates are not at the forefront. In publicizing the findings of these human rights report, the activists and academics who have social and class legitimacy, are the people we see and hear. A common practice for NGOs, following the politics of respectability, is to hold workshops and press conferences in hotels, inviting journalists and political representatives. The launching of this “Guide to Working Inside Women's Prisons” was held at the Lebanese American University, under



the auspices of the Minister of Interior.<sup>47</sup> Another workshop that tackled the problems that women prisoners faced in Spring 2011, was held at Holiday Inn in Beirut. This event was attended by NGOs, heads of prisons, as well as political representatives (Khalidiyya, Assafir 2011).<sup>48</sup> This is one tactic to reach the mainstream and public authorities, yet it also has its limitations because it reinforces the position of human rights and women's rights activists as the legitimate producers of knowledge about women in prison. This tactic also does not challenge the relationship between people on the inside of prisons and those who are outside them (Hammad, "Critical Resistance"), as it does not clearly connect violence that women face in prisons to state violence that reinforces gender, class and ethnic hierarchies in Lebanon.

Therefore, what feminist queer thought can contribute to organizing around prisons is to challenge the inside/outside dichotomy, and recognize that people who have experienced the systemic violence of prisons do bring important knowledge and can hold queer feminist perspectives. But it also necessitates challenging the politics of respectability that mainstream women's rights groups adhere to during their collaborations between the "inside" and "outside". Speaking about people of color and the prison industrial complex (PIC) in the U.S, Suheir Hammad calls for this blurring of boundaries between inside and outside prisons, declaring that there is no "difference between/the inside and the outside,"<sup>49</sup> as she connects the violence that women and men

---

<sup>47</sup><http://www.unfpa.org.lb/Documents/Tanseeq-arabic-version-low-resolution.aspx>;  
<http://woneews.net/ar/index.php?act=post&id=1279>

<sup>48</sup>[http://johayna.blogspot.com/2011\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://johayna.blogspot.com/2011_03_01_archive.html)

<sup>49</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsEQBjkIMeY>

of color in and outside the U.S face. Moreover, U.S indigenous and radical women of color organizing against the prison industrial complex and for transformative justice offer crucial contributions to theorizing the complicity of state institutions (from police, to prisons) in the violence of colonialism, heteropatriarchy, racism, imperialism and capitalism.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, such theorizing is always looking for local alternatives to combatting violence and holding perpetrators accountable (Incite; Lakshmi et al; Boyes-Watson).

Similarly, in Lebanon, queer feminist thought thus does not turn away from people experiencing the violence of prisons, but allows them to speak, and to connect the violence of the “inside” and the “outside”. This is especially true since sex workers, working class queer people, and other queered bodies are the ones who are most likely to experience the war zones of prisons. As Ghoulama, a queer Lebanese activist writes, it is not middle class self-identified queer activists who are at the forefront of state harassment and assault, but working class people (many of them immigrants) who have no safe spaces to meet (Helem site).<sup>51</sup>

Laila Farah, an American-Lebanese performer and scholar, writes/performs about her own experiences at Karakol Hobeish (or Maghfir Hbeish, translated as Hbeish Police Station) when she was imprisoned there as a teenager, under false charges of drug use.

---

<sup>50</sup>See, for example, Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete*. NY: Seven Stories Press, 2003; Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Color of Violence: The Incite Anthology*. Massachusetts: South End Press, 2006; Julia Sudbury, ed. *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender and the Prison Industrial Complex*. NY: Routledge, 2004. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. Eric E. Stanley and Nat Smith eds., *Gender Captives: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011.

<sup>51</sup>n.p. *Helem English*. n.d <http://goo.gl/BjyTSJ>

She juxtaposes her experiences with the torture of Iraqis by U.S prison guards at Abu Ghraib (336), and with Khiam prisoners in South Lebanon, in an attempt to hold nation states accountable for their abuses (336). Beirut's Maghfir Hobeish, whose name has now been changed to Ras Beirut police station in an attempt to whitewash its reputation,<sup>52</sup> is infamous for holding people with charges related to drugs and “public decency”.

Thus, the maghfir (police station) holds drug users, sex workers, and the sexually (and gender) queer. “What happens to a girl who is forced to witness torture?” Farah asks, “what happens when police threatens a girl with rape?” She writes:

There is no self proclaimed resistance in Hbeesh ... no bravado that withholds, no inner strength that withstands... The only kind of resistance comes in the form of how many lies you can tell convincingly, over and over again, through multiple interrogations, for two to three days at a time. Hbeesh had no accountability for its officers... ultimate power = ultimate corruption of spirit, of mores, of sanity. I can still see the vice squad cop's face ... imprinted in the stuff my nightmares are made of (336-7)

Not wanting to romanticize resistance, as a 19 year old girl who found herself in the presence of the violent prison system, Farah can only resist indirectly through withholding the truth from the officer and misdirecting him. Hbeish, therefore, can be read as an icon in the collective memories of people accused of transgressing the limits of respectability with their gender, or their sexual acts. And queer feminism engages with the violence committed there, as a symbol of state-sponsored, familial, or other forms of heteropatriarchal violence.

As Farah presents Hbeish within a web of stories about state-sanctioned torture in prisons, whether by native or colonial states, I include her theorizing of her experiences

---

<sup>52</sup>LBCI group. “Makhfar Hbeish Yobaddil Ismahu.” Online news video. Youtube, n.d. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcV2qZ1jYMk>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

into queer feminist thought from Lebanon, as she draws connections between different manifestations of violence, locally, transcommunally and transnationally. Such tactics of connecting violence is similar to the work of “Pinkwatching Israel,” where transnational networks monitor discourse, as they see the connections between land liberation and sexual and gender liberation. Such a transnational interconnecting tactic is also evident in Abu Ghazal's refusal to separate between Margaret Atwood's feminism and her accountability to the Palestinian struggle.

I have shown in this chapter how queer feminist thought, invested in multiple sites of women's resistance, interweaves past and present movements that are often seen as separate. It also connects militarized and mundane forms of resistance. After having demonstrated, in the beginning of this chapter, how the attack on the flotilla provoked memories of exodus and calls for accountability for one Palestinian Lebanese feminist, and how AbuGhazal used a cyclical temporality to explain her politics, I now turn to another contemporary feminist who uses a similar understanding of time to challenge mainstream politics. C. Partmanian is a Lebanese Armenian feminist activist who, after the flotilla attack, wrote about the collective traumas of the Armenian people. Since the international activists who were killed on the flotilla were Turkish, much of the manifestations of solidarity that followed were vocalizing their support of Turkey while ignoring the history of the Turkish state's suppression of Armenian and Kurdish peoples and their narratives.

At the core of Partamian's article, “An Armenian Perspective on the Flotilla: Euh, Erdogan, WHAT?” is a call for complex political stances that support Palestinians, show

sympathy and solidarity with the activists on board the flotilla, while also not falling into romanticizing or blindly following nation states and their agendas. The people, Partamian argues, need a hero to represent their cherished Palestinian cause to the world, and they have blindly chosen Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey, as this hero, because of his momentary stand-off with Israel. Partamian sees that this support of Erdogan and the Turkish state is a symptom of amnesia, and it is the root of the problem; that the Lebanese activists were forgetting Ottoman colonization and Turkish state repression was symptomatic of a deeper issue, evidenced in the way the people remember the Lebanese civil war. She writes:

I am impressed by how easily the Lebanese forget, no stages of grief no nothing. Just call everything 7awedis\*<sup>53</sup> and move on and a few decades after Jamal Pasha al Jazar,<sup>54</sup> transform your martyr's square into a car park and pretend all is good in the world.

I do not wish direct or indirect control by any government. I do not wish for Turkish UNIFIL to protect MY south,<sup>55</sup> I do not wish for Erdogan to speak in MY name, I do not wish anything other than for us to wake up and understand that our history, our causes, our survival, our struggles and even our deaths are just a piece of the bait used to lure power and control (Partamian, "An Armenian Perspective").

The deaths of the activists on board the flotilla, as well as the deaths of citizens during wars, can become rhetorical games among those in power. Thus a critique of Israeli aggression does not mean we should consume and reiterate the dominant narrative without questioning it. Parallel to a diminishing of the 15-year war by calling it "events", a show of undisputed solidarity with Turkey diminishes histories of Ottoman colonization

---

<sup>53</sup> "7awedis", or "hawedis" is best translated as "events". Many Lebanese refer to the 15 year civil war, and different wars, as hawades, or events.

<sup>54</sup> Or, Jamal Pasha "the Butcher", the nickname of this Ottoman ruler, remembered for his massacre of Lebanese and Syrian nationalists rising against him in 1916.

<sup>55</sup> United Nations forces deployed in the South, on the borders between Lebanon and Occupied Palestine.

and genocide. For Partamian, then, chronological time allows those in power to “move on” without accountability, and without healing for those who suffered. Instead, her analysis is operating within a cyclical temporality that challenges such amnesia in order to arrive at more complex understanding of history and politics.

Grief, Partamian’s article infers, can be part of our discourse in productive ways, and needs to be connected to other losses with the purpose of healing. Like Abu Ghazal’s essay, this article also shows that one moment, one “story”, holds a whole history in it. Like Abu Ghazal’s article too, the above quote is an example of feminists tackling local and international events, engaging in politics, yet from a feminist perspective that follows a non-linear temporality and does not replicate dominant discourse-- even when it is leftist discourse. I note here, however, that Palestinian and Armenian voices are not sufficiently visible within feminist movements. Abu Ghazal writes elsewhere, for example, that in feminist spaces she is often not “visible as the only Palestinian in a room.” In these spaces too she becomes “the token of diversity” (“Politics of Closeness and Alienation”). Therefore I include these marginalized voices not to present them as representational, but because they are presenting important interventions from their different margin points. Another way that women resist the dominant political situation is by organizing and fighting for peace and for their communities during times of war and massacres, a topic that I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

### **Women Fighting for Peace**

I have chosen to highlight some aspects of women’s militancy as part of past

mobilizations, particularly during times of civil war and occupation. But in times of war too, women and feminists have led peace activist efforts, or came together for the survival of their communities as a political statement against the war, which they described as a masculinist manifestation (Shehadeh). The decentrist writers, for example, a term Miriam Cooke coins to describe women writers living in Beirut during the war, exposed and challenged this violence. Cooke explains how the decentrists “from their marginal perspective... gave insight into the holistic aspect of the war” (Cooke *War's Other Voices* 4). Most of the decentrist writers—like many of the organizers who led efforts for peace—were economically privileged and had social capital as well, which allowed them to network and lobby for peace (5).

This chapter, then, will interweave the activism of activists who had class privilege and who were centered in Beirut, with the mobilization of women across classes and regions of Lebanon, whose organizing was for the survival of their communities in times of crises. Peace organizing, and organizing for survival, also took place at the junction between the militant and the mundane, but challenged them both. And though women’s discourse around their activism may seem conformist at times, I incorporate it into feminist thought to emphasize the need to look for resistance in places that have been silenced by patriarchy, classism as well as regional hierarchies, such as between Beirut and South Lebanon. Moreover, I find that in the midst of well-circulated narratives of the war are suppressed stories of queers that need to be seen as a more integral part of these narratives.

Women in prisons used domestic symbols-- like the sewing needle, to imbue their

violent environment with mundane and familiar objects. Women who were trapped with their families under the bombs also used the domestic sphere to bring a sense of normalcy to their lives, as the memoir of Jean Said Makdisi, for example, demonstrates. For contemporary feminists looking back on the war years, women's roles in wars are paramount. Feminist activist Joelle Moufarrege, who was commemorating the civil war in 2012, described women as the unsung “superheroes” of the war, who are still not acknowledged as full citizens. Though she does not deny that women took part in the violence, whether by condoning it or by fighting, she argues that, in times of crisis, women also kept life going for their communities. They were the ones who supported their families when water and electricity were cut, when the bombs were falling indiscriminately, or during times of food shortage. Collecting testimonies about mothers, she wrote:

Tareq recalls how his mum was left alone to deal with him and his two brothers, and her determination to carry those expensive carpets he grew to hate everywhere they fled. Nasim learned how to protect himself the day his mum, who was a fighter in the militia, taught him how to use a gun. Dana absorbed the sectarian dimension of violence the day her mum gave them religiously-neutral names, along with the frantic explanation of how to get home if she were to get killed while trying to pass a check point. Noha celebrates her mum’s courage and determination to drive all the way from Beirut to Zouk for the children to be able to watch a movie and forget for a few hours the confinement imposed by the war (Moufarrege, *Sawt Al Niswa*).

Moufarrege thus analyzes women's roles in the war presenting a different narrative to their passivity during crisis, through asking her interviewees to remember their mothers as heroes. She does not connect heroism to confrontational defiance, but to acts as varied as giving their children “religious-neutral names” during a time of severe sectarian divisiveness. She also does not produce a hierarchy of heroism, as she equates religious



neutral naming, or easing their children's fears, with practices such as teaching children how to shoot in order to defend themselves. Yet women in Lebanon, according to Moufarrege, are still “part time citizens,” who do not enjoy full citizenship rights such as the ability to pass on their nationality to their non-Lebanese husbands and their children.

There are other stories often forgotten about women in the Lebanese war. Like Ilham Mansour’s fictional narrative of Siham, a lesbian Lebanese woman in *Ana Hiya Anti* (trans. *I Am You*). In this novel, we see Siham engulfed in unrequited love stories with other women-- including with a self-identified straight woman. But there are other characters, like Mimi, who lives in an apartment in Beirut with her husband and children, yet has affairs with other women. These relationships (often unsatisfied) happen at a time of war, in universities, homes, and shelters. There are other stories, caught somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, which we have yet to collect, document, or otherwise imagine. Stories such as that of Sitt Marie Rose, the lead character of Etel Adnan’s fictional novel, whose (hetero)sexuality and refusal to submit to a man or to a political faction in the war, eventually gets her killed. Other stories come to mind, such as those of queer women who left because of the war, and who may have started their own feminist and queer spaces in their diasporic communities, like the Arab American webmagazine, *Bint El Nas*, that ran between 2003 and 2007. Contemporary feminist activism, in its rootedness in multiple struggles, can connect women's militant resistance with their more mundane resistance, through interweaving the narratives of women from different communities, and through linking past and present organizing, in its varied forms.

Another site of resistance that is often not considered feminist is that of women

who politicize motherhood and who use it as a tool for political participation (Zaatari; Shehadeh; Ward). Zeina Zaatari's ethnographic research demonstrates how women of South Lebanon, from different religious, political and class backgrounds, resorted to activism through their motherhood (34). Suad Joseph affirms that it is through kinship and relations with figures of authority, not through citizenship, that people in Lebanon take their rights. This is especially true in times of war and the absence or weakness of the state (qtd. in Zaatari 56). Similarly for Zaatari, women in South Lebanon used "the culture of motherhood as an avenue for civil participation" and for conceiving of themselves as powerful and agential (34).

One woman, Zahia, emphasized that "mother's role is the most important role... The father/man is an important helper." She added that religion does not mandate that women work only in the house, but that it is society that does so thus favoring partnerships in responsibilities within the household (qtd. in Zaatari 53). While Zahiya uses motherhood and religion to assert her role in her society, others like Um Fadi stress that women "should never live like she is nobody and unimportant. The least she can do is raise a good family" (qtd. in Zaatari 49). Inaya and other secularist mothers, on the other hand, appreciated their roles as mothers but did not define their identity solely through motherhood (Zaatari 50). In short, despite the different perspectives about motherhood and their roles as mothers, the women in Zaatari's research sometimes prioritized the family over individual activism, yet they were always in the process of mobilizing for change.

In chapter two, I discussed Hashem's "cup-of-coffee movements," where she

rightly critiques elitist women's organizing, but I also noted that less privileged women also participate in cup-of-coffee meetings of their own; these meetings can be politicized in different ways than those organized by economically privileged women. In the feminist meetings in Lebanon that I have participated in, for example, activists pointed out the need to approach women who do not identify as feminists, and engage with them in their own spaces through such informal meetings. In Egypt, the contemporary feminist group Nazra for Feminist Studies continuously holds the “session for storytelling and venting(جلسة حكي وفضفضة)” to discuss varied feminist issues, which I believe, mirrors the social activity of women coming together and chatting over coffee about their lives.<sup>56</sup> In other words, our critique of this movement thus does not need to blind us to the many ways that women organize and resist, which may not take the form of professional meetings or activist rallies.

As I argue that queer feminist thought today is rooted in multiple histories of women's resistance to war and crises, I also look at women organizing in secrecy. Contemporary self-identified queer feminist organizing has resorted to underground work, as it prioritized confidentiality towards its members. Such confidentiality has also been important to different dimensions of women's histories in Arab-majority countries. Secrecy, for example, was an aspect of peasant women participation in (sometimes armed) resistance to British colonialism in the 1930's (Petet 55). One can expect that militant Lebanese women and Palestinian women in refugee camps would have relied on secrecy as part of their operations-- as Suha Bechara did. Another form of collective and

---

<sup>56</sup>“Salihha X Dmaghak.” *Nazra for Feminist Studies*. Facebook page, n.d.  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/550952878322217/?ref=5>.

mundane mobilization that had a private facet was that of Armenian Lebanese women organizing shirkets. Shirkets, or “structured visiting patterns” (Hamalian 71), resonate with Peteet's observation of female consciousness among Palestinian women, where women's attitudes and roles are politicized in times of crisis to assure the survival of the community.

Originating in older forms of networking and organizing in Armenia, the shirket gained importance in Armenian refugee camps and later in Lebanese Armenian populated urban areas of Beirut. In refugee camps after the Armenian genocide and later in urban neighborhoods, women and children (often, orphans) constituted a large part of the population, as many of the men were killed. In addition, family relations, as well as people's relations to their villages and cities, were severed by expulsion and massacres (73). Thus shirkets became important ways that women could mobilize all networks and resources available to ensure the survival of their communities.

Shirkets didn't end when the crises were over, and they endured as organizational patterns in urban lower middle class Armenian spaces. These visiting patters were maintained as secret organizations among married women, with their own internal structure, and their own rules, which included elections and a division of emotional and economic labor. Part of that emotional labor, and part of the reason that they were secret (in addition to economic reasons), Arpi Hamalian explains, is that they were spaces of healing where women shared their problems and received advice and support. Confidentiality was needed to protect the women (79-80). As we see here, the seeminlgy socially-conforming patterns of visitations gains a political characteristic as it is

concerned with the holistic health of the women and the entire community. Moreover, Hamalian argues that the organized process of continuous visitations amongst members of shirkets ensure accountability and connectivity.

Outside of Beirut, another site of politicizing social networks took place in Mount Lebanon during the war. In the 1980's, at the height of the war and the Israeli invasion, the Tajamu' Al Nahda Al Nisa'iya تجمع النهضة النسائية or Women's Edification Assembly (WEA) in Shouf of Mount Lebanon brought together women from opposing political backgrounds. What this collective offered was a sense of community, and of normalcy in tumultuous times. It hosted seminars and poetry readings, created a collective kitchen, and provided a space for children to play. The collective also constantly demanded the end of the civil war, as one of its leaders wrote that "our history is laden with examples of how we can... [and] We should teach our nation that sectarianism is an ugly disease" (Ward 391-3). Therefore, the women were addressing both the root of the war, that is, sectarianism, as well as dealing with the symptoms. In Baakleen, in Mount Lebanon, after the Israeli invasion in 1982, women, who were expected to stay home and not fight, opened a kitchen to cook and distribute meals to the fighters. The creation of this kitchen was a political act, since it openly acknowledged a frustration of wanting to participate in resisting occupation, yet it was also one done without subverting traditional expectations (392). While the politics of WEA may have fallen under a politics of respectability, it also offered an alternative space for women from different social and political backgrounds that were fighting each other during the war to co-exist and work together (390). Thus, while some forms of resistance broke from traditions, others used tradition to create an

agential space, as Zaatari's research demonstrates.

Feminist queer thought, in presenting the past and drawing connections between time periods and between different movements, finds resonance with women on the margins who break norms of gender and sexuality, and who link class and colonial struggles. Yet I also put together this feminist history without dismissing the women who use the mundane as resistance. This perspective makes it clear that everyone can internalize oppression and can be complicit with some form of violence and hierarchical relations or another. This framework also allows for awareness that all activists and organizers may break traditions in some ways, yet we conform and are complicit in others. Many forms of women's organizing, shaped by class, gender, and region, can also offer ways to address women's grief and loss; they become opportunities for them to help their communities, to organize publicly and to refuse the divisive ideologies of a sectarian war.

And while I showed working class Armenian women organizing in secrecy, other women relied on public networking to bring an end to the war. The anti-violence movement during the war years was often spearheaded by women who were mobilizing people—especially other women, into action. Many of the leaders of this movement were professional and middle class women who believed in non-violent resistance, and voiced their belief that “women have many roles [to play]... yet the primary war is to reject war” (Mgheizel, qtd. in Shkeir 89). That is, the activists believed that ending the violence should be prioritized over all other roles and other forms of activism. Though I recognize the importance of their demands, such prioritizing reinforces the dominance of

mainstream middle class women's forms of organizing.

In 1984, Lebanese researcher Iman Khalife, co-led a non-violence campaign that called for the end of the fighting, urging the “silent majority” to break their fear and take to the streets (Siraj 228). In a campaign that was marking the ninth year of the war, her statement was about saying “no to the tenth year.” (my translation; qtd. In Siraj 229). Khalife was also adamant to have women at the forefront of the campaign, since she believed that the only power “the ladies” had was their voice. Such a politics insists on women in leadership position, but at the same time risks being appropriated into binary concepts of gender. Nader Siraj, for example, argued that Khalife's “feminine sensibility, and perhaps her disappointment of the other sex” is what prompted her to launch this campaign for peace (my translation; 228). This example shows how the war is constantly portrayed as a masculine manifestation, but also that “femininity” is not questioned. Women, on the other hand, carry the responsibility of peace-making. Many of the activists themselves, however, such as Laure Moghaizel, did not want the anti-war campaigns to be only by and for women (Shqeir 128).

Moghaizel, who was a leader in the anti-violence movement as well as the mainstream women's movement took part in collective campaigns to end the war. These campaigns included running petitions, mobilizing blood drives that met “at the demarcation line[s], under the bombs,” and holding sit-ins (interview with LaTeef 206). One campaign of the non-violent movement, in 1987, involved people with disabilities, including those whose disabilities were a result of the war, where people marched dressed in white across North Lebanon, attracting more participants (Shqeir 132-4). This anti-war

movement, of course, relied on networking and outreach. Addressing a mainstream public, activists reached out to politicians, artists, schools, hospitals, religious, cultural and athletic institutions, local and international journalists, and members of civil society (Siraj 234-5; Shqeir 129). Therefore, it was social capital that made these efforts possible, particularly at a time when the country was divided, ideologically, as well as physically. That is not to say that the anti-violence movement was endorsed by all those in power. In fact, many of these campaigns were aborted, such as when militia men stormed the place where the blood drive was held (Shqeir 130), or when politicians publicly slammed anti-war organizers as being “insincere” (Siraj 238). The importance of such networking is not only that it was led by women, but that it transgressed political divisions, and spoke to warring factions, something we have seen the Women’s Edification Assembly in Mount Lebanon do too. Many of the women who led the movement for peace did have social and economic privileges, which does not need to diminish the importance of their activities. Moreover, even though some names, such as Moghaizel's are remembered more than others in peace activism in Lebanon, these icons represented a general longing for seeing the end of war, but it also could not have happened without the participation of people who remain unnamed, and who risked danger by going to the streets and demanding peace.

Women have written about the war, and they have told their stories of surviving the chaos and the dangers. There is also literature, very scarce, that addresses women's militancy during the war. What has been missing in this literature is the connection between different facets of women’s lives and resistance, as well as the links between



past movements and feminist consciousness and organizing today. These connections do not make for a clearly marked chronological story, as they move in serpentine motion, across different time periods, geographies and communities. What I am arguing is that it is the drawing of these politicized links that matter most, and that allows us to see feminism not only through a mainstream women's rights lens, but as rooted in various marginalized communities and struggles.

As feminists, I take it to be our duty to study liberation movements, labor struggles and women's resistance to violence and crisis, even when it looks conformist. It is also our duty as activists to bear witness to these women's struggles, and to take them as part of our own feminist history, even when the women and the movements themselves may reject the feminist label. What I have done in the past two chapters is to shed light on some of these moments of organizing, collected from different sources, and put them together, understanding them as a part of our history. In chapter five, I examine how feminists are creating connections with women of color in the U.S and women across the Global South. Firstly, however, I turn to another aspect of feminist queer thought in Lebanon, namely its relationship to the bodies of migrant women workers.

Chapter Four: Queering Each Other is a Reaching for Each Other:  
Rethinking the Position of Migrant Workers in Queer Feminist Thought

*Oftentimes, it feels easier to be part of a social group that does not hold power, especially when you're not personally dying from your lack of power. In Lebanon, a woman, but I grew up middle class; queer, but I can pass. In the U.S, I become an alien with a work permit, but I am still sheltered enough, by my profession/class, and ethnicity, to not feel the full weight of racism at work. Now living in the U.S, it is easier for me to be a woman of color angry at white supremacy and imperialist foreign policy than to turn that unrelenting critical gaze at my own privileges, in both the U.S and in Lebanon. And no matter how much the idea of a "Third World queer woman" or "Arab woman" evokes oppression in the minds of the "civilized world," the reality is more complex than that. And the social geography that I live and move in, with its socio-economic hierarchies, make it too simplistic to assume that I am always contained at the margins (personal Journal entry, Nov. 20, 2010).*

In this chapter, I turn to explore feminist thought's relationship to domestic migrant workers in Lebanon. It is for this reason that I started with the above personal piece from a journal entry, in order to acknowledge my own privileged position as a Lebanese feminist. My Lebanese citizenship, my class and education give me, and many Lebanese feminists, privileges in a country that institutionalizes the exploitation, abuse

and invisibility of migrant workers. As Zee, a genderqueer Lebanese activist who has participated in anti-racist coalitions once put it, “We are the white people here” (personal conversation). And we are, if we take whiteness to represent not one’s race, but one’s privileges in their social context. Zee’s statement, which self-reflects on a privileged position, represents one of the queer feminist anti-racist tactics that I highlight in this chapter.

This chapter aims at challenging the compartmentalization of domestic migrant workers’ struggles into a cause separate from other feminist and queer issues in Lebanon. Instead, I show how contemporary grassroots activism is producing a thought that is built on self-reflexivity, accountability and interconnection/inclusivity. Examining the body of literature produced by scholars and women’s rights NGOs on domestic migrant workers in Lebanese homes allows me to see the themes that are recurring in this literature. Probing into this literature, however, also helps me compare it to the writings by young feminist activists who are attempting to interconnect feminist and anti-racist struggles.

Building on these activists’ writings, on the literature of migrant resistance, and on U.S queer women of color theories, this chapter argues that deeper interconnections are needed between queer feminism and migrant issues. Firstly, as I queer migrants’ position and their resistance here, I show that it allows for more mutuality by theorizing that self-identified middle class queers come to understand homophobia and transphobia partly through witnessing the discrimination against domestic migrant workers. Migrant workers are queered by their non-normative positions within Lebanese norms of class, race and gender as well by their resistance to these norms. Migrant resistance, whether

through pursuing their desires, or through forming communal support systems, I argue, challenges dominant representations of workers as victims. The networks and communities of support become practices of collective opposition and of “queer mothering”, through Alexis Pauline Gumbs' definition of the term , in the face of constant devaluation (55).

Finally, just as my work queers migrants' status, so too do I ask queer feminists to take the time to travel into migrant worlds, as Maria Lugones calls for, in order to better understand migrant women's lives (88-9). Expanding on the feminist anti-racist activist, Farah Salka's analysis of racism in Lebanon, I argue that traveling (metaphorically or/and physically) to migrants' home countries and learning about women's resistance and feminist movements “over there” creates clearer paths for coalitions “here”. In other words, in order to better understand the ways migrant women resist exploitation and abuse in Lebanon, one would also need to look at women's resistance in migrants' home countries.<sup>57</sup> This lens allows for the exchange of feminist lessons and experiences, but also for recognizing that migrant resistance is transnational.

On the ground, many contemporary feminists who have participated in labor rights, queer activism, and movements against Israeli apartheid, are also invested in anti-racism. Leaders of migrant communities in coalition with feminist and anti-racist activists, for example, have created the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM). ARM aims at

---

<sup>57</sup>Such a challenge to the binary between “here” and “over there” is similar to Suheir Hammad's concept of “over there” and “here” in her poem “Critical Resistance: Letter to Anthony” that I referred to in chapter two.

“documenting, investigating, exposing and fighting racist practices and mentalities” in Lebanon (website).<sup>58</sup> ARM continues to hold segregationist institutions accountable, and to counter different manifestations of racism and xenophobia in the country. ARM also collaborates with Nasawiya, the feminist collective in Beirut, and KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, an NGO that works on gender-based violence, for events and campaigns that are of concern to immigrants and refugees, including domestic migrant workers.

These collaborations have included rallies, fundraisers, vigils for women who have been killed (or pushed to suicide) by the racist system, and migrant markets to sell migrant women's handicrafts. Collaborations also happen when Nasawiya holds Kitchen Nights, or Libumu Nights at the Nasawiya Cafe in Beirut. Every Saturday for Libumu Nights, migrant women from the Philippines, Ethiopia, Nigeria and other countries, cook and share their country's dishes with attendees, with the proceeds going to the cooks themselves (facebook event page).<sup>59</sup> As important as creating more business for migrant women, is the fact that Libumu Nights became one of the rare spaces where migrants socialized with predominantly Lebanese activists and community members. These practices embody what I will show in this chapter as a growing coalitional anti-racist feminist thought and its tactics of interconnection, reflexivity, and accountability.

In the following section, I explain the situation of domestic migrant workers in Lebanon through an overview of the literature written about their experiences, literature that includes works penned by academics and reports published by human rights and

---

<sup>58</sup><https://www.facebook.com/ARMLeb>

<sup>59</sup><https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nasawiya-Caf%C3%A9/481039175244213>

women's rights organizations. Much of this literature takes a transnational approach that recognizes that migrant lives are not only shaped by their experiences in Lebanon, but also by global economic forces. And while some of these studies and reports may focus on the victimization of the workers, there is also a growing body of work that is more interested in demonstrating the ways that workers resist exploitation and abuse. Another reason I give an overview of this literature is to compare it, in the following section, with articles written by young anti-racist activists in the feminist movement. Whereas academics and human right reports inform, and suggest mainly legal solutions, the tactics of anti-racist feminists, I show, are more confrontational, self-reflective, and coalitional.

I have chosen to focus on Sri Lankan migrant women, and women's resistance in Sri Lanka, because they form the largest majority of migrants in Lebanon, to the extent that all domestic workers are racialized as Sri Lankan; in other words, all domestic workers are called "Sri Lankan" (Pande "Balcony Talk" 387; Jureidini 92). And as I later show, experiences with colonization, and with feminist movements, bear some similarities that make a sharing of experiences enriching. But it is also necessary to study feminist and queer thought in the home countries of different migrant communities working in Lebanon.

### **The Compartmentalization of Domestic Migrant Workers**

In this section, I highlight the situation of (mainly) Sri Lankan migrant workers in Lebanese households by examining how the topic is documented and analyzed by scholars, human's rights groups and women's rights activists. A transnational approach, I

will show, is characteristic of much of this literature, as it traces policies and networks that facilitate gender, economic and racial inequality. When focusing on the situation of women in Lebanon in particular, activists and scholars also highlight the sponsorship system which intensifies the exploitation. And while the scholarship in this section recognizes violence against migrant workers, some scholars have chosen to call attention to both the violence and to women's resistance to it.

One of the aims of this section is to inform readers about the status of migrant workers through a thematic overview of the literature. Yet I am also arguing here that this literature, though highly important, contributes to the compartmentalization of the lives and struggles of domestic migrant workers into a distinct category, separate from a feminist movement which can connect the struggles of women across class and race. As I have shown in the introduction, women's rights groups operate as service-based NGOs, and based on their own self-critique, they do not enjoy popular support (Hoteit and Al Qadiry 408). Therefore, a grassroots feminist movement is what is required to start interconnecting struggles rather than compartmentalizing them into different campaigns. A larger argument of this chapter is that there are contemporary feminist anti-racist activists who are finding ways to connect feminism and anti-racism. Moreover, while much of the literature in this section does take a transnational approach to understanding the situation of migrant workers in Lebanon, by analyzing the economic and social reasons that propel women to migrate, I later explore how migrant women's resistance may also be transnational. In other words, resistance tactics also begin in workers' home countries and they travel with them to new geographies and shift as their position

changes. Below, I unpack three main topics in the literature on migrant women: a transnational lens, an indictment of the sponsorship system in Lebanon, and finally, migrant women's agency and resistance. Whereas the available literature is not written by migrants themselves, migrant leaders have also recently become more visible, and are making their voices heard. Through support groups, press conferences, social media campaigns, and coalitions with feminist and human rights groups, migrant voices are gaining more public visibility, though it is still limited. And as I am focusing mainly on a body of work produced by Lebanese activists and academics, it is important to keep in mind that this literature is built on the experiences and the voices of the migrants who collaborate with researchers and activists.

### **A Transnational Lens**

The phenomena of hiring migrant workers in the Middle East began in the 1970's, after the oil boom in the Gulf (Smith 380). However it was in the early 1990's, after the end of the Lebanese civil war, that more migrant women came to work in Lebanon (Abu Habib 53; Jureidini "In the Shadows" 90). Essays written in late 2012 and early 2013 estimate the number of domestic migrant workers in the country as 200,000 (Mechnik et al; *Al Akhbar English Report*).<sup>60</sup> Women's rights activist Lina Abu Habib has produced one of the earliest documents that exposes the plight of domestic workers and reveals the complicity of Lebanese society, the government and NGOs in the discrimination. In her 1998 article, "The Use and Abuse of Domestic Workers from Sri

---

<sup>60</sup> The population of Lebanon is estimated to be about 4.5 million, though there has not been any recent census.



Lanka in Lebanon,” Abu-Habib argued that the exploitation of migrant workers happens at the intersection of gender, race and class inequalities that create a “situation reminiscent of slavery” (52). She explained that women come to Lebanon from Sri Lanka “through illegal or semi-legal channels,” coordinating between both countries. Lebanese families, too, participate in “catalog shopping for maids,” as they choose a worker through a selection of pictures of Sri Lankan women (53-4).

Abu Habib explained that it is economic necessities and government policies that propel migration; she also addressed migrants' dilemmas when they return to their home countries. Returning women, she argued, are often accused of having been in promiscuous relationships; they are also likely to complain that their husbands have been cheating on them while they were away (54-5). Later in this chapter, I show how Michele Gumbard complicates these arguments by giving Sri Lankan women more agency. Like Gumbard, Abu-Habib's work addressed the issue transnationally, following women from their home country to Lebanon and back to Sri Lanka. Her paper also aimed at presenting how legal, social and economic discrimination are working together against migrants, manifesting in people's attitudes and practices, and in the lack of legal protection. Moreover, NGOs, Abu Habib declared, did not quickly take up the issues of migrant workers' rights. Instead, many human rights workers betrayed a sense of superiority, with their belief that the women are lucky to be in Lebanon, otherwise they would've starved in their home countries, for example (56). Therefore, migrant issues did not come to be seen as important or urgent until women's rights activists began to analyze the issue at the intersection of economic, racial and gender inequalities.

In 1999, Lebanese journalist Reem Haddad would name the business of hiring domestic workers in Lebanon a “modern day slave trade.” Like Abu-Habib, Haddad’s exposé reveals that migrant workers are forced to work for long hours, and are subjected to physical and sexual violence. She also called attention to the authorities’ racism and mistreatment of migrants when they are handling cases of abuse. As many feminist activists and scholars emphasize, the state is complicit in the abuse, in adopting the sponsorship system, in failing to provide legal protection, and in hesitating to persecute abusers (Pande “The Paper” 414; Salka “WTF Only in Lebanon”; Salka “Being Black Poor and a Woman”).

The image of the “slave trade” that Haddad uses is appropriate here, because it captures the global network of exploitation and the economic forces that push women to migrate. It also shows that a study of migrant women's experiences requires not only a transnational lens, but also a historical approach. Gamburd argues that Sri Lankan migration to the Middle East is the result of European colonization of South Asia since the sixteenth century, which hurled South Asian workers across Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands. Such forced migrations continue to this day, as “South Asian labor” is still obliging “the world's elite” (30). Yet I also believe that the term “slave trade” pushes Arabs and Muslims to confront their history as early colonizers and slave holders, as the current situation with domestic migrant workers becomes an extension of an older Arab practice of keeping (particularly female) slaves. Although slavery in Muslim-dominant countries did not resemble the institution in the U.S, enslaved people were brought to places such as Iraq, Egypt, and Bahrain since the seventh century (Murray 48-50).

Women served as “chambermaids, cooks, seamstresses, wet nurses and confidantes” (Murray 56), which is not much different from their roles in Lebanese and Arab homes today.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, a study of the contemporary phenomena of employing Sri Lankan domestic workers has to be understood historically and transnationally. In a later section, I will argue that if we take the time to study feminism and women's resistance in Sri Lanka, we will recognize that both discrimination and resistance are transnational.

Yet staying on the topic of transnational discrimination and exploitation, many activists call attention to the role that agencies play in this exploitation. As state agencies do not exist in Lebanon, it is private agencies in Lebanon and in Sri Lanka that are in control of the entire process of migration (Moukarbel 34). Najla Chahda, the director of *Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center* (2007), reveals that the women sign contracts in their home countries written in English and Arabic, even though many women do not understand either language. Moreover, they are likely to take out loans to pay the agencies that hire them (2). In order to pay the agencies in Sri Lanka the required \$200 dollars for hiring them, getting them into debt even before they leave their country (Moukarbel 34). Bangladeshi activist lawyer, Huda Sigma (2007), states that women are forced to sign different contracts when they reach Lebanon, where they are paid much lower wages than what they had been promised initially (25). Studying these agencies also locates home countries as points where women's exploitation starts. Many scholars also indicate that the government of Sri Lanka encourages migration because it counts on the remittances of the women (Abu-Habib 53; Moukarbel 24-5; Gamburd 42-5; Smith

---

<sup>61</sup> The enslaved men served as watchmen and gardeners in wealthy households (Murray 56).

380).

The complicity of states is also made obvious in Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild's introduction to *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. Though Ehrenreich and Hochschild's work is not about workers in Lebanon, the scholars do reveal programs "sponsored by the Sri Lankan government" that teach potential migrant workers how to use ovens and vacuum cleaners. The scholars, for example, point to a song blasting in airports about "After much hardship, such difficult times/ How lucky I am to work in a foreign land" ending with "I promise to return home with treasures for everyone" (7). The romance of migration thus also becomes a gendered patriotic act (M. Smith 385), as the hardships of women's transnational labor becomes a sacrifice for everyone's economic prosperity, and not just for the individual women.

Moukarbel, a migration studies scholar further investigates the violence against Sri Lankan migrant women in Lebanon. In *Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon*, Moukarbel resorts to a transnational approach that includes "pre-migration," (83). Moukarbel shows the economic reasons, which range from lack of employment prospects to the negative effects of government policies that propel the migration of women (23-5). Moukarbel also highlights the power dynamics between Lebanese employers and Sri Lankan housemaids, suggesting that "symbolic violence" rather than physical coercion is more commonly practiced against workers. Despite her claims that the violence is mainly symbolic in nature, Moukarbel's documentation of the relationship between employers and migrants reaffirms the reality of physical, sexual and emotional abuse that many

workers face.

One important scholarly contribution to understanding domestic migrant workers not only in a transnational context, but through a historical lens too, is presented by scholar and activist Ray Jureidini. Jureidini's "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon" (2009), sheds light on the changes that had undergone in the hiring of domestic help among middle class Lebanese families.<sup>62</sup> Prior to the 1975 war, he shows, Lebanese families hired other Lebanese and Arab women to perform domestic duties. Importantly, these women were mainly regarded by the housewives as someone who is "not a maid... [but] a helper." Though many of these women were exploited, a sense of "fictive kinship" normally governed the relationship between the family and the worker (76). In the 1960's, however, domestic service for Lebanese women began to be seen as shameful ('aib); employers also preferred hiring foreign laborers because they saw them as more submissive and less likely to protest against their exploitation. As such, the number of Lebanese domestic workers decreased (92-3).

Once the civil war started in 1975, the act of hiring an Arab and Lebanese domestic workers became too engrossed in politics. War made it unfavorable to employ someone from a different religious group to work in one's home (90). Recruitment agencies thus started the business of hiring women from Sri Lanka, Philippines and Ethiopia, among other countries, irrespective of their religion, to work in Lebanon. And

---

<sup>62</sup>In *Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon*, Moukarbel also examines the predominance of Kurdish and Arab women to provide service in wealthy homes before the war. She believes that Sri Lankan women's low wages, as well as the war hostilities and divisions, both created the shift away to migrant workers (30-1).

what was once a relationship based on “reciprocal obligations” became a “commoditized employer-employee relationship” (77) and another face of “contract slavery” (95).

Jureidini also believes that that the case of Lebanon is unlike that of many developed countries, where women’s entry into the workforce propelled them to employ a migrant worker. Modernization, the increase in women’s education, and their entry into the workforce, Jureidini argues, cannot explain this phenomenon of hiring domestic migrant workers.

Instead, Jureidini turns to how the middle class Lebanese family constructs its identity and position through its “status, life style, and power relations (including racial) between women” (90). The status and “prestige” of middle class families, then, depends on the women, both the housewives and the employed domestic worker. It is Lebanese women then, Jureidini believes, who internalize and reproduce the status of their family by exerting power over less privileged women.<sup>63</sup> As sociologist and economist Amrita Pande argues, however, the focus on employers, especially the women employers, conceals the state's investment in the continuation of migrant women's cheap labor (141). The state can also be said to be invested in propagating a certain model of middle class families through exploitable workers. I will argue later in this chapter that this class of workers who are not allowed assimilation into a Lebanese norm become queered subjects. Through queerness, migrant women and self-identified queers become less compartmentalized as mutually exclusive.

---

<sup>63</sup>See Mary Romero's *Maid in the U.S.A*, where the scholar argues that women hire other women in their homes not only to be able to work outside the house, but also to enhance their status as middle class women (129).

In addition to the way institutionalized racism works by dividing Lebanese and migrants hierarchically, it also creates a hierarchy within migrant communities. In this hierarchy, Filipinas fare better than women from Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, for example. Filipino employees, Jureidini notes, “*command* higher up-front costs and monthly salaries” (my emphasis), because of the assumption that they are better educated than other domestic employees and because they have a good command of English. Thus “they have a higher social prestige as domestic service” (67). The usage of the term “command” here gives agency to Filipina workers as a “community” who recognize their own value and can better negotiate their salary.

Yet classism also intersects with racism in creating a hierarchy of workers in Lebanon. Filipina maids, for example, are seen to enjoy more “social prestige” than workers of other ethnicities (Moukarbel 32). Often, Filipinas have lighter skin than women from Sri Lanka and from African countries. That is not to say, of course, that their lives are free of the exploitation and abuse. Rather, these classifications call attention to complexities within migrant communities in Lebanon, based on gender, race and class. Migrant communities, however, challenge these divisions by creating inter-communal alliances and support systems (Pande “From Balcony Talks”).

In Sri Lanka, as in Lebanon, domestic work is seen as “women's work” that does not require much skills. Like Lebanese women, domestic workers, before migrating, are often responsible for the unpaid labor inside their homes (Samarsinghe 316; Gumbard 41; 176). Migrating becomes a decision that these women take to perform the same chores they always have, only to be paid for it. I should add here too that what seems to facilitate

the migration is that many of the women are part of informal transnational networks, where one woman would migrate to work through the recommendation of a relative or friend, and sometimes choose to work in a location close to that relative/friend. Such networks further demonstrates my argument that migrant women's resistance, which includes support systems, is transnational in scope. This resistance, I will be arguing, only becomes clear if feminists and queers take the time to travel (metaphorically) to migrant women's home countries and to learn about the feminist movements there. Other possibilities for mutual inclusiveness appear in such traveling: one, the devaluing of house work, in Lebanon as in Sri Lanka, may point to similar ways in which patriarchy operates, and may therefore offer shared strategies for challenging patriarchal hierarchies. Wouldn't both migrant workers and many women in benefit from a valuing of what is considered women's work?

### **The Sponsorship/Kafala System**

Another recurring theme in the literature on migrant women by scholars and human rights groups focuses on the sponsorship system. This system, in Arabic called kafala, is one of the primary reasons that allows widespread mistreatment and exploitation (Jureidini “Trafficking” 156; Moukarbel 33-8; Menchik et.al). The sponsorship/kafala system is a legal system “to provide temporary labor during economic booms that could be expelled during periods of economic downturn.” (Menchik et al). Migrants and local activists recognize the way it entraps migrant laborers in a maze of exploitation, repression, and dependency on employers (Hamill 5). The sponsorship/kafala system places “legal and economic responsibility” towards the



migrant worker on her employer during her stay and for her repatriation. (Pande “The Paper” 418). That the name of the sponsor is stamped on the worker's visa attests to the dependency that this system creates (Moukarbel 33). Moreover, as workers cannot be naturalized, they can never be assimilated (417). And because they are not included in the Lebanese labor law, they are not protected by minimum wage or supported by labor benefits (419; Abu Habib 54). Thus, while the minimum wage in Lebanon is around \$300 per month (Pande “The Paper” 419), Sri Lankan and Ethiopian women are paid an average of \$120 (Moukarbel 32), while Filipinas earn slightly higher wages.

In other words, the sponsorship/kafala system ties the immigration status of the worker to that of her employer so that any kind of movement—of coming and going, of traveling, living situation, buying and selling and working, of changing jobs-- is determined by the employer (Menchik et al; Pande 419). If the worker leaves her sponsors, for whatever reason, she becomes “illegal” (Pande “The Paper” 422). I have witnessed employers “lending” their worker to another household, mainly that of a close kin, as there is no law that prevents them from doing so. Workers are commonly not paid for such extra work that they perform (Moukarbel 192).

The sponsorship/kafala system, scholars and activists argue, increase the risks of violence. This reality is epitomized by the (often female) employer’s control of workers’ schedule and sleeping hours, for example. One domestic worker called attention to how the “madame” manages even her eating, “Madame say: ‘Don’t eat anything before you ask me’” (Moukarbel188). As both activists and scholars show, women are complicit in

the system and in the oppression of other women.<sup>64</sup> Pande, however, critiques the overemphasis on the “employer-employee” abuse, and the focus on women (Lebanese/Arab) exploiting and abusing Asian and African migrant women. Instead, she argues that such a focus “absolves the state of its responsibility” by turning it into a private matter within households, while hiding the sponsorship system as the root cause of exploitation (“The Paper” 414). I find important to study both, as racism, classism and sexism are also structural problems, with the sponsorship system.

In addition, sexual and physical violence are constant threats, since workers are required to live under the same roof as their employers. One Sri Lankan nun in Lebanon, Sister Angela, stated that she had seen many cases of women “who were raped, pregnant” (Moukarbel 172). Another domestic worker revealed how “Madam hit me all the time. Mister even tried to choke me. He wanted me to do a blow job for him” (175). Thus, even though Nayla Moukarbel writes that her surveys have led her to believe that physical and sexual violence are not widespread (181), sexual vulnerability is present in her interviewee’s experiences nevertheless. But surveys aside, the risks and existence of violence is always real for women, especially when there are no laws and institutions, and no support systems, to protect them. However, Pande's work is important because it shows that the state needs workers who are easily exploitable, who provide cheap labor, and who will not assimilate into citizens. This non-assimilation, because of their labor and their race, will become important to my reading of migrants as queer(ed) bodies.

One women's rights group looked for solutions through models in other countries.

---

<sup>64</sup>See Setsu Shigematsu's *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* for an analysis of women's complicity in violence, ix-xix.

In 2012, KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, published a report titled “Policy Paper on Reforming the ‘Sponsorship System’ for Migrant Domestic Workers: Towards an Alternative Governance Scheme in Lebanon.” After explaining the ramifications of the system, in creating dependency and migrants' vulnerability, the report also suggested legal reforms based on experiences of Bahrain, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom. These countries, the report showed, reduced the damaging effects of their sponsorship system by creating different kinds of visas for migrants, by allowing for more options in living situations, and by extending the function of the National Employment Office to regulate the labor of migrants as well as natives (43). KAFA's publication represents a reformist feminist concern in that it highlights the problem and finds legal alternatives to the current system. KAFA, I note here, is a leading organization that is pushing for a law that protects (Lebanese) women from domestic violence and marital rape. Yet because of the separation of migrant women's rights from the feminist struggle for legal protection from domestic violence, when this law passes, it will not protect migrant women (Moumneh “Queering the Domestic Violence Law”; Mikdashi “Moral Panics, Sex Panics”).

Migrant women face confinement, sometimes because employers are afraid they would escape or “be corrupted.” On the other hand, women are considered more docile and exploitable, which explains why they are “in demand” as laborers (Anderson 118-20; Mohanty 141-3). Women aren't expected to physically fight back or protest, and they allegedly do the work they are asked to do. The “risk” that the migrant worker carries is perhaps particularly related to her sexuality. From my own observations of many a

conversation amongst Lebanese housewives, I know that the migrant worker is sometimes considered less intelligent than the family member, but many are also considered capable of trickery and deviancy, of conspiring against their employers, or of doing something they would consider immoral. The assumption is that meeting with other domestic workers supposedly corrupts her because she would learn defiance from them. Moreover, my observations in middle class households also indicates that one of the primary fears of employers is that she would be “tricked” by a man and escape with him, or even more scandalously, that she would become pregnant in their home. Therefore, close attention should be paid to the intersection of racism, classism and sexism against migrants that prompt these abusive practices.

### **Migrant Women's Resistance**

The themes above focus on the exploitation and abuse of migrant women in legal systems and in social practices, often from a transnational perspective. Yet there is also a small body of work that refuses to portray migrant workers as nothing but helpless victims. These academic productions pay closer attention to the agency of workers, and to their resistance, often through non-confrontational methods. This literature is especially important to my own arguments here because I too am invested in showing different modes of oppositional practices at work. Centering on migrant women's experiences, this literature makes clear the hierarchies among women (native and migrant), while seeking to understand how migrant women defy these hierarchies. However, there is still a risk of compartmentalization here; there is particularly a responsibility on feminist movements

to recognize both privileges, and intersecting oppressions between migrants and other working class women, or between domestic migrant workers and different marginalized communities. It is also through rejection of these entrenched norms and hierarchies that coalitions between women from different groups communities begins to take place. At the end of this chapter, I will argue that while most scholars do see oppression in a transnational context, what has been missing is viewing resistance as transnational in the studies that foreground migrant workers in Lebanon.

In *Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon*, Moukarbel investigates different forms of violence that Sri Lankan migrant women face in Lebanese homes. Moukarbel, however, is equally interested in migrant women's resistance. Borrowing from James C. Scott's interpretations of peasant resistance in South East Asia, she uses the terms "everyday resistance," and "weapons of the weak" to explain migrant women's opposition to oppression.<sup>65</sup> "Every day resistance", she explains, are acts of resistance that are deliberate, and are therefore not simply survival strategies, even if they are not collective (Moukarbel 201). In the face of symbolic and corporeal violence, migrants resist through "indirect" and "safe" routes (16-17). Workers, for example, sometimes appear to comply with their employer, and then choose to not do the work they were told (202). In other example, a worker pretends that she did not understand what she is being instructed to do, to the point of angering the "Madam". Domestic migrant workers also

---

<sup>65</sup>See also Asef Bayat's exploration of how "social nonmovements" can trigger lasting social change, through what may seem like passive, apolitical, and disconnected acts (3-4). Bayat writes in the context of social movements and nonmovements in the Middle East.

pretend to be sick, work slowly, or lie to their employers as means of resisting their power over them (209-11). While these acts of opposition confirm the Lebanese housewives' anxieties about the workers, through Moukarbel's analysis, they become politicized practices of resistance.

Resistance, however, is not always subtle. Moukarbel also observes scenes of open confrontation, such as saying no to a given task, even if the worker risks abuse. These scenes of defiance are often short, and workers usually return to more subtle means of resistance. Running away also constitutes an act of public defiance that domestic migrant workers resort to in some cases (204). Moukarbel notes how some spaces become sites that workers reclaim, such as balconies of houses, where women resist their confinement by talking to other migrant workers in the same or adjacent buildings (207).

Pande's research expands on the concept of balconies as sites of resistance and support among domestic migrant workers in her research on Sri Lankan workers in Lebanon. Also using Scott's theories of everyday resistance and infrapolitics, Pande sees workers practicing "meso-resistance." This concept looks at the way people resist not only at an individual level, but on a more communal level as well, even if it is not a large scale social mobilization yet ("From Balcony Talks" 384).<sup>66</sup> Pande argues that workers turn the very spaces that they are confined to into sites of resistance and community support. On balconies, for example, workers hastily but regularly exchange information and support, despite restriction on their movement and congregation. Churches for

---

<sup>66</sup>Infrapolitics is a "middle ground" between subservience and mass mobilization; it is deliberate resistance, though it is often on an individual level (Pande "From Balcony Talks" 384)

migrant communities are also places where women assemble, socialize and exchange support (400). These experiences of communal support, I will later show, are examples of queer oppositional practices.

Resistance, Pande's work demonstrates, also occurs when workers escape and pursue autonomous lives. Many unsponsored women also become organizers. Migrant workers, in other words, create new spaces of resistance, such as the apartments where “illegal” workers live together (391). The latter spaces are especially important. In the absence of laws that allow formal organizing of migrants, runaway workers and “illegal freelancers” (who are not sponsored by an employer) form informal groups that resemble unions. Though living in economically underprivileged neighborhoods, where twenty people of different nationalities may be residing in one apartment, these spaces become headquarters for organizing.

In these spaces, migrants “hold regular meetings and a yearly election of leaders” that sometimes consulates acknowledge (396-7). They collect membership dues that go towards supporting migrant women in prison, or to help fund tickets back to their home countries (389). These migrant spaces also hold support groups for migrant women, and act as shelters for new runaways (396-7). Leaders of migrant communities have become experts on mediation and conflict resolution between employers and employees, as they advise fellow workers about Lebanese labor laws. They have also have also established good networking connections (397). It is such leaders in migrant communities who form networks and alliances with feminist groups; and it is because of their organizing that an anti-racist movement becomes possible.

Similar to Pande, scholar Monica Smith also critiques a discourse of victimization of migrants used by academics and activists, as she presents a different side to Sri Lankan migration to Lebanon. Smith contends that organizations such as the United Nations Development Program Regional Center in Colombo (UNDP RCC), along with Sri Lankan and Lebanese state agencies and NGOs (such as Caritas Lebanon's Migrant Center), produce a discourse that erases women's desire and their sexual agency. Instead, this discourse reproduces the image of a chaste and devoted wife/mother/daughter. Smith thus reveals a backdrop of moral judgement and emphasis on the nuclear family, arguing that organizations that claim to help migrant women are, in fact, controlling them (383-4). Just as Pande describes the gathering of migrant women on Sundays, in their churches, or on certain streets of Beirut, as having an "air of a carnival" ("From Balcony Talk" 394), so too does Smith represent Sri Lankan women in Lebanon acting on their desires and expressing their sexuality. I will come back to Smith's article in a later section, because pleasure is an important facet of "every day resistance", by acting out on one's desire, in the face of systemic suppression, is also part of queering migrant positions.

While the three themes above demonstrate the exploitation and abuse of domestic migrant workers and their resistance, the next section aims at moving beyond a compartmentalization that such work may indirectly promote. In the following section, I address another body of work by young feminist and queer activists writing in online spaces, to show how they are trying to find ways to connect feminism and anti-racism. The tactics being used to make these connections and to address migrant issues



differently include inclusivity, accountability, and deconstructing one's privilege. Later in this chapter, building on these tactics, on theories by queers of color in the U.S, and on the literature of resistance that I highlighted here, I push for more coalitional frameworks that can further bring together migrant women and queers and feminists into intersecting positions. These frameworks include queering migrant workers, and traveling to migrant home countries, where we can learn about feminism and women's resistance there, and where we can examine how workers are employing transnational resistance.

### **Feminist Tools and Tactics**

Grassroots anti-racist coalitional campaigns in Lebanon have included direct action and demonstrations, dinner nights and migrant markers, parades and celebrations, thus creating more spaces where migrant women enjoy autonomy, such as the Migrant Community Center. Such coalitions also create spaces where migrant workers and members of other communities could come together, plan campaigns, and socialize. Mirroring these coalitions, the writings that I discuss in this section appear in feminist online magazines like *Sawt Al Niswa*, in queer online spaces such as the “feminist and queer Arab magazine,” *Bekhsoos*, as well as in activists’ personal blogs. These virtual sites become spaces where (mostly Lebanese) activists talk about their participation in anti-racist and in migrant-inclusive events, and where they highlight the racism that they see around them.

Not every issue in these feminist webzines and blogs is about racism, nor does every post analyze the system that privileges Lebanese women over migrants. However,

these writings become a basis for a framework that connects the feminist movement to a movement against racism, instead of compartmentalizing Lebanese women and migrant women's issues. The writings that I analyze below allow me to examine the connections that the activists are making, and the tactics they are presenting. These writings also become one of the foundations for me to create more analytical interconnections in the following sections, through reading migrant women as queer, and through inserting women's resistance in their home countries into their resistance as migrants in Lebanon, thus seeing a transnational resistance at work.

One aspect that is particular about the writings here is that they are more cynical and deliberately provocative when addressing Lebanese racism than the academic and human right reports that I have showcased in the above section. I am not arguing that feminist thought always favors confrontation and provocation; on the contrary, in this chapter as in the previous chapters, I am attentive to mundane forms of resistance, as well as to more overt acts of defiance. However, I argue that feminist thought from Lebanon (in its ideal form) makes use of all available resources, and creates its own resources as well. Yet it also has a fierce uncompromising position against racism. The articles illustrate three main coalitional anti-racist tactics that challenge the compartmentalization of migrant rights: inclusion of domestic migrant workers into feminist and queer issues, deconstructing activists' privilege, as well as shaming and holding politicians and racist perpetrators accountable.

One manifestation of inclusivity and interconnection became visible when Nasawiya and *Sawt al Niswa* launched an #OccupyBeirut campaign. A writing campaign

at the time when the Occupy Wall Street movement was becoming popular in the U.S and internationally, #OccupyBeirut aimed at giving space for feminists to imagine and write about a different Beirut occupied by feminism. Many of the articles published in *Sawt al Niswa* for this issue focused on liberating women's relationships to their bodies and sexualities, and on revoking the influence of religious institutions on women's lives, among other issues.

A few essays, however, did include women who are not Lebanese in their vision of a better Beirut. One essay imagined women storming shopping malls in protest of strict standards of beauty and body sizes, as Nay al Rahi pictured it. It is not clear if migrant workers are part of “women of all colors, shapes and ages” that Al Rahi mobilizes, but I still read it as an inclusive statement, though it focuses on their gender rather than their status as workers. In her critique of the Catholic school that she attended, and their practices of reinforcing religious hierarchies in Lebanon, I find connections with anti-racism. Al Rahi explained that in her school, she often heard the statement that “people in West Beirut,” i.e Muslims, لا يشبهوننا , which can be translated into “are not like us,” or “do not look like us.” Such a concept of distancing oneself from those “not like us” is similar to racism against people of different race, nationality and class position. Moreover, Al Rahi imagined these masses of women taking over different institutions, such as schools that reinforce gender binaries and the Ministry of Tourism that uses women as sexual objects in its promotion of the country. Another institution that she dreamed of occupying and transforming was the Ministry of Labor, where she envisioned women changing labor laws to ensure protection for migrant workers (*Sawt Al Niswa*).

While there is a reformist aspect to her vision, in terms of changing the law, Al Rahi also sees the revolutionary aspect of occupying ministries and directly implementing the changes that women are calling.

Through this imagining, migrant women's issues are seen as part of an interconnected feminist vision, instead of its own compartmentalized cause. Occupying Beirut would both stop the sexual exploitation of Lebanese women for the purpose of tourism, just as it would stop the economic exploitation of migrant workers. Another imagining of #OccupyBeirut saw a wide scale movement sweeping not only across Beirut, but the entire country, including Palestinian refugee camps. Jana Nakhal envisioned a movement where people are committed to the rights of minority groups, where workers own and manage their modes of production, and where migrant workers, housewives, and peddlers see themselves as equal and connected (*Sawt Al Niswa*). These writings, therefore, create a thought that motions towards mutual inclusiveness in oppression and in liberation.

In addition to strategies of inclusion and interconnection, another feminist anti-racist tactic is naming names and holding people accountable for the abuse and exploitation of domestic migrant workers. In “Shukran Butrus Harb, Bas Ma Fhimna,” (trans. “Thank You, Boutrous Harb, But We Didn’t Get It,”) by feminist Rebecca Saab Saade. The activist holds then minister of labor Boutrous Harb, accountable for his inaction towards migrant rights. In a sarcastic tone, she shames the politician for not implementing the policies he had promised to protect migrant women. Saade calls attention to the urgency of the matter, and the power dynamics that entrap migrant

women in abusive situations. Hers is a coalitional perspective that refuses any justification for the exploitation of women and for the inaction of politicians; instead, taking the issue from a migrant perspective reveals that it is an urgent matter of survival from daily mistreatment.

Some self-identified queers in Lebanon have also addressed migrant issues in their discussion meetings, as well as in their online space, *Bekhoos*. In 2011, after an increase in the number of racist attacks on immigrants in Berj Hammoud, a suburb of Beirut populated by migrants, two queer activists addressed the attacks in *Bekhoos*. In “From Berj Hammoud with Love,” Alladin and Abdo explained that Berj Hammoud attracts migrants (many of them “illegal”, or as I call them, unsponsored) because rent is cheaper in that area, and they blamed the media for flaring racism. Alladin and Abdo then interviewed an anonymous migrant activist about the recent attacks and the discrimination that migrants normally face in Lebanon. They also asked their interviewee about the Migrant Community Center, the safe space that migrant activists and their Lebanese allies rented in Berj Hammoud. The article/interview thus highlighted an activist place that supports and is managed by migrant workers.

Making space for this issue in *Bekhoos*, where most writings focus on personal stories by young queer people, as well as on queer politics in both its specific (gender and sexual politics) and expanded (intersectional, inclusive) approaches, is a political statement. It is a proclamation that migrant issues should be included in queer politics, that this politics has to expand beyond a focus on Lebanese middle class sexual and gender identities alone, and to include an analysis of racial and class hierarchies.

Although the topic of racism against immigrants and domestic migrant workers is not a recurrent feature in the magazine, covering the news of the attacks through interviewing the migrant activist is telling here. I see it as a politics of giving space to an activist, rather than theorizing the issue oneself. This tactic gives space to migrant activists to speak about their experiences and their activism; and it makes visible the migrant community center.

The above article also resorts to shaming, as the migrant interviewee declares to *Bekhsos* that “it is very weird to see a non-racist Lebanese person.” Queers and feminists, therefore, are more likely to use shaming as a tactic, instead of a diplomatic language that begs for sympathy. As Nadine Moawad declares, “why do we ask the Lebanese people with all this politeness and childishness to treat workers well..?” (my translation; “Afwan Caritas”). These tactics are not meant to shut down conversations, but they are an attempt to change the way we approach this issue. Therefore, she is centering the urgency of migrant rights, rather than middle class people's feelings.

Yet coalitional politics also propels feminists to turn inwards, and to self-reflect on their own behaviors and attitudes, as Moawad did during one campaign to raise consciousness about the exploitation of migrant women on Labor Day (May 1<sup>st</sup>) 2010. Moawad wrote in her blog about exploring her own privileges as an activist before criticizing society's racist practices. She stated that “we cannot deal with issues in others... until we have deconstructed them in ourselves” (“The Racism in Me”). She thus critiqued her own thoughts and practices as a necessary step for alliances with migrants. These self-reflections, she rightly asserted, are more important than participating in

campaigns that call on an unidentified mass of Lebanese people to treat domestic workers with respect. Moawad makes it important to reflect on one's privileges, instead of assuming that activists are not complicit in the systems that oppress migrant women.

A final article that I highlight here is Farah Salka's "WTF only in Lebanon," where she derided people in Lebanon-- including leftists, about their internalized and blatant racism. Salka writes that Lebanese people, including those who appear to hold more progressive politics, "think they are better off than other[s]... especially better off than Nepalis, Palestinians, Sri Lankans, Syrians, Ethiopians, Filipinos, Romanians, Indians, Egyptians..." (*Sawt Al Niswa*). By noting the racism against individuals from different "developing" countries, based on a faulty "premise... that Lebanon is a developed country," I believe Salka establishes a connection similar to the one Zee makes when she states, "we are the white people here." Just as Zee appropriated a U.S.-based racial system to explain Lebanese racial hierarchy and privileges, so too does Salka hint at this developed/developing binary as being not about modernity. Instead, the binary designates privilege and lack of privileges in the Lebanese context.

What the above activists like Salka and Zee are also doing is dis-identifying from this Lebanese racial hierarchy, or what Mab Segrest would call being a "race traitor" (1994). Salka also revealed in her piece how she had recently visited Sri Lanka, and how she had found it to be a beautiful country, where its people possess a generous spirit. In Sri Lanka, she had noticed that women driving motorcycles, for example, are a common occurrence. Women in Lebanon, however, regardless of ethnicity or nationality, face catcalling on the streets whether they're on motorcycles or simply walking by. By

highlighting women's freedom to ride motorcycles in Sri Lanka, I believe, she is also deliberately using shaming as a tactic, challenging the supremacist assumption that Lebanon is more "civilized" and that its women enjoy greater freedom than the alleged "undeveloped" home countries of migrant women.

I too use this same tactic of challenging assumptions later in this chapter when I show that in the field of representational politics, Sri Lankan women have fared better than Lebanese women. Moreover, I take Salka's account of her visit to Sri Lanka as another strategy of feminist thought that I will be expanding on later. This strategy calls for traveling, whether metaphorically or physically, and drawing connections between different geographies as a political act of coalition-building (Lugones 85-6). I rely here on philosopher Maria Lugones' theory of world-traveling, or identifying with someone by moving to their world and seeing it through their eyes. World-traveling, she argues, is a coalitional act that emphasizes our interdependence (85-90). In other words, one strategy to transgress the compartmentalization of migrant women's issues is to make it important for anti-racist feminists to take the time to know about Sri Lanka, to travel there, to be curious about Sri Lankan feminism.<sup>67</sup>

However, unlike what the title of Salka's piece suggests, it is not "only in Lebanon" that racism occurs. I call attention to this fact because, as I have shown in an earlier section, migrant issues are best understood in a global context. Thus, despite the strategic necessity of focusing on one geographic location, especially the racism in one's country, it is also important to study the repetition of patterns of racism, and violence

---

<sup>67</sup>Here I am using Cynthia Enloe's argument that feminism and feminists need to be curious so we do not become complacent. Enloe also believes curiosity means that "all women [are] worth thinking about" (2-6).



against migrant workers transnationally.<sup>68</sup> In other words, racism is neither about individual people nor about specific countries. Instead, feminist thought, I believe, seeks to understand the international neo-liberal economic systems that exploit and intensify existing racial hierarchies, even as it highlights and fights against racism, classism and sexism in a specific context (Mohanty 139-45).<sup>69</sup> This intersection between the international and the local make the strategies of traveling and insertion that I suggest here all the more relevant to anti-racist feminist work.

Behind Salka's underscoring of Lebanese racism too is the implication that the relationship between Lebanese middle and upper class women, and migrant workers, is similar to Elsa Barkley Brown's argument that "white women and women of color not only live different lives, but white women live the lives they do because women of color live the ones they do." (qtd. in Keating 93). Lebanese class status has become possible through migrant women's presence in the house (Jureidini 2009). Yet through holding everyone, including oneself, accountable, through mobilizing with a sense of urgency, and interconnecting issues, these power relations, feminists are suggesting, can be eventually changed.

I find Salka's article to be an important foundation for my own proposals about

---

<sup>68</sup>See Rhacel Salazar Parrenas *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, in which she discusses similar situations of Filipina migrants in low-paid work in different geographies (3).

<sup>69</sup>See Aihwa Ong's *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006; Michele Gumbard's *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000. Grace Chang's *Disposable Domesticity: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000. And Grete Brochman's *Middle East Avenue: Female Migration from Sri Lanka to the Gulf*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993, for some examples of the global interconnections between home and host countries.

feminist thought examining other possibilities for interconnections. Salka's traveling to Sri Lanka, physically, I have shown, is important, because it is a political act of knowing more and of connecting separated geographies. In the final section, I push further the relationship of feminist thought to migrant women, by building on this act of traveling, and by asking feminists and queers in Lebanon to travel--metaphorically, politically, to Sri Lanka. In the next section, however, I turn to reading migrant women's position and their resistance as queer in an attempt to inquire into further interconnections between queer feminist communities and migrant women.

### **Queering Migrant Workers**

Queer feminist anti-racist thought from Lebanon, as I have been showing in this dissertation, pays attention to different communities, and different forms of women's resistance, interweaving struggles together. Consequently it is through queer feminist anti-racist politics that we question not only sexual and gender norms, but also racial and ethnic norms. Building on the resistance literature feminist anti-racist tactics that I highlighted above, and on U.S queer women of color theories, in this section, I propose that migrant women's positions and their resistance is also queer. I am using queer here as a methodology that questions fixed categories and blurs the boundaries of communities in Lebanon. Politically, I take queer to be about "anti-assimilationist nonconformity" and "unintelligibility within the order" (De Genova 106-9). Nicholas De Genova, guided by Samuel Chambers and David Halperin's definitions of the term as being about opposition not inclusivity, investigates the queerness of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. De

Genova argues that some facets of undocumented people's resistance disrupts "the normative confinements of citizenship" and the identity that this citizenship provides. As such, he contends that queer is not about inclusion, but following Halperin, about "anti-assimilationist non-conformity" (106).

While I agree with his definition of queerness as non-conforming, I do not assume that anti-assimilation is always a deliberate choice; instead, I find that an inability to assimilate can be related to the refusal of a hierarchical system to include some bodies, based on their ethnicity, their class and their labor, and to keep them as outsiders. Such is the case with Palestinian refugees that the Lebanese state refuses to grant citizenship; and it is the case of domestic migrant workers, who are needed as single women and childless to provide cheap labor for a temporary period of time (Mikdashi *Jadaliyya* 2014).

Migrant bodies, therefore, are socially and legally queered. It is not that we can all be called queers where communities' shared struggles interconnect; it is because queer politics urges us to pay attention to the way norms are constructed by ostracizing certain bodies, sexualities, and ethnicities. Related to queerness through ostracization, where I am mainly using Cathy Cohen's framework, is the queerness of resistance. Through their resistance, migrant women show themselves as "unintelligible". That is, migrant women challenge what a domestic migrant worker is supposed to do, feel, and even look like, by acting on their desires, and by forming communities of support.

Published in 1997, Cohen's seminal essay "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" challenges the assimilationist politics of the lesbian and gay movement in the U.S. Cohen builds on women of color politics

(particularly leftist Black theoretical foundations such as the Combahee River Collective) in order to question a taken-for-granted dichotomy between “queer” and “straight” in queer activism. When pursuing a “civil-rights strategy” in the LGBT movement, which prioritizes a gay identity, some systems of oppression (mainly race and class-based hierarchies) are left unchallenged (21-2). Instead, she writes that

[f]or many of us, the label 'queer' symbolizes an acknowledgment that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multi-sited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor and constrain our visibility” (24).

Queerness is therefore not only tied to same-sex sexuality, but to the anomaly that some individuals and groups pose to the dominant system by their mere existence and daily resistance. For Cohen, working class women of color in the U.S, even if they are heterosexual, are pushed to the margins of a standardized white well-off heterosexual norm in ways that wealthy white gay men are not. More importantly, working class women of color (heterosexual or not) are also being kept at the margins of queer politics.

Cohen adds, “beyond a mere recognition of the intersection of oppressions... how do queer activists understand politically the lives of women (particularly of color) on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral or worthy of state support?” (26). Cohen thus connects queerness to the way some bodies are constructed as threatening, and unworthy of state support. Therefore, queer politics needs to recognize how self-identified queers, whose sexuality and gender is antithetical to the norm, and persons who are stigmatized because of their “non-normative heterosexualities” are connected. These recognitions of mutuality do not require a shared history or identity, or a dissolving of the boundaries “of all

communities and categories.” What such politics necessitates is a re-conception of interdependence amongst individuals and groups (46).

It is through experiences of being “marginal, deviant and 'queer'” in relationship to the dominant order that queer politics lives up to its radical potential (43). And just as Cohen's essay is predominantly addressing queer activists, and not necessarily asking of welfare women to declare their queerness, I am also reading the position of migrants in Lebanon as queer, based on their disenfranchisement and resistance to it, without requiring a self-identification with their label. It is their migrant position (as economically disadvantaged women who are not citizens) that I read as queer, rather than a self-identification.

In Lebanon, when a migrant woman arrives at the Beirut International airport, the General Security guard hands the passport to her sponsor, who is required to pick her up in person (Moukarbel 35). The woman is driven to the family's home, where she is likely to live for years. Under the kafala/sponsorship system, she sleeps in the family's house, and becomes a necessary part of the family's daily life. Yet she's not really part of the family. She is the alien who looks different, speaks a different language, has a different history, and dissimilar customs. She is the odd one out. No matter how much a family may want to treat her like one of “us”, she isn't.<sup>70</sup>

And no matter how she is treated in “our” house, how “we” (as feminists, as Lebanese) perceive ourselves as treating her, we also know of the situation of migrant women. An individual case of good relations does not change the entire exploitative

---

<sup>70</sup>See Jureidini “In the Shadows of Family Life” (75); and Simmel, George. “The Stranger.” *Sociology of George Simmel*. Trans. Kurt H. Wolf. Ed. Kurt H. Wolf. New York: Free Press, 1950.

system. We have heard of women jumping off of balconies, of being abused; we have seen the pictures, we have heard the stories; we have probably witnessed or taken part in the abuse and exploitation. We have seen the signs in swimming pools stating that maids are not allowed to swim there.<sup>71</sup> In other words, in Lebanon, a migrant woman is queer within in the family and in public spaces.

What does that do to the relationship between those who identify as queer and those who are queered in the same space by their class, race and gender? Let's imagine a young self-identified middle class lesbian woman whose family has employed domestic workers. She has not come out to her family yet, and she is familiar with racism in her country. Maybe she has seen a parent being abusive towards the worker; maybe she knows of family members who have abused their workers. Therefore, she has probably seen racism at work before she has a chance to see how her family responds to her avowed lesbianism. By hiding her sexuality, she is aware that it is likely to be a hostile response.

One can argue that this young lesbian woman may have come to think of homophobia and the mistreatment of lesbians in her family by seeing the mistreatment and marginalization of migrant workers in Lebanese families. She has come to understand how the response to her queerness will be through witnessing how migrants' queerness is received. Through Cohen's framework, this young Lebanese lesbian has privileges based on her class that a heterosexual migrant worker living in her house does

---

<sup>71</sup> N.p. "Beachtime— Lebanese Style." *Anti-Racism Movement*. 9 July 2011.  
<http://www.antiracismmovement.com/2011/07/beachtime-lebanese-style.html>.

not have. Yet I am suggesting here that, in some ways, the response of a family, or of society in general, to what it considers “alien,” may be similar, whether this alienation is due to sexuality, or to racial and class differences.

Moreover, the policing of the way migrant workers look and behaves, as well as their sexuality of migrants, shows similar patterns of policing of queering children within a family. There is at least surveillance, at most a control by the employers, of where women go, and with whom they spend their time. A domestic worker is often forbidden from interacting with men, as sponsoring families regard her desires to be a threat. The way a domestic worker dresses and how she presents herself is also often controlled by her employers. For self-identified queers there is a link here, perhaps in witnessing how she is policed, there is a queer fear of a similar treatment once an individual's sexuality and/or gender nonconformity are recognized.

Perhaps there is a latent fear that one will be treated with the same emotional distancing, and possible physical violence, *that, like the migrant worker, we will be of our family but not really part of them.* Hence, I define queerness not only based on gender and sexuality, but in terms of exclusion from the norm, and of the expected hostile response to what falls outside the norm. In other words, I believe that, unconsciously or otherwise, queerness in Lebanon can be theorized through migrant bodies. Homophobia and transphobia, then, are not entirely disconnected from the abuse against migrant workers.

Moreover, parents sometimes suppose homosexuality to be contagious, as children are warned against, or prevented from, associating with someone who is

presumed gay. Families sometimes assume that their daughter's sexuality is someone else's fault. Similarly, there is an anxiety of corruptibility used against domestic migrant workers (Pande "The Paper" 429). Workers are also presumed to learn deviant ways from their fellow migrants; much of these anxieties about corruptibility have to do with employers' fears of the worker's (hetero)sexuality and desire, where it is assumed that she will meet men behind their backs (Pande "The Paper" 428 ).

The queerness of the social position of migrant women, I argue, is also related to their rebellion, and to their resistance. Monica Smith argues that Sri Lankan migrants' sexual lives are regulated in the service of morality and the upholding of the nuclear family. State institutions and non-governmental organizations, even when they are calling for the protection of workers, reinforce only certain images and certain types of sexuality, erasing women's pleasure and their seeking desire outside of marriage. Though she does not talk about same sex desires here, her work opens a space for acknowledging domestic migrant workers as women who are not just maids, and not simply passive victims in need of constant rescuing. Where we have come to see migrant women as sponsored by employers, and dependent on them, these alternative representations emphasize women's autonomy without dismissing the violence that they face.

Smith, for example, presents textual descriptions and a photograph of Sri Lankan women enjoying themselves and smoking at a concert in Beirut. In the context of the suppression and restriction that I have been highlighting here, to be a Sri Lankan worker in Lebanon who parties and smokes openly, is an act of mundane resistance. While these women, therefore, are not in direct confrontation with their employers, or with the state,



they are creating spaces where they can enjoy themselves outside the control of their employers. Oppositional practices therefore do not always involve slogans and marches, but can happen more quietly. But I also read it as an assertion of the queerness of migrants, not simply as “aliens” in a Lebanese home, but also in their refusal to submit to their status only as a domestic worker. To put it differently, migrants here are using their desires, which are often viewed as a threat, to break free from the system that sees them only as submissive workers confined to the house.

Smith tells the story of Sureyka, a thirty nine year old, unhappily married Sri Lankan woman with two daughters who, for financial reasons, came to work in Lebanon in 2007. By late 2008, she had experienced the life of an exploited, overworked, and very lonely domestic worker. The husband in the house had sexually approached her, but she had declined his advances, and he did not persist. These experiences made her consider the advice of Rajesth, the Indian male gardener, about freelance work. Rajesth had suggested that being a freelancer (which would require running away and becoming “illegal”) would allow her more freedom and better wages. Sureyka hence escaped from her employers, “married” Rajesth and shared his apartment.<sup>72</sup> According to Smith, Sureyka still worked, but she was also able to party—something that she could not do before. And despite the risks of being an unsponsored migrant woman, she enjoyed this freedom from the confinement of both her family in Sri Lanka and her employers in Lebanon. Smith thus insists that we do not erase migrant women's desires and agency (388-9). What I add here is that migrants pursuing their desires and seeking autonomy is

---

<sup>72</sup>Although Sureyka's unsponsored status prevents the state's acknowledgment of her union with Rajesth.

a queer resistance. One can also see that the story of Sureyka's pursuit of independence begins in Sri Lanka, and I will argue later for the case of migrant women's transnational resistance beginning at home and travels with them to Lebanese houses.

In Lebanon, Sureyka's story, and Smith's use of one photograph of Sri Lankan women enjoying themselves at a Beirut concert brings to mind so many images that I have been seeing in the last few years, of Nepali women and their allies in Lebanon, enjoying the Dashain festival, laughing, dancing and eating,<sup>73</sup> of migrant women and children at the Migrant Communities' Handicrafts Market, selling gorgeous artifacts at the Nasawiya (Feminist) Café,<sup>74</sup> and of migrants drumming and dancing and shouting during parades, enjoying themselves while also holding banners that demand the end of the sponsorship system.<sup>75</sup> These acts of collective resistance are as much about pleasure as they are about protesting the structural inequality they face.

Other images I have seen are less celebratory. In September 2012, the Anti-Racism Movement facebook page published pictures of the vigil for Shanti Rai, a Nepalese worker in Lebanon who committed suicide, and whose body was found hanging in a shop where she worked. The banners at the vigil, held by migrants and their allies, shed light on the abuse and exploitation that Rai had endured, and highlighted migrant workers' plight. One banner questioned the narrative of the employers and the police who dismissed the exploitation that had pushed Rai to her death. Other banners asked for an investigation to be carried through, as such cases commonly are not pursued. Thus,

---

<sup>73</sup><http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.158907810807328.32973.123396574358452&type=1>

<sup>74</sup><http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.480411751990264.114819.123396574358452&type=3>

<sup>75</sup><http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.401740936524013.96268.123396574358452&type=3>

migrants take their struggles to the streets, through displays of celebration and defiant mourning. These images and stories of defiance also attest to the ways migrants challenge a racist system that sees them as only domestic workers.

As I further examine the queerness of migrant women's position and their resistance to it, it is also important to question and challenge all individual and collective acts of racism, classism and sexism that may keep migrant women away from feminist and queer circles. Ghoulama, for example, criticizes a mainly middle class LGBT movement in Lebanon for reproducing these same structures and stereotypes. Ghoulama's criticism can be summarized by a question asked of queer activists: "what if you knew a lesbian migrant worker, would you go out with her?" ("A Debate in Tactics").

Questioning the assumption of heterosexuality is also important, otherwise, we erase how homophobia works with classism and racism to further ostracize some women. Other potentials for interconnection, for example, may arise when we consider if migrant workers, who are confined to the house, may act as allies and secret-keepers for queers living under the same roof. These are issues I keep in mind as I continue to read the queerness of migrant women's resistance, in an effort to imagine a different, more interconnected relationship between migrants and queers.

According to Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley, queerness is about finding the "disruption to the violence of the normative order." Tinsley's queer methodology aims at understanding the Middle Passage as queer. On slave ships where bodies became commodities, she argues, "loving your own kind was supposed to cease to exist." Therefore making intimate human connections, whether sexual or not, was a queer act

(199). Similarly, Alexis Pauline Gumbs asserts that, historically and to this day, the survival of Black women in the U.S is queer “because it contradicts the social reproduction of abjection for racialized communities” (35). In other words, survival is queer because, in the midst of dehumanization, it does not reproduce hatred of Blackness, but creates a different, more loving and more complex, representation of one's self and community.

Audre Lorde declares that in the face of the criminalization and devaluing and death of Black bodies, “I am not supposed to exist, I carry death around in my body” (qtd. In Gumbs 25). Like Lorde, many Black feminists, writers and activists, Gumbs argues, have long lived lives and created work that challenges racist and sexist systems. In addition, as Cohen maintains, “Black mothers are queer threats to the social order” (qtd. in Gumbs 50). Gumbs also calls attention to the queerness of Black mothering. Whereas white motherhood in the U.S may be historically rooted in the reproduction of the white heteropatriarchal nuclear family, mothering, as she sees it, is the accountable, intergenerational nurturing relationship that Black women provide. Mothering is not necessarily based on biological relationships, as Black women since slavery have mothered children “they cannot ‘own’” (55). Yet it is important for Gumbs too that mothering and maternity is not discarded, especially given the “criminalization and targeting of racialized mothers” (51).

Despite the differences in contexts, migrant women in Lebanon, I believe, also embody queer survival, because they too live in the midst of violence against their bodies and their spirits. Furthermore, while there are some aspects of queer mothering happening

among migrants, I describe it as the creation of communities and collective oppositional practices. I see migrants as mothering themselves too, individually, and through the informal networks that allow them to share experiences, advice and support. I find it productive to use these queer frameworks because they allow me to highlight the way the system works by ostracizing and certain groups, rendering them disposable.<sup>76</sup> These theories aim at valuing Black (and migrant) positions and the work that they do. Moreover, by examining queer survival and practices of community support, including queer mothering, the focus shifts from individuals to communal relationships: the position of the migrant and the work that they do, as well as the networks they build, in Lebanon, and with their home countries, and the friendships that migrants establish amongst themselves.

Following the theories of Gumbs, Cohen and Tinsley, one example of collective oppositional practices in Lebanon is an art production by migrant workers, titled “Speak Up before They Pack Up.”<sup>77</sup> In this production, migrants wrote letters to people in their home countries who may be migrating to Lebanon; and in these letters they share their experiences and thoughts about being in Lebanon. As collaborative effort between Desmeem, an international multidisciplinary design project in Lebanon, and “180 degrees,” an activist initiative for the rights domestic migrant workers in Lebanon, this production appeared on facebook pages as well as the Anti-Racism Movement website.

---

<sup>76</sup>I use the word disposable here from Grace Chang's *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.

<sup>77</sup><https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.443411622356944.104441.123396574358452&type=3>

Pictures of the letters, penned on colored paper, were thus spread on social media.<sup>78</sup>

Some letters offered practical tips to survive in their host country: “You must know that sometimes only we eat rice,” asking the readers to bring biscuit with them for those days when they’re not able/allowed to eat. Another one asked them to “Take mobile with you;” to keep a record of the phone numbers of agencies, “good police” and consulate; to bring medicine with them, and to “always take with you your faith in God.” Another letter warned about taxi drivers cheating migrants and asking for more money. The letter gave potential migrants the exact amount that they should pay.

Some of these letters include warnings against Lebanese men, and others warn of the housewives’ cruelty towards the migrant workers. Offering both advice and caution, one letter from a migrant to a potential immigrant said:

For ethical reasons I will do the following:

- 1- I will advice one not to come
- 2- Make use of what is available in home country
- 3- If she come, she will succumb to slavery
- 4- Racial discrimination is the talk
- 5- Marginalization of poor.

It is ethics, i.e a sense of responsibility and accountability, that drives the writer of the letter above to address the potential migrants, advising them not to come to Lebanon and

---

<sup>78</sup><https://www.facebook.com/180Degrees.lb>.

fall into a system of slavery. This letter seems to specify slavery as being a danger especially to women, as the letter reads “If *she* come, *she* will succumb” (my emphasis), whereas the rest of the points are not gender specific. The writer, for example, says in her/his first point, “I will advice one not to come.” I find it significant too that the 5<sup>th</sup> point the letter makes is about the “marginalization of the poor,” not of “poor migrants,” therefore showing an understanding of race and class, which would include the Lebanese poor, the refugees, and different bodies of immigrants.

In the same art production, another letter advises strength and warns against exploitation. The writer tells the potential migrant reader who hasn’t come to Lebanon yet to “be ready for everything, 1<sup>st</sup> of all you must be strong, you must know how to fight for ur right and of course you must be good with your work especially with your employer. Here there are good and bad bad So you not to expect good only.” Thus this message focuses on personal strength in facing the life of a migrant in Lebanon, revealing that there are both good and bad employees. Many of these letters caution against coming to Lebanon altogether.<sup>79</sup> I see these art/activist actions as instances of queer resistance and creating community that is in opposition to the dominant system. These “little things,” about eating, carrying mobile, having faith, are acts of self-love, support and community-building that are not specific to women only, though they are led by migrant women. These relations are not based on biological kinship, but are mobilized by self-affirming migrant politics.

---

<sup>79</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=464075136957259&set=a.443411622356944.104441.123396574358452&type=1&theater>

After reading Black women's survival in the U.S as queer, Gumbs asks, "what happens when the object(ified) lesson, the queer(ed) Black mother, becomes the teacher?" (22). And when, in Lebanon, we listen to a racialized and othered woman from Sri Lanka, what lessons does she offer feminist thought? I end this chapter by proposing, based on activist Salka's experiences of traveling to Sri Lanka, and on Maria Lugones' theory of world-traveling, that queer feminism in Lebanon can do a traveling of its own.

### **Feminist Travels: Mundane Heroines at Home and Abroad**

As Jureidini notes of Lebanese families employing migrant workers, "[i]t is likely that most families still know little about Sri Lanka, the Philippines or Ethiopia, and are not very interested to learn, for their primary interest is to have the house-work done" ("In the Shadows 92). In this section, as a break from such willful ignorance, I use Lugones' theory of traveling as a way to blur boundaries, transgress hierarchies, and to be able to see the disenfranchised as they see themselves (85-90). Therefore, in order to challenge the compartmentalization of communities and countries, traveling to the worlds of Sri Lankan women in Lebanon and in Sri Lanka pushes for a more central, and more informed, space for migrants in feminist thought.

Focusing on Sri Lanka, I suggest here that learning about women's resistances in Sri Lanka can shed light on migrants' resistance in host countries. They also allow us to recognize that resistance does not stay in one place, but moves with the women; migrant women therefore devise new and modify old ways of resisting, as they adapt to their new positions. Moreover, opening the gates to feminist movements outside Lebanon's national



borders can also be an opportunity to share experiences, compare strategies, and to mirror migrants transnational position. Learning about Sri Lankan feminism also evokes questions about who teaches us about these feminist legacies in migrants' countries of origin. Is it privileged Lebanese scholars? Sri Lankan scholars? Migrant activists? These are questions that relate to my arguments because they require that as we interweave each other's histories together, and that we are also mindful of the process by which we do that.

I therefore dedicate this last section to traveling metaphorically to Sri Lanka, to show how learning about women's resistance in their home countries is a productive feminist anti-racist tactic. Whether or not domestic migrant workers identify with feminism, I argue that migrants' resistance begins at home, and follows similar patterns in host countries, though they devise new ways of resisting as well, shaped by new spaces of confinement. I call this process "political insertion," inspired by Lugones' theorizing of political insertion as an act of coalition-building. Insertion is a collective feminist practice that occurs when we recognize that we lack complete knowledge of the communities that we want to work with, and when we become aware that we do not speak each others' languages, in a metaphoric or literal sense (Alexander, lecture; Alexander, *Pedagogies* 269). Insertion is also moved by feminist thought's responsibility of self-reflecting and coming to understand oneself in relation to "other" communities and worlds. Insertion therefore satisfies a yearning to develop "companionship in a radical vein," and community building as "a lifelong task" (Lugones 194-5), thus helping us recognize that resistance is transnational.

It is through a process of interweaving each other's stories in our collective histories and narratives that we build alliances, and we create a transnational feminism that is attentive to women (particularly working class women) moving between different geographies. Such insertion may also be productive since feminist movements in these two countries share many similarities. These similarities stem from living under parallel forces, such as colonialism, civil war, class differences and neo-liberalism. I do not know where this mutual insertion into each other's histories will go, what it will make feminism look like. That there is no clear vision is part of the process. What I do know is that this strategy allows for the de-centering of middle class privileged positions, of any stable position, and of boundaries of communities and nation states. What I hope this strategy does is center the experiences of working class women and of different margins across different communities.

Traveling to Sri Lanka informs us that throughout the 1970s, the country was considered a "model democracy" offering its people a "high quality of life" according to Human Development Index (Ruwanpura and Humphries 173). Traveling challenges misrepresentations and stereotypes that Lebanese people, and as Abu-Habib showed, even human rights activists, hold. In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the first woman to hold the position of prime minister of Sri Lanka.<sup>80</sup> Thus, women in Sri Lanka have a stronger and longer presence in politics than in Lebanon and many Arab countries.

---

<sup>80</sup>In Lebanon, it was in 1963 that Mirna Bustany became the first woman parliament member, for a year. *Who is She in Lebanon?* Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World <http://whoisshe.lau.edu.lb/expert-profile/myrna-bustani> ); Arab Woman and Political Participation <http://www.awapp.org/wmview.php?ArtID=2150>

As in Lebanon, however, women have only been able to enter political life through their association with male members of their family; that is, it is commonly with the death of their politically prominent husbands or fathers that women are elected.

These introductions to Sri Lanka and to Sri Lankan feminism are important not only because they challenge misrepresentation, but also because they pave the way for different kinds of coalitions. In the next chapter, I show feminist anxieties in Lebanon about “western” influences. One way to break such anxiety, and such influence of hegemonic western paradigms, is to turn our attention to communities that have been similarly colonized, and similarly involved in militarized conflicts. Hence, these lessons become opportunities for breaking compartmentalization of issues, and of national borders, to create alliances amongst women and feminists of the Global South.

In Sri Lanka, the year 1998 saw the emergence of a female-led<sup>81</sup>, ethnically diverse independent women’s group in Nuwara Eliya, a district in the Central Province of the country (Jayawardena and Humphries 248). Many of the members of this group were community organizers associated with STRAWN, the Sinhala-Tamil Rural Women’s Network, who lobbied and organized for the rights of disenfranchised agriculture workers. Dissatisfied with the political representation in Nuwara Eliya, they decided to enter political sphere in an attempt to challenge it (Pinto-Jayawardena 170). However, electoral manipulation and intimidation, coupled with conservative backlash, meant that members did not succeed in getting elected. The leader of STRAWN, Wimali

---

<sup>81</sup>Though many of its members were men (Pinto-Jayawardena 170)

Karunaratna, who had faced enormous pressure and threats during the campaign, later ran as candidate for the People's Alliance, a dominant party which had previously used intimidation against her. Yet she was still not able to win enough votes (Pinto-Jayawardena 170-1).

Despite a more marked presence of female leaders in Sri Lanka, women's political presence remains scarce in both Sri Lanka and Lebanon (Jayawardena and de Alawis 248; Pinro-Jayawardena). These experiences, I suggest, point to potential lessons that feminist organizers from Lebanon can learn from activists in Sri Lanka, lessons about involvement of women and feminists in politics, its possibilities and its entrapments. The above political experiences of Sri Lankan women in politics may also offer lessons about alliances with the economically and politically marginalized agricultural districts. It is not only political participation that I want to address here. In fact, in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka, the role of women in mainstream politics has been identified with patriarchy and the status quo, rather than with the betterment of women's lives. In both countries, women's movement and their sexuality are policed; importantly too, in both countries women have taken part in and survive long standing wars and militarized tensions.

In a transnational feminism that moves with the workers and adapts to their shifting positions as citizens, and as migrants, some questions arise that can help us draw more connections between these two positions. For example, did STRAWN and other women's groups impact the lives of migrants coming to Lebanon? How would learning this history shape migrant activism in Lebanon? How would it reshape feminism?

Furthermore, is it possible that the more these narratives circulate, particularly in Lebanon, the more they may replace stereotypes of migrant workers, and misrepresentations of their home countries?

Legacies of Sri Lankan women's participation in different struggles, I am suggesting, makes it unlikely that migrants' resistance in Lebanon is isolated and new. And the long history of Sri Lankan feminism may also constitute a predecessor for Sri Lankan women's activism in Lebanon today. In Sri Lanka of the 1960's and 1970's, a feminist movement adopted the "personal is political" model to deconstruct the private sphere/public sphere binaries and show the political implications and relevance of their everyday lives. Reproductive justice and sexuality became part of the discourse. Feminist activism during that period connected patriarchy to economic exploitation. Feminists were also invested in consciousness-raising and creating women-centered spaces, and histories, thus they were worked on rewriting mythologies, and reforming media representation. Legal change and academic research have also been important facets of Sri Lankan feminism (Jayawardena and de Alwis 255-6). In addition, women's roles in the victimization and their resistance to armed conflicts have also been key feminist concerns (264).

The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed cross-class alliances amongst Sri Lankan feminists in support of workers' strikes, trade unions, and rights, weaving local and transnational networks of support. During this time, feminists produced a multi-lingual feminist magazine, called *The Voice of Women*, which linked social and economic, personal and political oppressions in their critiques (250-1). Much of these class-based

alliances were focused on women in free-trade zones, working mainly in textile factories. Activists also critiqued the orientation of the Sri Lankan government towards liberalization, beginning in 1977, which encouraged women to find work overseas to increase revenues (303-9). In the 1980's, cross-class collaborations resulted in publications such as *Dabindu* (Drops of Sweat), which contained writings by workers and their activist allies. All these activities were happening at a time of censorship and sweeping away of labor laws, under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (103). Women in Sri Lanka therefore have a history of movements and of forming radical cross-class and inter-ethnic collectives that challenge these inequalities.

Therefore, in addition to the potentials of shared experiences between feminist movements in Sri Lanka and in Lebanon, learning about women's resistance in migrants' home countries can also be the basis for better understanding Sri Lankan migrant women's resistance. Kanchana Ruwanpura and Jane Humphries, for example, call Sri Lankan women "mundane heroines." That is, they acknowledge women's daily struggles as heroism. Given the mundane and direct resistance of migrant women in Lebanon that I have shown in an earlier section, Sri Lankan working class women can be described as "mundane heroines" at home and abroad.

Ruwanpura's study of female headship in East Sri Lanka reveals the diverse ways that women from different ethno-religious backgrounds living under poverty and conflict in East Sri Lanka navigate their life situations. She argues that women sometimes defy and push patriarchal boundaries, while at other times they work within these boundaries, to make the best of their situation. Also crucial is the non-economic support that women

provide each other, ranging from childcare and care for the elderly in each others' families, to selling and buying groceries for each other, and sharing the food they cook. In other words, low-income women find ways to support each other, even though they are all similarly impoverished, "even if this simply means talking to her/them daily... we do our best to share and help them cope with their problems (154-65).

Emotional support has always been central to the survival and resistance of Sri Lankan women in Lebanon as well. Just as women in Sri Lanka recognize that companionship and support are crucial, migrant women also rely heavily on the advice and assistance of migrant communities around them, even if these support systems sometimes only happen across balconies. When they can, women also share monetary assistance and provide safe living spaces, as Pande shows of unsponsored workers living in poor urban neighborhoods. Furthermore, Arlie Russel Hochschild notes that a large number of migrations are guided by networks of family and friends abroad that bring in not only capital and contacts, but stories and information (19). These networks, one would presume, operate in countries of destination as well as in home countries, thus providing a transnational grassroots, sometimes unseen, predominantly women-centered network of advice and support. Such networks are also examples of how women are constantly attempting to have agency and circumvent the exploitation. Women in Sri Lanka, and then in Lebanon, often resort to indirect everyday resistance.

Another way to trace transnational resistance is by focusing on women's pursuit of autonomy. Many Sri Lankan women immigrate to Lebanon not only for economic reasons, but in search of some forms of sovereignty (Jureidini and Moukarbel 587). Some

women leave their families in Sri Lanka and go to work in other countries, Gamburd asserts, because they *want* to leave their families; hence, social conditions and economic necessity are both push factors (144-6). Acting on a desire to pursue new experiences is a form of defying conditions of social confinement. I therefore propose that we connect these acts of leaving as resistance to the way many migrant women also escape exploitative employers and live with other migrants as unsponsored workers in order to experience the independence that they have been seeking, sometimes before they came to Lebanon.

Workers' resistance in their home countries thus shares similarities with their actions in their host countries, as they may deal with a similar lack of resources, and parallel ways of compromise and resistance. However, their new status as migrants, as foreigners who experience cultural non-belonging (Parreñas 197) may also invoke altered ways of resisting. The balcony, for example, may constitute a new site of resistance, one that gains meanings given new conditions of confinement. Running away from one's place of employment (from abuse and exploitation), I have shown above, may also combine new and old forms of resistance through leaving one's home/workplace.

In an earlier section, I have shown that scholars and women's rights groups recognize that the struggles of domestic workers are best understood from a transnational framework. Abu Habib, for example, studies the victimization of Sri Lankan women in their home countries and then when they become migrants in Lebanon. She also states that when these women return to Sri Lanka, they are ostracized by their communities, or cheated on by their husbands. This lens views women only as victims, wherever they go.



Other scholars and activists have pointed out to Sri Lankan government policies, global neo-liberal policies, private hiring agencies and manipulation of workers' contracts as evidence of this transnational exploitation. Yet while exploitation is seen on an international level, scholars like Pande, Moukarbel and Smith, who write about Sri Lankan women's resistance, focus only on migrant resistance in Lebanon. Instead, I suggest that just as exploitation begins in home countries, so does resistance. The ways they resist may not always look the same, as it shifts with their changing positions.

Gumbard shows that Sri Lankan “migrant mothers try to conform to older ideals and to challenge the validity” of these ideals. Gumbard's research investigates the perspectives of Sri Lankan women who have returned to their country after working in the Middle East. Her work therefore presents important insights of shifting gender and class relations before, during and after the women's migration. The scholar explains that despite “unflattering stereotypes” which replay allegations of sexual misconduct abroad (225), women want to exhibit signs of their “well-being,” new experiences and a new identity (223) upon their return to Sri Lanka. Unlike Abu-Habib, Gamburd's study is not limited to women's victimization. Gamburd highlights women's agency in the midst of economic inequalities and of changing gender relations as women increasingly become transnational bread-winners.

As many scholars who have studied migrant workers theorize, migrant women form new relations in other countries and create transnational households (Parrenas 244); migrant mothers also create “different meanings of motherhood” (Hondagneu Soteno 26). Through their “long distance mothering,” many women also resist some traditional ideals

of what good mothers should be (Gumbard 195). What these theories present are migrant workers' agential formations of dynamic identities in the context of “global regimes of inequality” (Hondagneu Soteno 22) and a “new world domestic order” (3). In the midst of global inequalities, migrant women are creating new ways of mothering and new ways of forming communities and families that are transnational, and that are adapting to women's migrations. Resistance, as these scholars note, often co-exists with compromise. Additionally, support systems within one's diasporic community, as Parreñas tells us, may also co-exist with class-based alienation from it (245). Parreñas is analyzing the relationship of Filipina domestic workers relationship to a middle class Filipino-American community in the U.S, which differs from the situation of Sri Lankans in Lebanon. Her analysis, however, points to the need to examine the hierarchies within a migrant community, and different migrant communities in Lebanon. Still, these relationships constitute transnational resistance, sometimes happening through the creation of cross-national support systems.

There is no doubt that domestic migrant workers have a deep and often unacknowledged impact on Lebanese lives. That is why Lebanese feminisms would be amiss if they did not include the concerns of domestic migrant workers, and if it did not address the racism, sexism and classism, and possibly the heterosexism and homophobia, that they experience. I have shown in this chapter how feminist thought from Lebanon is committed to building coalitions with migrants and to interweaving struggles through the works of anti-racist feminist activists and academics. But I have also proposed that by queering migrant workers, and learning from the feminism in the workers' home

countries, this feminist thought pushes for deeper interconnections. As such, I have shown how queer feminist thought can expand beyond its comfort zone, beyond the borders of feminist and queer communities, as well as the borders of nation states. In the next chapter, I continue disrupting the relationship between the local and the international, as I explore feminist thought's ideological influences transnationally, looking at the influences that it resists, and the feminist coalitions and the queer feminist paradigms that it seeks.

## Chapter Five: Fissures, Tensions and Interconnections within Queer Feminist Thought

In Lebanese American writer Etel Adnan's "First Passion," an autobiographical short story revolving around the relationship between two teenage girls in 1930's Beirut, she describes how she had "'loved' Helen differently from anybody else, almost like in the movies, not quite, though not unlike, either" (240). Even at a young age, Adnan was aware that her love for Helen differed from her love for her other friends. What Adnan and Helen shared, she writes, "was somewhere between friendship and something else which we were too young to name, yet we were aware of its intensity, of the trouble, of the stirrings in which it was creating in our souls" (242). The intensity of this young love, however, evoked unspoken tensions that eventually pushed the two apart. When they met again decades later, Helen, who was now married with kids, invited the author to the beach. "I thought I would [go]" she writes, "But I didn't." (244). Adnan concludes this story by pointing to the contradiction, where the fear of losing love drives one to killing it (245).

In addition to providing a rare glimpse into a "relationship" between girls and women in early twentieth century Lebanon, I begin this chapter with Adnan's story as a prologue to more recent queer feminist writings and reflections on tensions and interconnections within their communities. Commenting on this short story, scholars

Amal Amireh and Liza Suhair Majaj rightly observe that such feelings of first love signal to Adnan not only the intricacies of relationships, but also induce greater self-awareness (21). As Adnan writes about love: “It comes about like a wave of infinite strength and creates the fear of drowning... it has to do with the absolute” (245). This self-awareness that Amireh and Majaj highlight, then, is about recognizing the contradictions in love: loss and gain, hunger for the beloved, and fulfillment, fear and strength, life and death. And these contradictory feelings are about totality, the absolute.

As with first love, so too are the early years of queer feminist community-building riddled with both excitement and tensions. And as with Adnan's story, unspoken tensions can create cracks into these communities, breaking them apart. After having spent previous chapters of this dissertation looking back into histories of queer feminism, as well as looking ahead into future possibilities of transcommunal and transnational coalitions, this chapter is about looking into the relationships inside self-identified queer and feminist circles. Looking in implies exploring not only socio-economic hierarchies and violence that comes from outside the borders of a community, but how contradictions and structural power dynamics affect queer feminist spaces. Yet, I also show how this process of critical self-reflection also has its transnational coalitional elements.

In this chapter, then, I look at the different ways that queer feminism addresses points of contention within it, in its early years and then at a later period. Such an analysis of intra-communal dynamics propels me to find new frameworks through which movements and organizations in Lebanon are analyzed. Finding inadequate the dominant patron/client lens that scholars often use, I examine examples of alternative frameworks

that allow me to better address the multiple experiences in queer feminist spaces. Therefore, after establishing a framework that takes into consideration several origins of a movement, as well as multiple experiences within movements, I turn to explore one significant queer feminist production. In 2009, *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*, an anthology by and about queer women and transpeople in Lebanon was published, making visible narratives of queers in Lebanon. Part of what anthology was doing, I argue, is an attempt to demarcate and build a community that was still in its earlier stages. Through *Bareed Mista3jil*, I analyze points of tension based on class, religion, sexuality that are made visible in the process of building a queer feminist community. Language is also another point of tension that I explore in the anthology, and I use it as a bridging point between organizing in early and later stages. In the anthology, language is used to demarcate a community as well as to talk about reclaiming terms to talk about desire and sexuality. In one feminist's essays a few years later, language becomes more explicitly about privilege and decolonization.

At the end of this chapter, through further discussions of points of contention and fissures a few years after *Bareed Mista3jil's* publication, I show how addressing these tensions recurrently seems to include looking transnationally and making connections with women in the Global South and women of color in the U.S. Moreover, by choosing what I call "surrogate foremothers" or veteran U.S women of color writers, activists in Lebanon are also making these connections transnationally and historically to address power structures within feminism in Lebanon. In doing so, not only a homogenous picture of a queer feminist community being challenged, but so is the idea of the west.

What is the work that *Bareed Mista3jil* does, beyond making visible the voices of queer women and transpeople to the world? In her reading of queer Xicana feminist Cherrie Moraga's autobiographical texts, Sandra Soto argues against using Moraga's personal writings as nothing more than an “obvious... evidence of queer intersectionality.” Soto urges us not to take “queerness for granted” when reading a text that is about queer experiences (18). Part of challenging what is taken for granted occurs through finding the contradictions, tensions and fluidity within a text (32-3). In this chapter, through looking at fissures and contradictions in *Bareed Mista3jjil*, and in online feminist writings, I use a queer methodology that complicates queer and feminist writings and challenges binaries.

Hence, it is the serpentine, non-linear, border-transgressive tensions that I attempt to represent here. Throughout this dissertation, it has been my intent to connect various communities, but also to look in multiple directions and temporalities, to interweave past, present and future—in a serpentine fashion. The serpentine motion is created through movement between nodes, linking points of tension, or seeing these points shift from one place to another as they surface in different situations and texts; it is in the return to similar points and debates, through highlighting and analyzing recurrent patterns of power, but also expecting new patterns to emerge. All this motion is never clear-cut and linear, but creates more cyclical and zigzagging imagery/energy, linking different modes and nodes, different groups, geographies and temporalities. Moving underneath, in the shadows, the serpentine imagery/energy does not recreate the binaries of

mainstream/radical, surface/depth, or center/margin, because in its circularity, it twists the poles into wholes.

Yet before I turn my attention to *Bareed Mista3jil*, I contextualize intra-communal dynamics within frameworks that address social movements in Lebanon. While the patron/client relationship remains a common analytical lens through which scholars study social movements in Lebanon, I show that there have been recent methodological interventions that are productive to studying queer feminism. I identify this framework as being about finding multiple genealogies to movements, and about exploring internal dynamics of groups through bringing to light multiple experiences and tensions within these groups. In other words, in the next section I highlight two texts that are doing similar theoretical work that this dissertation is doing. While one of the texts below, by environmental policy professor is about the environmental movement in Lebanon, the second text is an introspection into an academic feminist group, Bahithat, that the researcher, Azza Charara Beydoun, is a member of.

### **Methodologies of Introspection**

In the opening chapter, I introduced a framework often used to analyze organizations in Lebanon: the patron-client relationship that shapes mainstream politics and is often reproduced in civil society and social groups. While recognizing that this is an entrenched power dynamic, I believe that there are other forms of relations within groups that are neglected. Some social justice groups, for example, that are heterogeneous and are not based on lobbying and building relations with political leaders,



may have dynamics other than patron/client relationships. While these groups may recreate modes of relating that are similar to the patron/client binary, whether internally or with outside influential parties (from international funders to political parties), what other relations may exist there? What this section therefore asks is the following: when one is studying movements for the sake of advancing their radical potentials, how do we talk about them critically without reifying frameworks such as clientelism, and the ominous control of leaders?

In order to link queer feminism with other movements in Lebanon through parallels and similarities, I choose two texts here, one that addresses environmentalism in Lebanon and another that is a women's/feminist organization. Makdisi's "The Rise and Decline of Environmentalism in Lebanon" and Beydoun's "Self Empowerment and Fulfillment of One's Identity: The Bahithat," present productive approaches to movements and collectives that parallel, in some ways, my own approach to the queer feminist movement. Makdisi's essay locates the environmental movement in the country within different genealogies, some of which are not mainstreamed. And while Beydoun also resorts to finding multiple origins of the women's academic group, Bahithat, what I find most important in her text is her exploration of the internal dynamics within the collective. These intra-communal relationships that she surveys cannot be easily reduced to patron/client relations. These two texts become my theoretical/methodological contextualization of *Bareed Mista3jil* as a text that is also deliberately showcasing tensions and contradictions in the process of community-building.

Makdisi studies the environmental movement(s) in Lebanon prior to its independence to find three main strands of work for the country's environmental integrity. The first is an elite, liberal and reformist movement, which resembles the values and class background of the women's rights movement that appeared in early twentieth century Lebanon. This movement and its campaigns are symbolized, for instance, in the Friends of the Tree Association, co-founded by President Emile Idde in the 1930s. This strand of environmentalism reached new heights in the 1960s, where “mostly professional, middle class and Western-educated (or at the very least, deeply influenced by international norms) activists” ran campaigns to lobby and raise public awareness of environmental issues. The movement ran “in tandem with a global awareness and therefore of more availability of funds to create local environmental NGOs” (11). This mainstream strand was therefore local and led by middle class professionals, but was also speaking to an international (western) movement that reflected its privileged class position.

Fascinatingly, Makdisi suggests another origin point for the movement, “contrary to... [its] standard understanding of itself.” What this professional mainstream environmental movement has failed to recognize is the relevance of the mobilization of the politically and economically marginalized Shiites in the 1950s and 60s under the leadership of Imam Musa al Sadr. Though Al Sadr's movement did not identify itself as environmentalist either, Makdisi argues, its mobilization centered on the economic liberation of rural and suburban spaces predominated by a poor Shiite population (long known as the “misery belt” around Beirut).

In this context, environmental issues were taken to be deeply tied to a “crisis of participation” and disenfranchisement, thereby calling for an “environmentalism of the poor” (14). Sadr's coalition with Bishop Gregoire Haddad's secular Social Movement, also part of this “environmentalism of the poor” demonstrates how grassroots movements find solidarity despite differences in approach and discourse (15).<sup>82</sup> And just as the first strand of environmentalism resembles an elite women's movement, the inclusion of the “environmentalism of the poor” into the history of the movement is also similar to my remapping, in earlier chapters, of an alternative feminist history that may not identify itself as feminist.

Makdisi's study is an exceptional mapping of genealogies of the environmental movement in Lebanon, though it is sorely lacking a gendered lens in analyzing both the leadership and grassroots activism. In my own personal experiences working with one environmental NGO in 2007, for example, I saw women do much of the on-ground volunteer-based work, yet it was a man who was the head of the organization and who took much of the credit and attention. I also mention these two strands because they relate to class differences, as well as to anxieties and realities of western (economic and ideological) influences on both environmentalism and feminism.

---

<sup>82</sup>Lastly, Makdisi also finds traces a third trend of environmental organizing, which formed to find solutions specific and urgent issues. This strand appeared during the war years to address its catastrophes, from poverty to the abandonment of agricultural lands, to vast water pollution. One prime example is the mobilization around the 1988 “scandal” (involving an Italian company and Lebanese militias) whereby “sixteen thousand barrels and twenty large containers of toxic waste” were sent from Italy to Beirut, as the contents were sold as “fertilizers, pesticides and paint.” The containers were re-painted and sold to civilians, who used them “to store food and drinking water” (16-7).

On the other hand, Beydoun's study of dynamics among members of "Bahithat"--the "Collective of Lebanese Researchers" is a rare demonstration of the dynamics within this intellectual women-only collective. Beydoun begins her study of the organization by exposing what I take to be different points of origins of the group: in 1985 at a time when Beirut was too fractured for the members to meet regularly; 1987 in the "Lebanese Woman as a Witness to the War" symposium in Paris, or months before that in preparation to the Parisian meeting; or 1991, with relaunching of the group after the war (179-80). Based on surveys of members, she breaks down the members' experiences of belonging to the group, their sense of purpose within it, their ability to hold other members and the leadership accountable.

Beydoun shows the organizational structure of "Bahithat" shifting over time with the members and their growth within the collective. Her interviews with the members reveal that some individuals who want to see change in the collective discuss their vision in board meetings, while others hesitate because, in their own words, it's not the right time. Others member "keep their suggestions to themselves" because they are convinced that the members will not take their suggestions into consideration (186-7). In a similar vein, Beydoun shows how voicing one's critique of the group is silenced by self-censorship, with some members confessing that they "do not wish to bother the others." Some members fear direct disapproval of their opinions, while only a few openly evaluate the group (187; my translation).

What strikes me in Beydoun's expose are dynamics I've observed in collectives before: how some women do not join an activist group because, for reasons of politics or

personality, they do not get along with one or more leading members. As with Bahithat, some members only join when the person they disapprove of leaves. And like the members of this academic collective, I've observed individuals who are hesitant to take on leadership positions in their activist groups, justifying it with their lack of experience, their “non-leader like” personality, or their fear of/disinterest in positions of power (185). These justifications do not challenge what leadership is, and why many women feel uncomfortable with being leaders, but they are reflections of dynamics within social justice groups.

Beydoun's dissection of her collective is a prime example of how a member shows the tensions and continuum of experiences within a group for the sake of advancing it. Importantly too, her work demystifies dynamics within women-only and feminist collectives, instead of creating one or two exceptional icons to represent it. Beydoun does not elaborate on her own conclusions of her interviews, leaving the answers of the members to speak on their own about this continuum of relationships within the group. And while a form of patron/client dynamic may be operating between those in central positions and other members, her essay does show other modes of relating. Members talk about negotiating their expectations amongst each other, for example; and it is hinted that class and ideological differences are another possible framework to understand the group. As with Makdisi and Beydoun's research, I show that similar tensions, and multi-faceted relations are taking place in the queer feminist anthology, *Bareed Mista3jil*, and that these tensions are included in it in order to create a community.

### **Queer Feminist Thought Produces 'Mail in a Hurry'**

Within the larger argument of queer feminist thought's coalitional lens and interconnecting struggles, looking inward into queer feminist communities shows a process by which tensions are highlighted in the process of community building. These tensions, I show, reflect personal and communal experiences, but they also come to terms with influences and alliances from outside Lebanon's borders. While showing some of the tensions are deliberate at earlier stages of community building, later writings in queer and feminist online spaces center the sense of alienation and power dynamics within the movement. Yet even as they highlight the problems and the debates, these later writings are still coalitional and transnational.

While writing has been a well-mobilized tool for queer feminists, the publication of the anthology, *Bareed Mista3jil*, signaled a new chapter of queer self-representation. Coming to life in 2009, *Bareed Mista3jil*-- translated as "Mail in a Hurry" or 'Express Mail' was written, compiled, edited, published and advertised by Meem. Meem is/was an underground grassroots "support community for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and transgender persons," mainly in their twenties and early thirties. *Bareed Mista3jil* (hereafter referred to as *Bareed*) represents a particular period in queer organizing which is important to celebrate and critique. At the time of the anthology's publication, Meem was two years old (*Bareed* 20), and it represented the "power of small spaces" (Moustafa 528) to create changes that extend beyond these spaces.

As Meem no longer exists in the shape and form that it did in its earlier days, this section is, in some ways, a critical (and perhaps slightly nostalgic) reflection on an earlier phase of queer activism. This section engages with *Bareed Mista3jil* not only as representing a bygone phase, but to see the way creating community highlights fissures. Here I am also in conversation with Dina Georgis's nuanced analysis of Bareed. Georgis argues that rather than think of the anthology through a binary of shame and pride, and repeat a "post Stonewall pride politics," shame is a productive site of analysis. Shame as Elspeth Probyn and Eve Sedgwick argue, allow us to recognize the things that really matter to us (234-5). Thus, Georgis explores the contradictions of queer communities through emphasis on negotiating shame. My attention, however, goes to *Bareed's* creation of community through making visible contradictory experiences, as well as interdependence throughout these points of contradictions and tensions. While these contradictions are embraced within a continuum of experiences in *Bareed*, years later in online writing, they take more center stage.

There are twelve main themes in the anthology: Discrimination, Self-Esteem, Gender Identity, Activism, Coming Out, Family, Relationships, Sexual Diversity, Religion, Community, Self-Discovery and Emigration. All twelve themes are listed at the beginning of every new entry, although one or two (or more) of these themes are highlighted in bold with every new story, to denote the issues each entry touches on. In the first entry, for example, "Discrimination" and "Self Esteem" are in bold, while the other ten themes are in a lighter shade. This is an artistic move, but I also read it as a

political choice that recognizes that all these these themes (and more) may be present in the life experiences of any queer person in Lebanon.

Even as it is meant to reveal the lives of queer women and transpeople to what is assumed as a heterosexist and homophobic Lebanese audience at large (*Bareed* 7), the individual stories are intended to resist what Nada Elia calls “the burden of representation” (13). Instead, there is an insistence on refusing one representative experience, favoring a continuum of perspectives. As *Bareed*'s introduction declares, “there is no 'typical Lebanese lesbian.’” Thus the creators of the anthology were deliberate about including individuals with “opposite experiences” (8). The queer feminist strategy of that period was to make room for multiple experiences to co-exist.

Some queer people, for example, write about being immediately accepted by their families after coming out, on account of their faith in God’s will (83), while others encounter familial violence when their sexuality is known. Some stories also show a process that parents undergo from rejection to acceptance (“Coming Out to My Mom”). The relationship of queer people to their families is not simply about coming out, though; it is about independence, interdependence and responsibility, as well as about a process in which queer people come to understand their families better. Thus, the queer feminist thought that *Bareed* puts forward uses opposite experiences not for the sake of disconnecting, but to show that these experiences are interdependent.

Another important facet of *Bareed* is the anonymity of the writers. No name of any writer or contributor appears in the entire anthology, and this was done partly for confidentiality reasons. Another reason, however, is because each snapshot in the book



resembles many other experiences of queer people in the country (8). One may argue, for example, that the issue of confidentiality could have been solved by using pseudonyms instead of the authors' real names. Yet this anonymity represents interconnections through representations of diversity. Importantly then, while this anthology is partly about assertion of self and personal identity, it is also-- more relevantly for me, about the building of community, and of a movement, with all of its contradictory elements.

I see intra-communal tensions emerging in this anthology based on religion, class, and gender and sexual expressions. Given the “opposite experiences” that *Bareed* deliberately seeks to reveal, some of the entries are angry and hopelessly declare that Lebanese societies are cruel and merciless (159), while others conclude their recollections of a painful past with optimism. Some stories end with a dedication to activism, while others do not mention engagement with political/social movements for collective change. Still, the anthology, born out of a movement itself, is a political queer feminist statement that declares the existence of queer communities, as well as what these communities face and resist.

*Bareed* reveals multiple levels of violence, from social and economic violence, both individual and structural, to the physical, sexual, emotional and epistemic violence (from family members, friends and strangers),. Queer lives have been shaped not only by homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism, but by war, poverty, and patriarchy. Yet the stories are also about resistance, through the act of remembering and documenting, and through defying erasure and shame. As Georgis writes, *Bareed Mista3jil* is not simply about the binary of pride and shame, a common trope in western LGBT stories, but about

hope (234-5). Later in this section, I focus on epistemic and linguistic violence through the erasure of queer histories, as well as through the inability to write about one's experiences around sexuality in Arabic.

Firstly, however, I turn to highlight points of contention around religion, sexuality and class in *Bareed*. Here, aspects of community building occur through coexisting contradictions. As a secondary argument, it is not a stretch to read such a tactic in a Lebanese context, where co-existence of different ethno-sectarian peoples has been both possible and impossible. Queer cultural productions can be positioned within these two Lebanese experiences: the romanticized concept of the co-existence of seventeen religious sects in a small country (Salibi), as well as the constant wars and sectarian violence that has plagued it. The Lebanese collective memory, for example, is rife with phrases such as the “war of elimination” (حرب الالغاء), the name given to the 1990 war. The threat of elimination of political and sectarian groups has been mobilized politically and violent during wars, just as the idea of coexistence been mobilized nationally. I therefore read this insistence on coexistence in the anthology as a response to heteropatriarchal sectarian violence.

*Bareed's* tactic of incorporating contradictory experiences is also similar to Beydoun's investigation of Bahithat members' relationship to their collective and their co-members. Beydoun shows points of conflict coexisting with feelings of belonging within a group, without creating an overarching theory of the power dynamics in it. I am not saying that this tactic is the “best way” or the “most radical” way to examine communities and structural power relations within them; instead, I see it as a recurring

tactic of self-exposure and self-reflection in community-building, sometimes occurring in the early years of the community.

Thus, in *Bareed*, tensions between community members based on religion, sexuality and class exist with a sense of belonging and of the ability to be oneself. Some stories, for example, reveal that religion plays a positive role in the life of a queer person and in their activism. In “Becoming,” the writer considered her activism as that of a missionary, on a mission “for peace, love and gender equality” (61). Another activist professed that “my faith is about love,” as her faith gave her a (spiritually) healthier life and a sense of purpose for fighting oppression (80). One activist, on the other hand, spoke about misconceptions toward veiled lesbians, and the alienation she felt among queers who did not understand how she could be both queer and veiled.

'A dyke wearing the hijab? How can you be both?' I got this from a lot of people. Or I could see it in their eyes. I also faced the problem of not fitting in socially. Most girls in the lesbian community liked to go out to bars and drink (176).

Entries reveal the misconception in queer communities that religion and queerness are mutually exclusive (80), while there are also stories about individuals who struggle against these misconceptions. In the quote above, the writer's religion (or rather, the dominating secularism of queer communities) stands in the way of belonging. Yet in a collection of varied experiences, sectarianism and some queer people's misperceptions of veiled women, are presented as personal individual problems, rather than structural issues.

Another point of tension revolves around bisexuality. Despite different entries on queer politics and the rejection of gender and sexual labels (“Butch”, and “The Mind

Boggling Queer” for example), some bisexual people talked about how discrimination against them and against bisexuality amongst gays and lesbians. One entry talks about queer people being even harsher than straight persons: “the only bisexuality I had heard of was one that gay people made fun of” (51). In “Taboo,” about a bisexual woman's experiences, bisexuality means that she is both misunderstood by homosexual and heterosexual, yet also able to understand herself better through her gendered and sexual dynamics with different partners (196-8).

Class based politics also constitute points of tension, although it is often working class individuals who bring it to the forefront. Thus, to some self-identified queers, while their queer community offers acceptance and healthy, egalitarian dynamics (127), other entries reveal a contrasting reality, sometimes because of one's class. In “When You Burn,” the writer describes her experiences as a young working class queer person, and the daughter of a family that has been struggling over generations. The writer reveals that:

Class is one of the most difficult problems I have vis-a-vis the lesbian community in Lebanon. I really don't relate to them and they don't really relate to me because of it. Take war for example. I don't have the option to leave. Unlike some girls, my family doesn't have the money or foreign passports to get out. If a new war starts, I'm stuck here. I can't tell my friends about my family's politics either. If my family has “extremist” political ideas, it's because they're stuck facing death, fighting for their survival (191-2).

This activist is therefore explaining the different ways that being working class queer differentiates her from middle class queer communities. Her family politics would not be understood by progressive activists, and her own struggles are also misunderstood—or

unrecognized. Belonging, she shows, is not solely determined by one's sexuality, but is also shaped by class.

By contrast, in an entry entitled "My Saturday's Journeys," a working class woman from what she identifies as a conservative community in the South, finds solace and belonging within her queer community in Beirut. In a story about violence, resistance and survival, the writer expresses her commitment to her new-found community, as she saves money every week to travel from the South to Beirut every Saturday, for meetings and discussions (203). As with "When You Burn", queer organizing does give these two activists a sense of dedication and purpose, yet what is different is that belonging and hope are constantly challenged in "When You Burn," whereas these are embraced as a new stage of an activist's life in "My Saturday's Journeys". The politics of *Bareed* is therefore not about offering narratives centered on class issues, and neither is it about quelling the differences and the tensions due to class differences. Instead it seeks to create expansive borders of a community, not by polarizing experiences, but by integrating them within a range of experiences.

The final point of tension that I discuss here is Lebanese queers' relationship to language. Written mainly in English, with some use of Arabic, the code-switching is meant to represent the way many Lebanese queers speak and communicate on social media, as Georgis explains. Code-switching is a symptom of a larger phenomenon, especially common among the Lebanese middle classes, and its hybridity and fluidity can be read as queer (238). The use of English in *Bareed* also speaks to the alienation of

many self-identified queers from their own language, especially when it comes to topics related to sexuality.

Some of the problems associated with queer people's alienation from their language are represented in their rejection of, or unease with, terms associated with desire and sexuality in general. *Bareed's* introduction, for example, addresses the difficulty in translating words such as “wetness”, and other words related to desire and sexual identities (6). Terms denoting female homosexuality are also difficult, or alienating to convey in Arabic, as the *Bareed* entry, “Sou7aqiyyeh” shows. Sou7aqiyyeh (or Souhaqiyya) is the archaic Arabic translation of the word “lesbian”; literally translated, it means “rubbing” or “crushing”. In this particular chapter, the writer rejects the idea that crushing should describe women’s sexual lives (15). As she reveals in the quotation below, neither the “western” nor Arabic terms satisfy her. She writes:

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 'ieeen'). Ugh. Even worse was the word 'dyke'. But it's still all good compared to 'sou7aqiyyeh'. That one really makes me want to vomit. I don't know if it's the word itself, or the meaning associated with it, that horrible disgusting image of lesbians in people's minds was entrenched in my mind too for so long.... So I couldn't call myself a lesbian. I refused to” (34).

While I recognize the uses of terms in their own context, “dyke” was more commonly used among working class white women in the U.S, and butch and femme labels are also more prevalent among working class communities of color (Crawley), the above quote is more concerned with the ways both mainstream “western” and Arab/Lebanese societies misrepresent queer women. As such, the mainstream connotations of words from “lesbian” to “sou7aqiyyeh”, as the writer sees them, are

labels loaded with misrepresentations and negative images. However, the writer here reveals that she even prefers the western terms to the Arabic word, which produces a strong reactions for her. Part of her struggle as queer becomes about finding more intimate words to identify with. Importantly too, this is not only about her personal identification, but a communal project to claim ownership of representation and self-expression. The entry ends by stating that “part of our job as a lesbian community now” is about finding words, inventing, and reinventing terms that can be claimed by queers (36). Therefore, the young writer/activist situates her work with language as a main aspect of queer activism and community-building.

The use of English, transliterated Arabic or Arabish, in the context of individual and collective struggles with language are thus points of tensions permeating the anthology, even when it is not directly dealing with this issue. Transliterated Arabic, is used by the writers of *Bareed's* stories to convey Lebanese expressions of love among women (“7ayeti inti”—translated as, “you are my love”) and specific terms in the queer community (from “shazz” to “shakhir”)<sup>83</sup>, as well as other Lebanese expressions, “to get the full cultural reference or emotional resonance” as Georgis notes (239).

Yet I also read this hybrid language as demarcating the borders of a community, without completely separating the inside of this community from what is outside the boundaries that it is constructing. In many cases throughout the anthology, Arabic/Lebanese is used to express what non-queer people (parents, neighbors and strangers) say, and therefore reveal the judgmental statements they make. One particular

---

<sup>83</sup>Shazz means deviant, and is the closest literal translation to “queer”. Shakhir includes the performance of a gay man as a housewife, or as a diva (*Bareed* 122).

heart-wrenching one-page entry “Ya 7ayaweni” (translated “You Animal,” in the feminine), is about a father physically and verbally attacking his queer daughter after catching her with another girl in her bedroom (155). A large section of this short entry is in transliterated Arabic/Lebanese, because it is replaying the father's abusive language.

In another piece entitled “Independence”, for example, a young woman expresses her strong desire for independence from her family. The Lebanese Arabic in this entry reflects socially conservative mindsets, coming especially from the writer's mother, who is resisting letting her daughter gain sovereignty of her life. The mother complains, “Ana yalli da77eit, bitkhalphi wled ou bitkibbiyon la barra” (trans. “I who have sacrificed so much! You give birth to children and you throw them to the world” (139). Hence, I argue that in this anthology, Arabic is the language of possessive mothers and abusive fathers, which is an intimate, though sometimes violent, social domain. English, on the other hand, in the two entries above, represents the telling of one's personal queer story to the world. The anthology does not aim at fully disconnecting the community from its larger social environment. Instead, by making the Arabic about the social and the familial, the narratives that are written in English cannot exist on their own, but need the social context to give them meaning.

There are multiple erasures that *Bareed* is resisting, partly through the pull and push of different languages. The anthology, being the first of its kind, is emerging out of decades of silencing non-normative sexualities and gender expressions. Alienation from a language to express sexualities and desires is deeply tied to the repression of non-heterosexual lives. *Bareed* tackles this erasure, and the misrepresentations it allows for, in



the introduction. Referring to Abu Nawwas, a famous poet in the 8th century who wrote homoerotic verses, the introduction reveals that “early Islamic writers” talked about sexuality “in a surprisingly casual and liberal manner” (3-4). *Bareed* is therefore tying multiple experiences and the gender and sexual identities that it is representing to the fluid sexuality that is portrayed in early Islamic writings.<sup>84</sup>

While reclaiming language and this history constitutes one political aspect of lesbian politics in the anthology, such a politics becomes more explicitly about decolonization in later stages of organizing. To end this section, I put *Bareed's* relationship to language, discussed above, in conversation with a later piece published in the online magazine, *Sawt Al Niswa*, to show how the use of English is used to address privileges within a movement and highlights a decolonial struggle. Feminist activist Sara Emiline Abu Ghazal writes about alienation from one's language as being connected with the legacy of colonization, and with privilege:

I wanted to write about the layers of identities, sexualities, class and privileges that prevent us from moving towards the ways of true change. How every time people use English my heart gets broken, as I feel our mother's tongue is being cut over and over again, and we are forgetting what we are, and how to look at ourselves from that language in particular, and how we invent ourselves through it, distancing ourselves from what the colonialists told us (“Politics of Closeness and Alienation”).

While in *Bareed*, the activist who wrote “Sou7aqiyya” feels distanced from Arabic terms, Abu Ghazal is asking that activists use Arabic in order to distance ourselves from colonialism. In critiquing some aspects of activism as being about the consumption of identities and lifestyles that are determined by the market as well as by dominant society,

---

<sup>84</sup> See Sahar Amer's *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

I also read Abu Ghazal's critique of the use of English in Lebanon as also being about the influence of the global economy. Moreover, language is used to reflect on privileges within activist communities. The irony that she is writing these words in English is not lost on the writer, who confesses to a sense of shame about it, but justifies it with English being the language of easy communication among feminists (and I add, queers), in Lebanon.

Lebanese communist writer and thinker, Mahdi Amel (1936-1987), once declared "it is a great risk to think of your reality in Arabic" ("Hassan Hamdan" *Jadaliyya*). In other words, using Arabic is a powerful tool against the local elite and imperial powers, requiring thinking of one's condition, and oppression, in Arabic, but also conceiving of the tools in one's local language. More recently, writing in the context of being an indigenous Palestinian living in Haifa, Nisreen Mazzawi declared in her (Arabic) blog "I might harm the language with my linguistic mistakes, but I harm it more if I abandon it" (my translation).<sup>85</sup> Not only is this a disclaimer about grammatical mistakes, but she is also reclaiming language against occupation and cultural/linguistic imperialism. Therefore I situate Abu Ghazal's analysis of the use of language in feminist circles within the context of Arab anti-colonial struggles, historically and in more recent times.

While English remains a widespread medium of writing among feminists and queers in Lebanon, many activists, over the years since *Bareed's* publication, have begun writing in Arabic more often. Some queers and feminists have also resorted to translating their English texts to Arabic as well, in an effort to stop the cutting of our mother tongue,

---

<sup>85</sup>Massawi, Nisreen. "Men Ana." n.d <http://nisreenmazzawi.blogspot.com/>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

as Abu Ghazal puts it. That said, while allowing reclamation of Arabic as a mother tongue, it is also important to remember that Arabic, in many regions and contexts, can be the dominant colonizing language that suppresses other indigenous languages.<sup>86</sup> I also see a form of classism operating when we privilege standard Arabic over spoken dialects, adding to the disconnection between the written and the spoken word. Below, through writings by Abu Ghazal and other activists produced a few years after the publication of *Bareed*, I look at the ways tensions and debates are addressed, highlighting a transnational coalitional consciousness within them.

### **The Transnationality of Looking In, Or Seeking Surrogate Foremothers**

I choose to conclude this chapter by looking at processes of critical self-reflection by which queer feminism analyzes and critiques the very activist spaces that produce it. These are critiques that analyze the privileges and power structures within local queer communities, but I also show how they do so through a coalitional and transnational consciousness. Looking into tensions within a movement is therefore a personal, collective as well as a transnational process that breaks from some relationships and allies with others, within and outside the borders of communities and nations. Appearing at a later stage of feminist organizing, a few years after *Bareed*, these writings are transnational and coalitional in the way they are attentive to feminists of the Global South

---

<sup>86</sup>Kahina, Nuunja. “‘You Have to Choose’: Islam, Secularism and Amazigh Identity.” *Decolonization: Education, Indigeneity and Society* 28 June 2013. <http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2013/06/28/you-have-to-choose-islam-secularism-and-amazigh-identity/>. Last accessed 20 April 2014.

and especially to women of color in the U.S. I later identify one aspect of these connections as being about choosing surrogate foremothers.

To theorize the relations that are being created by queer feminism from Lebanon with U.S women of color requires an analysis of how queer feminists are complicating the idea of the west, or speaking about a “different west” in the midst of constant accusations that they are western imports, or anti-western. Noting the mobilization of hegemonic international LGBT labels and tropes by the queer women and transpeople in *Bareed*, Georgis argues against the assumption that they are “simply or naively appropriating Western queer epistemology. Rather they are cultivating and negotiating their sexualities under a variety of local and geopolitical pressures” (“Past Pride” 234). Georgis is addressing anxieties and accusations of influence by a dominant western paradigm.

This need to answer for accusations of being imported from the west creates what I see as an anxiety of influence. I use the phrase anxiety of influence not as Harold Bloom intended it, but as a process of recognizing and subverting epistemic violence and challenging simplistic Arab/West dichotomies. Following the previous section of looking inward, I argue that transnationality is as much about looking in as it is about looking outside to create connections with groups and movements in the Global South and with women of color in the U.S. I am inspired in this concept by personal discussions in 2008 with Samia Abou Samra. Abou-Samra observed that women of color are situated in the backyard of the U.S empire, and are also in opposition to imperialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy. She therefore cautioned against the simplistic portrayal of “the west” in

ways that erase indigenous women and women of color and their radical intersectional politics; those who also get erased in the process as the elders among queer feminists of color, particularly those who have the racism of the feminist movement and the sexism of nationalist movements (personal conversation). This section therefore shows how some activists, since 2008, have begun creating these connections.

I trace the anxiety of western influence back to the orientalist discourse through which colonial states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century established themselves in opposition to Islamic countries, through the figure of the veiled woman, as well as through a discourse of propelling these countries into a new period of democracy and civilization (Ahmed; Lazreg; Said; Nusair 185-6). In Lebanon, women's rights activists and intellectuals during the colonial period exhibited both an admiration of and a resistance to the "West." In the 1940's, women's rights activist Rose Shahfa represented the nationalist Lebanese elite's frustration with France when she declared, "Shall we submit to their despotic treatment, while it was they who first taught us to demand our rights?" (Thompson 259). This women's rights activist therefore equates France with freedom and rights, even in her resistance to colonialism and patriarchy.

Women's rights activists led the fight against French cultural, linguistic and economic imperialism since the 1920s. Through their writings, and through establishing schools to teach Arabic and to "produce patriotic female citizens," they recognized-- as Abu Ghazal did almost a century later, that language is a tool for decolonization. Many elite women in the early twentieth century also sought to create a market for local women's handicrafts to protect their work from competition with French imports

(Thompson 96-7). Early women's rights activists, and many contemporary queer feminists therefore recognize the interconnection between gender-based rights, and economic, cultural and linguistic decolonization.

In contemporary times, feminists in Lebanon and in countries of Arab majority continue to resist neo-orientalist discourse about Arab and Muslim women. Some feminists, however, warn against trapping ourselves in a constant defensive position (Anzaldúa 100). In her March 2011 article entitled “Where are the Women?” ( أين هم النساء؟), Zeina Zaatari addressed Arab feminists' constant battles against western stereotyping, particularly during the popular Arab revolts of 2010-2011. Writing about the surprise at seeing women in the protests, and in Arab feminists' response to this reaction, Zaatari argued that the constant need to defend and explain ourselves to a racist audience impacts our discourse as Arab feminists. A defensive stand, Zaatari declared, simplifies our analysis, and leads to an exaggeration of women's roles, and a glossing over the hierarchies amongst Arab women.

In other words, a constant need to reply to the “western” question: “where are the women?” is pushing us to prove the presence of women on the street and in leadership positions without critiquing how visible/vocal women are commonly aligned with political or economic power regimes. Consequently, we continue to see how the reproduction of “gender identity predominates political identity when women enter politics” (Al Akhbar 2011). Therefore, we should not forsake a critical analysis of privilege among women for the sake of providing representations for the world to consume. Zaatari therefore uses an anxiety of influence as productive tool of theorizing

and pushing feminist analysis beyond a constant defense stance, and into deeper introspection and critique. This analysis that she puts forth is important for the discussion of sexuality too, because it allows the breaking of a binary by not focusing on what the “west” thinks and preemptively defending Arab queers against its assumptions.

Queer feminists are also complicating the idea of the west, by distancing themselves from mainstream hegemonic depictions and deliberately calling attention to marginalized individuals and groups from different geographies. One queer feminist tactic has been to choose to address women of color and women of the Global South in their public forums, rather than addressing an imagined general public at large. A poignant example occurred in the aftermath of a police raid on a “gay friendly” club in Dekwaneh, north of Beirut in May 2013. On that day, the Internal Security Forces raided the club, arresting and assaulting people, who were mainly Syrian immigrants. At the municipality headquarters, one of the arrested, a transgender person was “ordered to strip... to 'check whether she was a man or a woman.'” In response to these violent practices, activists released a petition asking for support, not indiscriminately from whoever is willing to support them, but specifically from “organizations and associations in Lebanon and across the Global South” to protest the Dekwaneh Violation and a call to action to protest police violence (CSBR petition).<sup>87</sup> Importantly too, the activists did not see the attack only on LGBTs, but situated it within the context of violence by state security forces and political parties against homosexual men, sex workers, and political protestors (CSBR petition).

---

<sup>87</sup><http://www.csbronline.org/2013/05/solidarity-statement-on-dekwaneh-abuse/>

The statement was endorsed by groups in Lebanon, Bahrain, Turkey, Pakistan, Mexico and Indonesia. The statement therefore assumes that feminists of the Global South are more likely to understand structural inequalities and state violence against the marginalized. It also reduces the likelihood of a savior approach. Choosing one's allies as this statement does, is a practice of connection and coalition-building that I also link to political insertions with migrant communities in Lebanon. As I showed in the past chapter, a transnational feminist vision which pushes for exchanges with women in Sri Lanka. Such a tactic allows exchanges not only between an imperial center (U.S) and many margins (Lebanon; Sri Lanka etc), but also between these margins, while also complicating the analysis of hierarchies within these positions (Mohanty 38-9).

While in the above example activists were reaching out for solidarity to groups in the Global South, other activists tackle local or internal debates by invoking groups that share their politics in the U.S. Such a tactic is evident in an article by Lynn Darwiche and Haneen Maikey, which reflects on queer politics in an Arab context, through challenging an Arab/West binary. Co-written by Lebanese and Palestinian activists between Jerusalem and Beirut, the article engages with debates within the queer community about politics and activist strategies. The debates which the two activists are addressing can be summed up as a tension between Arab LGBTQ identity politics and a more intersectional and anti-imperialist approach.

Darwiche and Maikey are critical of the accusations that an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial is simply “anti-western”. Instead, they ask for questioning the notion of what is “the west”:



After all, “the West” does not only produce mainstream LGBT structures and models of organizing, does it? From the belly of the beast, initiatives such as the Audre Lorde Project, Queers for Economic Justice, and many more have had a history of producing powerful and alternative forms of queer organizing. This shows how, in essence, the argument is not only unsound but actually counterproductive as it conflates mainstream organizing with Western organizing and thus inadvertently reinforces a homogenization of the West (Darwiche and Maikey, “From the Belly”)<sup>88</sup>

It is therefore a discussion of internal debates about queer politics that allows Maikey and Darwiche to turn outward, transnationally and coalitionally, into queer organizing by working class and queers of color in the U.S. What is most counterproductive in the assumption of a monolithic West is that it reinforces power differences, and lessens the ability to create connections between groups producing “alternative forms of queer organizing” in different locations.

The Audre Lorde Project (ALP) that Darwiche and Maikey are referring to is a community organizing project for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, gender queer and two spirit people of color in New York. The ALP works within a framework of economic and social justice as it intersects with sexual and gender justice.<sup>89</sup> The group, Queers for Economic Justice, also based in New York, brings socioeconomic disparities to the heart of the discourse and organizing around sexuality and gender, centering the perspectives of queers who are poor, and addressing socioeconomic structural inequalities.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, by calling attention to the need for intersectional politics within Arab LGBTQ organizing, they are also creating alliances themselves with groups that

---

<sup>88</sup><http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2011/10/from-the-belly-of-arab-queer-activism-challenges-and-opportunities/>)

<sup>89</sup>N.p. *The Audre Lorde Project*. N.d. <http://alp.org/> last accessed 21 April 2014.

<sup>90</sup>N.p. *Queers for Economic Justice*. n.d. <http://www.q4ej.org/>. Last accessed 21 April 2014.

take similar stances in other geographies. Feminists are also opening/continuing circuits of conversations and solidarity campaigns across Arab countries. Activists in Lebanon, for example, continue to write about the North African revolutions and to link them to Lebanese issues.

Yet I believe that there is something else at work in these processes of connecting with groups who share a similar queer feminist anti-racist, and anti-imperialist, discourse. The connections that are being made by feminists in Lebanon is not only across geographies, but also across time periods, particularly when it comes to queer women of color in the U.S. That is, since women of color in the U.S have a longer history of organizing and theorizing from intersectional and radical positions, and in the absence of similar documented self-identified Lebanese/Arab queer histories, I believe part of what is taking place is that queer women of color are embraced as surrogate foremothers for young queers in Lebanon.

Put differently, women of color veterans also represent mentors, or surrogate foremothers, and some activists in Lebanon are thus engaging in a process of interconnecting histories, politics and people across geographies. I ground this argument in my own coming to queer politics through reading Chicana queer feminists such as Moraga and Anzaldúa, and Black feminists in the U.S from the Combahee River Collective to Cathy Cohen and more recently, activists/theorists such Alexis Pauline Gumbs. I also saw these connections being made during discussions in queer and feminist circles.

Earlier, I showed how addressing debates within queer circles leads to highlighting transnational connections. Next, I return to writings by Abu Ghazal to show prominent examples of how feminists connect with surrogate foremothers in the process of writing about fissures and power dynamics within activist communities. I analyze this concept here not as representational of a common trend within feminism in Lebanon, but as an important theoretical intervention that I see emerging from feminist spaces. In “Audre Lorde, Quote Mining and Rambles from an Editor in Despair,” Abu Ghazal takes inspiration from Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde to theorize about patriarchy within Arab protests for social justice, and the position of women and feminism within them. Abu Ghazal introduces Lorde within a duality of despair (because of the reproduction of privileges and patriarchy in social/political movements) and hope (through a radical knowledge-producing Arab feminist movement). She writes:

In my daily rants a friend reminds me of Audre Lorde, and if she doesn't Audre Lorde reminds me of herself. Why do I mention an American (black lesbian) feminist?... Because Audre Lorde's work is a time capsule in a form of knowledge. Her work exposed silences and power struggles within the feminist movement, and her work made it possible for all of those living on the margins of movements (led by the white middle class) to reclaim a space in it, and connect race, sexuality, and class with gender and justice. Here in Beirut, we need to know all, read all, but produce our own. But most importantly, we need to be very careful about quote mining and taking matters out of context (we are always out of context in the eyes of patriarchy)” (Abu Ghazal, “Quote Mining”)

In this quote, Abu Ghazal starts with the assumption of difference in nationality, race and sexuality (“Why do I mention an American black lesbian feminist?”)-- to arrive at similarities. These similarities, or parallels, are about power differences not only in male-dominated movements, but among feminists themselves. What Lorde provides is a model of analyzing power intersectionally in ways that give voice to the marginalized, implying

that social movements and feminism in Lebanon and the Arab world require of us (Arabs, feminists, etc.) such nuanced analysis as well.

Here again, a critical reflection of the movement that she participates in becomes a transnational coalitional stand that “mobilizes” Lorde, or Lorde's position as a Black lesbian feminist in the U.S, in order to analyze hierarchies in the feminist movement in Lebanon. Through the figure of a Black lesbian feminist (as opposed to mainstream American) she aims at connecting the margins between feminist movements from Beirut (Abu Ghazal) to New York (Lorde).

According to Abu Ghazal, part the relevance of Lorde (paradoxically) is in being a “time capsule”, that is, in capturing the particularities of her own life and experiences. Therefore, the activist is showing how surrogate foremothers are chosen: not by quote mining blindly, but by recognizing the complexity of these different contexts. Since Arab feminists are constantly being accused of being allies or imports from the west, she both challenges what this west is, as she challenges the local movement out of which she writing.

In another piece by Abu Ghazal, she again invokes Lorde, and Adrienne Rich—in the occasion of Rich's death in 2012. In this essay too, she mobilizes the late feminists to evoke questions about the movement in Lebanon. She writes, addressing Lorde and Rich:

I wanted to ask you about your communities... Did you not belittle each other's work? Did you not betray one another?... Did you try to survive against all odds, but also against one another? Did you take in all the violence, all the discrimination, all the tactics of patriarchy and reflected it onto one another?... Did you become a feminist version of your own societies— resources and power in the hands of the few?

I believe that partly because the iconized elite women's rights movement in Lebanon has not openly discussed such issues of privileges and tensions within it, Abu Ghazal turns to queer feminist Black and white anti-racist activists from the U.S. Through invoking the late veteran figures, she critiques similar dynamics that are happening around her, and that are reproducing privileges based on class, ethnicity, and nationality. In looking in, she is simultaneously creating these transnational connections with an older generation of feminists.

From Abu Ghazal's writings above, we learn that queer feminism has not been immune to power dynamics that reproduce privileges based on class, education and nationality. Rather than show a diversity of experiences, as *Bareed* does, she is focusing on critiquing these systemic hierarchies within the movement. This chapter has therefore addressed practices of introspection, where members of feminist and queer feminist communities are critically reflecting on communities. Showing a range of experiences, sometimes contradictory, can be a part of building a community in its early stages. At later stages, introspection of the movement can sometimes be more critical and based on common politics. Yet queer feminism also becomes a practice in making transnational coalitional connections.

## Epilogue

“2013 was a dark year for social activism in Beirut,” journalist Yazan al Saadi began her article in *Al Akhbar English* newspaper, which ran under the title “Have Beirut's Social Movements Died?” Noting the lack of demonstrations and marches as the city had seen in prior years, Al Saadi highlighted the lack of activity and a crisis in feminist, anti-racist, anti-sectarian and other social justice groups. The activists she interviewed spoke of elitism in the movements, and of activism being confined to its own bubble, and to the capital city. The article also explained the demise of movements and the depression that had befallen activist spaces as being partly a result of the wars raging in Syria and their effects in Lebanon. What was left unspoken were issues such as the harmful power dynamics within activist groups, the lack of accountability, and the mistakes that brought about the alleged end of social movements.

2013 was also the year I was writing the bulk of this project on queer feminist thought and organizing. In short, I was celebrating its achievements in the midst of heartbreaking splits. This conclusion offers no closure on this topic, however. During the early days of queer feminist mobilizing, I had imagined that it would be met with violence from state and sectarian powers, from mainstream media. I had imagined harassment, censorship and bullying from police and political parties. Many activists have faced these institutions, because of their politics, their gender identity, and/or their

sexual identity; and because the violence of the state and political groups does interfere with our lives, especially because of activists' social, economic and political positions.

What happened, however, is that activists themselves became the agents of policing and harassment. With no systems of accountability to help us deal with people who were community members, activist peers, friends and lovers, power was abused. With no mechanisms to address grievances and crises, from the intimate to the political, injurious words and behavior went on unchecked. There came a point when all suppressed and visible issues exploded-- as a friend, J.H, explained in the summer of 2013 (personal conversation). With no mentors to guide us, to hold us back before we made some grave mistakes, or to give us courage to hold others accountable, activists were left to their own devices.

We were also young and angry and injured. We entered feminist spaces with our prejudices, our wounds, and our different socio-economic background; and we usually came from dysfunctional families too. We reflected all of these in our communities and against the people who came to the same spaces with us. Power was not evenly distributed, and activist spaces became laden with toxic power dynamics of center against margin. Everyone suffered to some extent, but it was the people with less privileges, and who did not have a community to support them because queer feminism offered them no sense of community, who may have suffered more than others. And with no similar movements outside of Beirut, the halting of activism in the capital meant that it also disappeared in the rest of Lebanon. I was not removed from all of these happenings. I tried to be, for a long time, to keep an equal distance, but at some point (in 2013) I had to

choose sides more actively. I do not wish to say more about this issue here, I am also still in the process of coming to comprehend all that has happened in the past years, and to understand where I had participated in perpetuating the crisis (mainly by not holding people accountable from the beginning; by not noticing and calling attention to certain alienating practices and power dynamics, because I had privilege enough to not notice). I mention all of this in order to highlight that radical thought can sometimes be accompanied by less radical practices.

These crises amongst feminist activists also produced anxieties about my dissertation. My initial anxieties at the beginning of this project were about writing the dissertation as an individualized process that garners individual rewards, and that is removed (intellectually and spatially) from the communities that I am writing about-- as I clarify in the introduction. Later I also questioned the degree to which I should ignore or include what was happening. Except for alluding to tensions and discriminatory intra-communal practices in the last chapter, I wrote this dissertation as if these feminist spaces still felt as revolutionary as they had many years ago, as if the communities which produced the queer feminist thought today hadn't split up in the midst of writing.

This dissertation has been a work that reflected the first years of my involvement in what was a queer feminist mobilization that was asking important questions, about norms, politics, intersectional analysis, about finding our roots. I saw some activists theorize links with women of color in the U.S, and create connections with feminists from Egypt and Palestine. My aim was to center the theories and perspectives of the activists on the ground, who were producing important intellectual work outside of



academia. The sobering reality of what has happening on the ground is part of the reason I began focusing on the history of women's organizing in different movements, rather than explore current organizing. Yet the yearning for a history is very real.

I started out being more interested in the groups, in celebrating their achievements, and in what they meant to me. My intellectual interest, however, shifted towards a discourse and theoretical frameworks that were being produced rather than groups, which I did not want to essentialize or romanticize. There were two strands I wanted to pursue: one, in reimagining the relationship between migrant workers and feminists in more mutually inclusive ways, and two, in constructing a radical feminist history where different communities and groups can see themselves reflected.

In many ways, then, this dissertation follows the advice of Toni Morrison, who says that “if there's a book that you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.” And so I did. I wanted to bring together history and more contemporary organizing; and to interweave different struggles together, because I believe that they are all part of our feminist heritage. The stories of women organizing in factories, of militant women fighting against Israel, and of migrant women resisting in mundane ways, underground, or through more visible activism should shape the way we understand feminism and women's resistance in Lebanon. The scope of the project, then, and the connections that it makes, between struggles, and between time periods, is what I offer to activists and academics. With this framework, I have inspired by and hope that this project speaks to U.S indigenous and women of color theorists. This project also changes the way we think of feminism in Lebanon and presents an alternative story for

activists and scholars who are interested in organizing, and in women's issues in Lebanon and Arab-majority countries. It is also a work that hopes to add to transnational feminism in its multiple interweaving of the transnational and the local.

In the end, I do hope that social movements, and queer feminist movements in particular, will emerge full force in Beirut again. Of course, we may need to rethink how we conceive of movements: do we only consider marches to be activism, and to be effective? What are different ways of organizing communally and effectively? I dream of seeing a movement that is intergenerational, intercommunal, intersecting and transnational in its approach, and that is radical, brave and compassionate. I also hope that it will move from the bottom up, and from the margins to the center. It may look different; maybe it will not take the shape of self-identified queer groups, and it may not be led by middle-class self-identified Lebanese feminists. But I hope that this movement will happen, and that it will transform feminists and queer feminism into a living reality of true justice.

## Bibliography

Anonymous. *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*. Beirut: Meem, 2009.

“Exploitations of 10’s of Millions of Domestic Workers: Report.” Alakhbar English 9 Jan 2013 <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/domestic-workers-tens-millions-denied-fair-treatment>

“Solidarity Statement on Dekwaneh Abuse: Solidarity with Demands for Justice Against the Abuse and Degradation of Non-Heteronormative Bodies by the Municipality of Dekwaneh, Lebanon.” *CSBR Online*. 13 May 2013. Last accessed 21 Jan. 2014.

Abouzaki, Rasha. “Electricite de Liban: Striking Workers Test Their Powers”. *Al Akhbar English*. 29 May 2012. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

Abu-Habib, Lina. “The Use and Abuse of Female Domestic Workers from Sri Lanka in Lebanon.” *Gender and Development* 6.1 (March 1998): 52-56.

Abu Ghazal, Sara Emiline. “Audre Lorde, Quote Mining and Ramblings from an Editor in Despair.” *Sawt Al Niswa*. 23 Mar. 2011. Web. 21 Jan. 2014.

---. “on Banat Tariq.” Message to anonymous mailing list. 30 Sept. 2011. Email.

---. “Politics of Closeness and Alienation.” *Sawt Al Niswa*. 13 April 2012. Web. 21 Jan. 2014.

----. “Margaret Atwood: Lessons in Selling Out.” *Sawt Al Niswa*. 3 June 2010. Last accessed 14 April 2014. Abu Mjadeh, Fawzi. “A Nidaa 211: Mahatat Nidaliyya fi Tarikh al Tabaqa al Amila wa al Haraka al Niqabiyya.” *Lebanese Communist Party*. 8 May 2013. [http://www.lcparty.org/website/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=2120:-211-](http://www.lcparty.org/website/index.php?option=com_content&id=2120:-211-). Last accessed 20 April 2014.

Adnan, Etel. “First Passion.” *Queer 13: Lesbian and Gay Writers Recall Seventh Grade*. Ed. Clifford Chase. Rob Weisbach Books, 1998.

-----. *Sitt Marie Rose*. Sausalito: The Post Apollo Press, 1982.

- Abi Saab, Malek. *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation*. NY: Syracuse UP, 2010.
- Abboud, Hosn. "Al Sijin lil Nisa' Aydan: Zainab al Ghazali wa Ayyam min Hayati." *Bahithat: Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women* Vol. IX. Beirut: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, 2006. 268-89.
- Accad, Evelyne. *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*. NY: New York UP, 1990.
- Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam*. CT: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*. Beirut: Meem, 2009.
- Alladin and Abdo, "From Berj Hamoud With Love." *Bekhsoos* 13 Nov 2011  
<http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2011/11/from-berj-hamoud-with-love/>
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Second Edition. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- and Cherrie Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Third Edition. Berkeley Third Woman Press, 2002.
- Agah, Azadeh et. al. *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women*. Toronto: McGilligan Books, 2007.
- Alexander, Jacqui. "Meditations on Feminism." *Feminists Ask: What If*. Denison University. Lecture Hall, Granville. 9 Oct. 2013. Lecture.
- , *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Badran, Margot and Miriam Cooke. *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999.
- Bakan, Abigail and Yasmeeen Abu Laban. "Palestinian Resistance and Solidarity: the BDS Campaign." *Race and Class* 15.1 (2009): 29-54.
- Barghouti, Omar. *BDS Boycott Divestment and Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*. Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2011.
- Bayat, Asef. *Life in Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010.
- Beydoun, Ahmad. *Al Siraa' ala Tarikh Lubnan*. Beirut: Lebanese UP, 1989.

- Beydoun, Azza Sharara. *Nisa' wa Jam'iyat: Bayna Insaf aThat wa Kdimat al-Ghayr*. Beirut: Annahar Publishing House, 2002.
- Bechara, Suha. *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon*. Trans. Gabriel Levine. NY: Soft Skull Press, 2003.
- and Cozette Ibrahim. *Ahlamu bi Zinzanah min Karaz*. Beirut: Dar al Saqi, 2011.
- Blackwell, Maylei. *Chicana Power! : Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2011.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Chahda, Najla. "Human Trafficking for Forced Labor." *Christian Organization Against Trafficking in Human Beings (COAT Net)*. 22 Jan 2007  
<http://www.coatnet.org/en/45468.asp>  
<http://www.migrationdrc.org/about/people/Researchers.html#Jureidini>.
- Choudry, Aziz and Dip Kapoor, eds. *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*. NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.
- Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." *GLQ* 3 (1997). 437-65.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Second Edition. NY: Routledge, 2000.
- Cooke, Miriam. *Nazira Zeineddine: A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2011.
- , *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*. NY: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Crawley, Sara. "Are Butch and Fem Working-Class and Anti-Feminist?" *Gender and Society* 15.2 (April 2001). 175-96.
- Darwiche, Lynn and Haneen Maikey. "From the Belly of Arab Queer Activism: Challenges and Opportunities." *Al Qaws*. 10 Oct. 2011. Web.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. NY: Vintage Books, 1983.
- Doumato, Eleanor Abdella and Marsha Pripstein Posusney. *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Russel Hochschild, eds. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002.

Elia, Nada. "The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out." *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Belonging and Violence*. Ed. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Al Sultani, and Nadine Naber. New York: Syracuse UP, 2011.

Enloe, Cynthia. *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004.

Farah, Laila. "Dancing on the Hyphen: Performing Diasporic Subjectivity." *Modern Drama* 48.2 (Summer 2005): 316-45.

Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.

Forest, Akhi Simine. *Dreaming the Old Council Ways: True Native Teachings from the Red Lodge*. Maine: Samuel Weiser Inc., 2000.

Georgis, Dina. "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3jil*." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 45 (2003): 233-51.

Gamburd, Michele Ruth. *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.

Gordon, Murray. *Slavery in the Arab World*. NY: New Amsterdam, 1989.

Ghoulama. "Niqash fi Aliyyat al Tanzim al Mithly wa Qawnanat al Jinsaniya fi Lubnan." *Helem* May 2012 <http://helem.net/?q=node/215>. Last accessed 15 April 2014.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996." Unpublished Diss. Duke U. 2010.

Haddad, Reem. "A Modern Day 'Slave Trade': Sri Lankan Workers in Lebanon." *Middle East Report*. Summer 1999. 39-41.

Al-Hajj, Faten. "Lebanese Women on the Frontline of the Trade Union Struggle." *Al Akhbar English*. 8 March 2012.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NY: New York UP, 2005.

Hamalian, Arpi. Visiting Patters of Armenians in Lebanon. *Anthropological Quarterly*

47.1 (1974): 71-92.

Hamill, Kathleen, "Policy Paper on Reforming the 'Sponsorship System' for Migrant Domestic Workers: Towards an Alternative Governance Scheme in Lebanon." Beirut: Kafa (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, 2012.

Hashem, Leen. "Ana Al Mouyawima... wa Khaymati Tatal al Samaa." *Shabab Assafir*. 12 June 2014. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

----. "An Harakat Finjan Al Qahwa." *Sawt Al Niswa* 22 June 2010. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. "Love and Gold." *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers*. Ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild. NY: Metropolitan/Owl Books, 2004.

Huda, Sigma. "Human Trafficking in Lebanon." *Forced Migration Review* 25 (2007) <http://www.fmreview.org/textOnlyContent/FMR/25/07.doc>

Ibrahim, Emily Faris. *Al Haraka Al Nisa'iya al Lubnaniyya*. Beirut: Dar Al Thaqaqa, 1966.

Jureidini, Ray. "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. 5.3 (Fall 2009): 74-101.

----- "Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon." *Gender and Migration in Arab States: The Case of Domestic Workers*. Ed. Simel Esim and Monica Smith. Beirut: ILO, 2004. 64-82.

----- and Nayla Moukarbel. "Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of 'Contract Slavery'?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 30.4 (July 2004): 581-607.

Kaidbey, Nayla. "Afifa Saab: Tajarib wa Abaad." *Bahithat: Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women* Vol. IX. Beirut: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, 2006. 312-36.

Keating, Cricket. "Building Coalitional Consciousness." *NSWA Journal* 17.2 (Summer 2005): 86-103.

Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2002.

Khairallah, Shereen. *The Sisters of Men: Lebanese Women in History*. Beirut: Institute for

Women Studies in the Arab World, 1996.

Khater, Akram Fouad. "'House' to 'Goddess of the House': Gender, Class and Silk in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mount Lebanon." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28.3 (1996): 325-48.

Kob, Farfahinne. "Intifadat al Muyawimeen." *Farfahinne: Socialist From Lebanon*. Last accessed 15 April 2014.

LaTeef, Nelda. *Women of Lebanon: Interviews with Champions for Peace*. North Carolina: McFarland, 1997.

Lazreg, Marnia. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Lynn, "Why Wasn't I an Emergency Case?" *Bekhsoos* 22 May 2012 <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2012/05/why-wasnt-i-an-emergency-case/>. Last accessed 15 April 2014.

Majaj, Lisa Suheir and Amal Amireh, "Introduction: Biographical and Career Highlights". *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab American Writer and Artist*. Ed. Lisa Suheir Majaj and Amal Amireh. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc.: 2002. 13-24.

Makdisi, Karim. "The Rise and Decline of Environmentalism in Lebanon." *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*. Ed. Alan Mikhail. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.

Makhoere, Caesarina Kona. *No Child's Play: In Prison Under Apartheid*. London: The Women's Press, 1988.

Mansour, Ilham. *I Am You (Ana Hiya Anti)*. Trans. Samar Habib. NY: Cambria Press, 2008.

Martinez, Elizabeth "Betita". "Unite and Rebel! Challenges and Strategies in Building Alliances." *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* Ed. Incite! Women of Color against Violence. Cambridge: South End Press, 2006.

Matar, Linda. Interview. *Sharika wa Laken*. Sawt al Shaab, Beirut: 22 June 2012. Radio.

Menchik, Jeremy. "Visualizing Human Rights for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon." *Jadaliyya* 11 Jan 2013 <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9214/visualizing-human-rights-for-migrant->



[domestic-work](#)

Menchu, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Trans. Anne Wright. London: Verso, 1984.

Moawad, Nadine. "The Racism in Me." *What If I Get Free*. 26 April 2010.  
<http://www.nadinemoawad.com/2010/04/the-racism-in-me-24seven/>

.... "Afwan Caritas" *Sawt Al Niswa*. 11 Feb 2011. Last accessed March 10 2014.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.

Moraga, Cherrie. *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.

Morales, Aurora Levins. *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity*. Cambridge: South End Press, 1998.

Moufarrege, Joelle. "Superwomen Yet Part Time Citizens? The Inexorable Paradox of Lebanese Women's Gender Roles." *Sawt Al Niswa*. 2 May 2012. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

Moughadam, Valentine M. *Women, Work and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

Moukarbel, Nayla. *Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon: A Case of 'Symbolic Violence' and 'Everyday Forms of Resistance.'* Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009.

Moumneh, Rasha. "Global LGBT Movement not Inclusive of Other Rights Issues." *Menassat* 10 Aug. 2009. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

Moustapha, Moustapha. "an Quwwat al Masahat al Saghira." *Cultural Practices of Arab Youth*. Ed. Maud Estephan-Hashem et. al. Beirut: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, 2010. 528-30.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.

Naber, Nadine. *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism*. NY: New York UP, 2012.

Nadz. "Queering the Arab Feminist Movement: Two Years in the Making." *Bekhsoos* 19 April 2010. <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/04/queering-the-arab-feminist->

movement-two-years-in-the-making/. Last accessed 15 April 2014.

Nakhal, Jana. "Takhayyal Beirut Ukhra: Ihtalalna al Ard wal Sama'a wal Ouyoun." *Sawt Al Niswa*. 21 Nov. 2011. Last accessed March 14, 2014.

Nassar, Anita Farah. *Dalil lil 'Amal Dakhil Sojourn al Nisa' fi Lubnan*. Beirut: Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World, 2011.

Ngewo-Oda and Aaronette White. "Identity Transformation and Reintegration Among Ethiopian Women War Veterans." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 23.3-4 (2011): 163-87.

Nichols, Andrea. "Dance Ponnaya, Dance! Police Abuses Against Transgender Sex Workers in Sri Lanka." *Feminist Criminology* 5:2 (2010): 195-222.

Nusair, Isis. "Gendered, Racialized and Sexualized Torture at Abu Ghraib." *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism*. Ed. Robin R. Riley, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Minnie Bruce Pratt. London: Zed Books, 2008.

----. Rev. of *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women*, by Agah et al. Toronto: McGilligan Books, 2007.

Pande, Amrita. "From 'Balcony Talk' and 'Practical Prayers' to Illegal Collectives: Migrant Domestic Workers and Meso-Level Resistances in Lebanon." *Gender and Society*. 26.3(June 2012): 382-405.

----. "The Paper That You Have in Your Hand is My Freedom': Migrant Domestic Work and Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon." *International Migration Review*. 47.2 (June 2013): 414-41.

Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.

Partamian, C. "An Armenian Perspective on the Flotilla: Euh, Erdogan, WHAT?" *Uruknet: Information from Middle East*. 16 June 2010. Last accessed 14 April 2014.

Perez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999.

Peteet, Julie. *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement*. NY: Columbia UP, 1992.

Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke

UP, 2007.

Al-Rahi, Nay. "Fi 'Akel Moukharibah." *Sawt Al Niswa*. 11 Nov. 2011. Last accessed March 14 2014.

Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Performing Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*. NY: New York UP, 2003.

Ruwanpura, Kanchana N. *Matrilineal Communities, Patriarchal Realities: A Feminist Nirvana Reconsidered*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006.

----- and Jane Humphries. "Mundane Heroines: Conflict, Ethnicity, Gender and Female Headship in Eastern Sri Lanka." *Feminist Economics* 10:2 (July 2004): 173-205.

Pinto-Jayawardena, Kishali. "Proportional Representation, Political Violence and the Participation of Women in the Political Process in Sri Lanka." *Can Democracy Be Designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in Conflict Torn Societies* ed. Sunil Bastian and Robin Luckham. London: Zed Books, 2003: 170-193.

Qawwal, Antoine, ed. *May Ziadeh: Nosous Kharij al Majmou'a*. Beirut: Dar Amwaj, 1993.

Saab Saade, Rebecca. "Shukran Butrus Harb, Bas Ma Fhimna." *Sawt Al Niswa* 4 July, 2010. <http://www.sawtaliswa.com/2010/07/boutros-harb/>.

Al-Saadi, Yazan. "Have Beirut's Social Movements Died?" *Al Akhbar English* 14 Jan. 2014. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/have-beirut-social-movements-died>

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Salibi, Kamal. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Salka, Farah. "WTF: Only in Lebanon." *Sawt Al Niswa*. 8 Nov. 2010. <http://www.sawtaliswa.com/2010/11/wtf-only-in-lebanon/>

Samaan, Hanadi and Tareq el Ariss. "Queer Affects: Introduction." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45.2 (May 2013): 205-9.

Sawah, Firas. *Al Ustura w'al Ma'na: Dirasat fi Al Mythologia wal Diyanat al Mashriqiyya*. Damascus: Dar Ala'din, 2001.

- Segrest, Mab. *Memoir of a Race Traitor*. Boston: South End Press, 1994.
- Shehadeh, Lamia Rustum. *Women and War in Lebanon*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999.
- Shigematsu, Setsu. *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012.
- Shqeir, Iman Shams. *Nisa' fi Imra'a: Sirat Laure Moghaizel*. Beirut: Dar Annahar, 2002.
- Siraj, Nader. "Iman Khalifa: Sirat al La 'Inf fi Hayat Shabba Lubnaniyya." *Bahithat: Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women* Vol. IX. Beirut: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, 2006. 227-42.
- Smith, Andrea. "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism." *GLQ* 16.1-2 (2010): 41-68.
- Smith, Monica. "Erasure of Sexuality and Desire: State Morality and Sri Lankan Migrants in Lebanon" *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 11:3-4 (2010): 378-93.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 1999.
- Soto, Sandra. *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2010.
- Stephan, Rita. "Women's Rights Activism in Lebanon." *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations from Within*. Ed. Pernille Arenfeldt and Nawar Al-Hassan Goley. Cairo: The American U in Cairo P, 2012.
- Stephan, Rita. "Couple's Activism in Lebanon: The Legacy of Laure Moghaizel." *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010): 533-41.
- Sunila Sunbula, "Sajjilna... Ana Arabiyya" Bekhsoos 31 Jan 2011. <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2011/01/note-it-down-im-an-arab/>. Last accessed 15 April 2014.
- Tachjian, Vahe. "Gender, Nationalism and Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide." *Nations and Nationalism* 15.1 (2009): 60-80
- Thompson, Elizabeth. *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. NY: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press, 2007.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ* 14:2-3 (2008): 191-215.

Walia, Harsha. *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Oakland: Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013.

Ward, Abir. "Women of the Lebanese Mountains: A Fight for Edification." *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009): 388-94.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

Zaatari, Zeina. "Ayna Hum Al Nisaa." *Al Akhbar*. 8 Mar. 2011.

----. "The Culture of Motherhood: An Avenue for Women's Civil Participation in South Lebanon." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2.1 (2006): 33-64.

Zeidan, Joseph. *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. NY: SUNY Press, 1995.