DIVAS OF THE NIGHT: QUEER ACTIVISM IN LEBANESE PERFORMING ARTS

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DOCTORAL THESIS

UNIVERSITAT ROVIRA i VIRGILI

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Supervised by Dra. Iolanda Tortajada and Dra. Cilia Willem

Department of Antropologia i Comunicació

UNIVERSITAT ROVIRA i VIRGILI

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Escola de Doctorat

FAIG CONSTAR que aquest treball, titulat "The Divas of the Night: Queer Activism in Lebanese Performing Arts", que presenta Abed Al Wahab Kassir per a l'obtenció del títol de Doctor, ha estat realitzat sota la meva direcció al Departament Antropologia i Comunicació d'aquesta universitat.

HAGO CONSTAR que el presente trabajo, titulado "The Divas of the Night: Queer Activism in Lebanese Performing Arts", que presenta Abed Al Wahab Kassir para la obtención del título de Doctor, ha sido realizado bajo mi dirección en el Departamento Antropología y Comunicación de esta universidad

I STATE that the present study, entitled " The Divas of the Night: Queer Activism in Lebanese Perfoming Art", presented by Abed Al Wahab Kassir for the award of the degree of Doctor, has been carried out under my supervision at the Department Anthropology and Communication of this university.

Tarragona, 12 September, 2023

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"For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive".

Audre Lorde

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List of Figures

The Undersigned, as co-authors of the publication referenced, herby authorize Abed Al Wahab Kassir, co-author of the texts, for their use in the presentation of his thesis by compendium of publications, entitled: The Divas of the Night: Queer Activism in Lebanese Performing Arts, supervised by Dr. Iolanda Tortajada and Dr. Cilia Willem in the PhD program in Anthropology and Communication at the Universitat Rovira I Virgili. Furthermore, the co-authors waive the right to present these publications as part of other doctoral theses.

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Confirmation of Visiting Period for Abed Al Wahab Kassir

This is to confirm that Abed Al Wahab Kassir (Y-7745796-P), actually PhD Student at
the Program on Anthropology and Communication, Universitat Rovira I Virgili, Av.
Catalunya, 35 43002 - Tarragona, Spain, joined the Institute for the Study of the
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2022, until the 31st of July, 2022. During his stay Abed conducted research, taught a
course with the title "Contemporary Cinema in the Arab World", worked on an article
that was published in *Journal of Sexualities*, and attended the conference of SeSaMo
(the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies) in Naples where we jointly presented a
conference paper with the title "The Fragmentation of the Macho Man and the Rise of
Queerness in Contemporary Lebanese Cinema".

In case you need more information, do not hesitate to contact me.
Best wishes
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ABSTRACT

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My research addresses queer activism through contemporary performing arts in Lebanon. I follow the definition of Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt of queer art as art that invites troubles (Schoonover and Galt, 2016). I trace the troubles or the "queer mess" that the artists create subvert the social norms and the heteronormative power, while opening spaces for queer transformational work to begin. Queer here is used more as a political tactic and less as an identity politics.

Through the methods of multimodal analysis, and inspired by theories from queer, masculinities, performing arts, and post-colonial studies, and black feminists and queers of color critiques, I study three different forms of performing arts; Instagram illustration accounts, drag queen shows, and queer movies. The central question of this study is: how does queer performing arts act as a site of subversion for hetero-normative power?

I argue that the artistic productions project an anti-assimilation and anti-respectability politics that subverts the pillars of normative patriarchal power, mainly sectarianism, hegemonic masculinity, the binary understanding of gender, family relations, and public morals.

RESUMEN

Mi investigación aborda el activismo queer a través de las artes escénicas contemporáneas en el Líbano. Sigo la definición de Karl Schoonover y Rosalind Galt del arte queer como arte que invita a los "problemas" (Schoonover y Galt 2016). Trazo estas problemáticas a través del análisis del "desorden queer" que los artistas crean para transgredir las normas sociales y el poder heteronormativo, mientras abren espacios para que comience el trabajo transformacional queer. Lo queer se utiliza aquí más como táctica política y menos como política de identidad. A través de métodos de análisis multimodal, e inspirándome en teorías queer, masculinidades, artes escénicas, estudios poscoloniales, crítica feminista, y crítica de queer de color, estudio tres formas diferentes de artes escénicas: cuentas de ilustración de Instagram, espectáculos de drag queens y películas queer. La cuestión central de este estudio

es: ¿cómo actúan las artes escénicas queer como lugar de subversión del poder heteronormativo?

Sostengo que las producciones artísticas proyectan una política antiasimilación y antirrespetabilidad que subvierte los pilares del poder patriarcal normativo, principalmente el sectarismo, la masculinidad hegemónica, la comprensión binaria del género, las relaciones familiares y la moral del espacio público.

RESUM

La meva recerca aborda l'activisme queer a través de les arts escèniques contemporànies al Líban. Segueixo la definició de Karl Schoonover i Rosalind Galt de l'art queer com a art que convida als "problemes" (Schoonover i Galt, 2016). Traço aquestes problemàtiques a través de l'anàlisi del "desordre queer" que els artistes creen per a transgredir les normes socials i el poder heteronormatiu mentre obren espais perquè comenci el treball transformacional queer. Allò queer s'utilitza aquí més com a tàctica política i menys com a política d'identitat. A través de mètodes d'anàlisi multimodal, i inspirant-me en teories queer, masculinitats, arts escèniques, estudis postcolonials, crítica feminista i crítica de queer de color, plantejo tres formes diferents d'arts escèniques: comptes d'il·lustració d'Instagram, espectacles de drag queens i pel·lícules queer. La qüestió central d'aquest estudi és: com actuen les arts escèniques queer com a lloc de subversió del poder heteronormatiu?

Sostinc que les produccions artístiques projecten una política antiassimilació i antirespectabilitat que subverteix els pilars del poder patriarcal normatiu, principalment el sectarisme, la masculinitat hegemònica, la comprensió binària del gènere, les relacions familiars i la moral de l'espai públic.

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1.   Introduction

My research is concerned with queer activism in Lebanese contemporary performing arts. In each of the articles, I look at how different forms of queer performing arts transgress normative social and cultural power while opening new zones of queer possibilities. I trace how the artistic productions aid, reflect, and visualize radical "deviant" figures of expression and "forms of being" while projecting queer politics that oppose and disrupt the dominant norms that recreate and sustain patriarchal heteronormativity.

I choose art as it "provides us with witnesses to the wildness of queer lives and the queerness of the wild" (Halberstam, 2014: 142). I focus mainly on performing arts as it is, just as queer theory, involved in world-making, "offering alternatives to embedded capitalist, national, hetero- and homonormative maps" (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 5). Considering this definition of performing arts, my study proposes that it is suitable to combine both fields (queerness and performing arts), investigating how, together, they are involved in the remodeling of Lebanese concepts and understandings of queer activism. The texts, images, and sounds become a transgression tactic as well as grist to the mill for opening up the possibility of queer word-making and queer futurity (Manalansan, 2013).

Apart from its function as an identity, queer here is used as a subject position and a strategy. I understand queerness more as a point of radical rupture in and transgression from the heteronormative matrix and power structure. Following the deconstruction politics that remind us of how "clear collective categories are an obstacle to resistance and change" (Gamson, 1995: 391), my analysis refrains from the creation of collective identity as firstly, this means fixation, which is anti-queer, and secondly, because identity politics fail to acknowledge the role of class, race, religious sects, education, and personal experiences leaving the unprivileged outside.

My work is also inspired by the narratives of the black queer feminist Cathy Cohen (1997) on deliberating queer politics in relation to state power. Cohen problematizes the limited gay and lesbian agendas that focus on a civil rights strategy "[w]here assimilation and replication of dominant institutions are the goals" (Cohen, 1997: 437). Instead, she invites us to redirect our

attention from queer politics that focus on sexuality to "the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life choices" (Cohen, 1997: 440). I follow Cohen's invitation to move away from identity politics and civil rights, focusing instead on queer transgressive strategies, tactics, and actions that challenge and destabilize the normalization of the system of power, sectarianism, and neo-liberalism that intersect and interact to oppress the lives of non-normative bodies. I look at how the activist (in chapter 1), and the artists (chapters 2, 3, 4) not only project anti-assimilation politics as they aim to overthrow the system instead of gaining its validation, but also at how they are committed to challenging social, economic, and political power, the source of their oppression.

As queer theory understands "sexual power as embedded in different levels of social life" (Stein and Plummer, 1994: 184), my specific aim is to show how the artists expand the narratives of queerness beyond sexualities to include class, educational privileges, and race. I aspire to display how activism tactics are shaped by such factors to a great extent. This thesis celebrates the marginalized bodies that not only do not measure up on the heteronormative matrix, but also operate through multiple identities outside the Western and middle-class experience.

Although the representations of homoeroticism in Arabic art can be traced back to paintings and poetry of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (Schmidtke, 1999; El-Rouayheb, 2005; Habibi, 2010) and the black and white Egyptian movies since 1938[1] (Menicucci, 1998), I choose to focus on artistic productions produced during and after the Arab Uprising. While the Lebanese revolution was the last to take place (2019), Lebanese artists had directly caught the drive for change that dominated the neighboring countries through a striking proliferation of artistic productions that "reveals an alternative aesthetic of resistance" (Shilton, 2013: 129). Hamid Dabashi (2012) describes the collective efforts for emancipation during and after the Arab Uprising, writing: "Arabs… were now risking their lives for their collective liberties in a manner that the World (awash with Islamophobic and Orientalist non-sense) was unprepared to witness" (Dabashi, 2012: 329). I will argue throughout this thesis that Lebanese artists are mirroring the above-mentioned spirit, fighting to liberate the body, craving spaces to exist, as well as subverting the

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[1] The first movie to show a cross-dressing Character was *Bint el Basha el Moudir* (The Pasha Director's Daughter), produced in 1938.

power that oppresses them. The artists conquered their fear and the many limitations of censorship, projecting various queer tactics that I seek to discover throughout this thesis.

1.1.   Research objective and key questions

The primary objective of this research is to offer a critical analysis of how queer contemporary Lebanese performing arts act as a site of queer activism, as they try to subvert the heteronormative power. I explore the queer tactics that the artists are suggesting, while I situate their art within the larger sociocultural Lebanese context. My aim is not to check how real what the art is proposing is, but how fabulous they are as they attempt to "puncture a hegemonic conception of reality that limited the scope of political imagination and action" (Chamas, 2020: 171). I conceive art as an opening (Muñoz, 1999: 91) that rehearses new ways of being. What might not be fully here yet is being shaped at the moment, enacting a queer resistance.

My second objective is to counter the normative local and Western perceptions that visualize non-normative Arab bodies as weak with no self-agency, but living in continuous fear and violence. I present art as a witness of how queer artists not only combat their marginalization and gender violence but also how they claim active positions, initiating their struggles to transgress and subvert the normative powers that oppress them.

The central question that I ask is: How does queer performing art subvert the hegemonic power that marginalizes non-normative bodies? As I try to answer this question, I look for the different queer tactics employed by the artists to "mess up" the normal. I argue that "mess" becomes an approach to transgressing the hegemonic order of things. I trace this mess by looking at the how, why, and where both the art and the mess are taking place.

1.2.   Situating performing arts

The definition of performing arts cannot be restricted to a particular form or performance style. Goldberg describes its form as "open-ended," and its content as what "responds, challenges, and changes the dominant normative discourse" (Goldberg, 2004: 13). Starting in the 1960s, performing arts presented itself as a "subversive tool that exposes and messes up with the socio-political realities offering incomparable materials for examining contemporary viewpoints on such issues as gender, body, and multiculturalism" (Goldberg, 2004: 9). Michael Peterson sees it

as a place that offers a new understanding of the self, defining it as "rarefied cultural productions that depend on and participate in the constructions of contemporary identities" (Peterson, 1997: 6).

The above two definitions present performing art as a perfect queer medium that connects the social with the sexual and the personal with the public. It not only reveals the performative nature of gender (Butler, 1990), but also queers the possibilities of being, the time, the space, and the discourse disrupting the hetero-normative logic (Chris, 2012). Within the performance, both gender and its embodiment turn out to be an individual matter, putting the artist in control, while breaking with the social power structures imposed by patriarchy. The bodies that had always been marginalized now own the stage or the camera, upgrading Butler's narratives of "doing gender" to consciously "celebrating gender," toppling the privileges of compulsory heterosexuality.

As performing arts offer a critical medium for minorities and marginalized bodies to channel their socio-political messages, feminists and LGBTQI+ movements leaned on these arts creating shows for "politicizing and de-naturalizing the body in the private and public sphere." (Miller and Wilmeth, 1993; Davies, 2012). I build on Cristyn Davies's (2012) invitation to conceive performing arts as "queer heterotopias" and anti-hegemonic zones that annihilate heteronormativity (Jones, 2009). In 1984 Foucault described the spaces that allow non-normative bodies to express their opposition to normative structure as "Heterotopia" (Foucault, 1986). Angela Jones extends Foucault's concept by speaking of "queer heterotopias," which are the "material spaces where radical practices go unregulated" (Jones, 2009: 1). I consider the performances as "queer heterotopias" as they open the plots for an alternative way of being, becoming sites of artistic activism that empower, challenge, and subvert the normative configuration of gender.

1.2.1. Gender Performativity and stage performance

Judith Butler presents gender as performative, constructed through a stylized repetition of acts and the power of language (Butler, 1997; 1999). Butler defines gender performativity as "a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivity norms, one

which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, constraining the gendered subject, and which are also the resource from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged" (Butler, 1997: 17).

Connecting the above definition to performing arts pushes me to envisage gender as a play, playing on the norms. Through envisioning gender as a play, I can directly think of drag queens' performances, which I discuss in the third contribution or chapter 3, where they illustrate such play through the destabilization of the common normative understanding of what defines both a woman and a man. In performing gender on stage, actors are rehearsing (here I say rehearsing as it involves Butler's notion of repetition) the reproduction of new realities.

Nevertheless, by this, I am not making gender performance a choice of which gender we want to be today, but I am alleging it to theatre performance, as they may become one through "producing the same signs" (Phelan, 1993: 18) that reveal the performative nature through the gesture, embodiment, postures, vocal pitch, costumes, and all the stage get-ups.

Within this context, the stage becomes a critical medium that not does only mirrors but recreates and re-evaluates with a critical perspective. Jill Dolan invites us to "stop considering the stage as a mirror of reality… [but] as a laboratory in which to reconstruct new non-gendered identities" (Dolan, 1985: 8). In the theatre school in Beirut, my teachers used the term "step into the role." Here, I modify the expression to "step into a gender" to indicate continuity between the inner self and the outer role. This reduction of gender into role play opens up the possibility of being outside the dominant discourse, allowing us to step into other forms that project a unity between the inner feelings and the gendered body. This might transform gender nature from imitative (Butler, 1990) to a more authentic fabrication of the self. Performing arts here become a technique to step into your unique understanding of both gender and politics. Laurence Senelick describes theatrical gender as more reliable as "the performer is free to move in and out of the gender role" (Senelick, 2000: xi).

Playing with gender does not indicate undervaluing it or oversimplifying its mechanism. Nor am I saying that there is a wardrobe of gender that we can choose from, but it is to question its nature by playing on the norms while opening up the possibility of resisting them. The aim is to make it less imposed and more of a choice. This corresponds with Butler's definition of the

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body: "The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a long lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations… the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretation within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler, 1990: 277).

Following Butler's discourse, the stage becomes a perfect place to present the body not only as an "object," or as Butler likes to describe it as a "matter," but also as a medium on which new meanings are inscribed.

To understand how the non-conforming bodies transgress normative social power and gender binaries, I mainly ask three main questions: What kinds of bodies are there? What is this body doing/saying? And, what meanings/signs are the bodies raising?

1.2.2.   The Body

On stage, "the body refuses to be reduced to less than what it is" (Balue, 1982: 14); in fact, it becomes the center of the semiotic crossing. Performing arts has leaned on the body, both as a tool and as a subject, making it not just "the content of the work, but also as the canvas, brush, frame, and platform" (Warr and Jones, 2006: 4). Tice Miller defines such arts as "artistic practices that both deconstruct the body as a political sign and an object… using it to resist institutional control" (Miller and Wilmeth, 1993). By deconstruction, I signify how the non-normative bodies defy all we know or imagine of normative corporeality and subjectivity.

Understanding the body as an aftereffect of social and cultural conditioning (Schulze, 1990) eliminates the essentialist view surrounding the fixation of the gendered body and opens the possibilities of the "queerly being." The stage offers these bodies the exposure and attention needed to be noticed after being reconstructed by the queers, who gain the full authority to be the commentary of the self that is free from the normative forces and matrix.

I pay special attention to body gestures as they are the channels through them, the body fabricates gender meanings. Sande Zeig views gestures as the "concrete means of producing meanings" (Zeig, 1985: 22), where there is always a denotation that cannot be neutral but acts as either a supporter or a detractor of the gender. This obliges the performer to take stands, either supporting or opposing the meanings that the gesture raises. Still, Zeig opens the possibility of

altering the body through learning new gestures while deconstructing the old ones as "when we actively question them… We become more critically aware of the meanings they hold" (Zeig, 1985: 24).

Hence, this research views the body as a site "of potentiality, process, and practices" (Blackman, 2008: 5), analyzing its potentiality of being, doing, and representing.

1.2.3. Performing contemporarily

Another keyword that this research builds on is "contemporary." In envisioning performing arts as a queer time and space, I build on David Roman's (2005) notions of contemporary, which situates the present as the time "in which the audience imagine itself within a fluid and nearly suspended temporal condition, living in a moment not yet in the past, and not in the future" (Roman as cited in Davies, 2012: 29). Understanding performances within the now pushes us to center our attention on the moment the performances are creating, not the long-term effects, as this is challenging and needs further research. Focusing on the now also prevents me from falling into the inaccuracy and general conclusions that might end up creating fixed LGBTQI+ identities and new homonormative (Duggan, 2002) realities.

Both gay identity politics and homonormativity frighten me as much as heteronormativity does. As I mentioned above, producing new static habitus and rituals that become fixed, creating a new mainstream homonormativity, is anti-queer. Such homonormativity not only replicates radical hierarchies but ends up being an extension of heteronormativity. As Duggan (2002) describes it, it "does not challenge the heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains and seeks inclusion within them" (Duggan, 2002: 50). On the contrary, I trace the non-definitive and the unexpected that keeps up with the radicality of queerness without falling into the "conditional neo-liberal acceptance" (Ota, 2020). This maintains the essence of queerness as well as the "emancipatory" nature of queer worlds (Halberstam, 2005a). Hence, I seek to investigate what the performances do to "undo" and the infinite possibilities they raise.

Nevertheless, I want to differentiate between long-term outcomes and the queer "marks" and "traces" (Ahmed, 2004) that the performances create. Each performance produces emotions, narratives, and thoughts that are the marks and traces that will reshape our bodies. For Sara

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Ahmed (2004), bodies take the shapes of objects with which they make contact. The marks might, in the long term, accumulate to create a potential power, which Foucault (1978) defines not in terms of domination but rather as "routinization" and "normalization" (Foucault, 1978).

So the final approach is not predicting an ultimate transformation but glancing at the mess that queer performances are creating. I observe how they are defying the cultural and political limitations where queerness unapologetically takes over the public spaces expressing the different layers of existence. As I mentioned earlier, throughout the thesis, I speak about multilayers, as non-normative existence is made through the intersectionality of various factors (class, education, health, race, sect, geography…). Also, speaking of layers assures that gender practices are local products that must break free from the Western/White discourse of gender and its colonial and capitalist captivity.

1.2.4. Queer Arts: The Art of Deconstructionism

As the definition of what counts as queer arts remains complex, one of the essential questions that this research faced was: How to identify an artistic production as "queer"?

Queer art is not an art that narrates biographies and struggles that non-heterosexual face, but "it is to interrogate the causes, whether social or cultural, that are de-normalizing those who are marginalized" (Dolan, 1996). Jill Dolan defines queer theatre as "a position of art practice or reading that anyone is inclined or so desiring could assume… a place to which people can find trove, find pleasure, and knowledge, and maybe (or maybe not) power" (Dolan, 1996: 5). Seidman also assures that: "Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations—in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995: 128).

Hence, I am looking for productions that push beyond the decent and the acceptable, "pouncing on particular concerns" (Goldberg, 2004: 14); performances that are queering the potentiality through their tactics that reshape, spoil, and unsettle social forces, disturbing the "order of

things" (Ahmed, 2006: 161), or perhaps as Paul Preciado writes, "drawing a door in the wall of sexual and gender oppression and escape through it" (Preciado, 2000: 17).

Here, queerness becomes less of a noun and more of a verb, an adjective, and an experience. It is the part of us [and the performances selected] that "resist the domestication of the sexual for social recognitions, the parts of us that refused to be colonized into affable, uprights subjects" (Georgis, 2013: 118).

1.3. The Interdisciplinarity of the study

This research is an interdisciplinary study that employs theories from different disciplines, mainly performing arts, queer studies, masculinity, Black feminists and queer of color critique and finally postcolonial studies. Within the intersection of these disciplines, I aim to establish a conversation between queer practices and Lebanese contemporary performing arts, carving out a new technique of looking at and analyzing Lebanese queer activism and cultural production.

1.3.1. Queer Theory

Queer Theory, as a "destabilizing agent" (Edelman as cited in Yekani et al., 2003) has been interested in subverting and interrogating the dominant structure and the normative order of power. Jack Halberstam defines it as what creates the "potentiality of lives unscripted by conventions" (Halberstam, 2005b:2). It has not only problematized fixed identities as it "can only ever disturb one" (Edelman, 2014; 17), but also interrogated power and inequality, while opening numerous questions regarding the role of race, color, geography, class, and ability (Halperin and Traub, 2019). It generated debates regarding the importance of moving away from the discourse of resistance to embracing failure and negativity (Edelman, 2014; Halberstam, 2011), from the narratives of equality to the anti-assimilation politics, while standing against homonormativity (Duggan, 2002), and homonationalism omonationalism(Puar, 2018).

This research recognizes the destabilizing effect of queer theory as it aims to uncover how queer performing arts subvert and dismantles the heteronormative source of power and claims that leave certain bodies marginalized. As my analysis looks for queerness with the local context, I turn to the sociologist Sofian Merabet's (2014) definition of queerness as he defines it within the Lebanese cultural and political context as what opens up the possibility of recasting subjectivity

against the politics of social and sexual normativity. He invites us to link sexual meanings to local political conventions and social precepts (Merabet, 2014). Hence, I am looking to the "potentially rebellious elements" (Merabet, 2014) of queerness that challenge the "conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions, and equations that sustain them" (Jagose, 1996:97).

As I mentioned above, due to my concerns about not falling into generalizations or creating a new homonormativity, I depart from focusing on "queer identities" to speak about "queer practices" and "queer subjectivities," focusing on the lived experiences and effects that inform such practices. I look at how the actions and tactics interrogate power, opening the space for transformational work to begin.

I trace "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant" (Halperin, 1995:61), and what opens a "mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, are not made (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1993:8).

1.3.2.   Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies are mainly concerned with uncovering the intersectionality of factors that raise the significance of what it means "to be a man" in a particular society. It came as a response to the traditional sex-role theory that projected the male and manliness as natural, stable, and unquestionable categories. Harry Brod defines it as "the study of masculinities and male experiencing as a specific and varying socio-historical-cultural formation" (Brod, 1987:40).

The starting point of this thesis is that all genders, including masculinity, are culturally constructed and never fixed, but come in various types depending on personal, cultural, and institutional power. Connell speaks of "Multiple Masculinities" as it is "an embodied socio-cultural practice that can be understood through crossing specific historical, social, and cultural contexts" (Connell, 1995:81).

However, to preserve its power, patriarchy has limited the angle of masculinity to what Connell names "Hegemonic Masculinity." He defines it as the culturally idealized form of performing manliness, acting as an obligatory guide that sets the "most honorable" way of how to act and be

a man, to preserve male superiority and hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Nonetheless, as men thrive on domination and on presenting themselves as "successfully masculine," they end up oppressing themselves by being the victims of patriarchy as they "neglected to prioritize to vital aspects of being wholly humans, and in their derive to be, they are preventing their greater self from being successfully happy" (Penny, 2018:3-4). Subverting normativity through queering masculinities provides men with an alternative, more holistic form of being.

In this thesis, I view the masculine body according to the feminist thinker Suzan Bordo (1993), who invites us to read it through the lens of vulnerabilities "rather than the dense armor of power" (Bordo, 1993:697). Bordo conceives the male body as a place of shame, self-hatred, and concealment as when "men problematize themselves as men, a fundamental and decisive sexual ontology is thus disturbed" (Bordo, 1993:697). Comprehending the male body as a site of weaknesses interrogates the notion of power that the cultural construction of masculinity relies on and raises the possibility of disturbing the structural domination within societies (Hartsock, 1990).

1.3.3. Post-Colonial Studies

One of the main aims of this thesis is to read both queerness and gender in Lebanese performances as a local product shaped by the intersection of the cultural theories of sexuality and its conjunction with race, nation, class, religion, and state politics. To achieve this, I deviate from the global production and circulation of knowledge surrounding gender that is still greatly affected by the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000; 2007) while centering on White and Western experiences. Here, I create a more expansive space for expressing gender and queer activism that is liberated from the "possessive investment in whiteness"[2] (Lipsitz, 2006:vii) and its binaries of "in the closet" vs. "outside the closet" or the binary of shame vs. pride. I turn my analytical gaze inwards, looking for the local factors and realities that sustain the heterosexist power, as well as local tactics that queer activists rely on to defeat such power. Here, queer becomes a mood of destruction to both local Lebanese heteronormativity and international

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[2] This thesis differentiated considerably between Whiteness as an ethnic group and the liberal culture of Whiteness that Lisa Lowe defines as the "Colonial division of humanity."

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homonormativity. I follow Jasbir Puar's (2018) definition of queerness, which she defines as that which "irreverently challenges a linear mode of conduction and transmission: there is no exact recipe for a queer endeavor, nor a priori system that taxonomizes the linkages, disruptions, and contradictions into a tidy vessel" (Puar, 2018: vii).

However, I am not denying the strong effect of Western culture on LGBTQI+ identities and lifestyles or the importance of creating universal solidarity and experience exchange. On the contrary, globalization, along with media, and non-governmental organizations funded by the West, plays an integral role in queer empowerment as it strengthens the relationship between the international and local queers, "integrating the limits both of nationalists discourse and Euro-American lesbian and gay narratives of identity" (Cruz and Manalansan, 2002:2). Such an exchange reshapes the self-understanding of gender subjectivities in the Arab World (Massad, 2002; Georgis, 2013).

Nevertheless, as gender practices are not immune from geopolitical forces, it remains essential to analyze them not as a White universal formation, but as a "set of meanings attached to bodies and desires by individuals, groups, and societies" (Gamson, 1995:352). I join the various voices coming from the global south, Black feminists, queers and feminists of color, and Arab queers (Muñoz, 1999; Ross, 2005; Thayer, 2010; Kong, 2011; Merabet, 2014; Manalansan, 2015; Moussawi, 2015; Bijie and Tang, 2016) who are trying to think their way toward understanding their gender and its relation to the local cultural powers.

1.3.4. Black feminists and queer of color Critique

I follow Black feminists and queers of color critique who approach sexual meanings and gender subjectivities as complex and intersectional. Roderick Ferguson (2004) defines queer of color analysis as "what interrogates social formations as the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interests in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalists ideas and practices" (Ferguson, 2004:149).

In line with black feminists' analysis of sexualities, I don't perceive the sexuality of the marginalized bodies as homogenous, but through various meanings that are shaped by specific local contexts, struggles, and experiences. As mentioned above, I center class, race, and

educational privileges as queer tactics that are highly shaped through such factors. This prevents me from falling into privileging certain forms, bodies, or styles of activism while creating a double marginalization for those who normally don't measure up on the universal, middle-class experience of queerness.

1.4.   Methodology: Methods of Visual Analysis

The Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the Beirut port explosion (2020) that resulted in the closure of theaters and cabarets, continously reshaped my methodology. Yet, to understand the changing nature of the object of this study better, I ended up relying on different qualitative methods that served best with each performing genre and both the time and governmental restrictions during which each chapter was written. To clarify what was going on in each phase, I will further explain the different methods employed and the selection process at the beginning of each chapter.

However, I can still speak of the common method, which is multimodal textual analysis. I rely on it as it allows us to understand communication and representation "to be more than about language, and which attend to the full range of communicational forms people use such as – images, gestures, gaze, posture, and the relations between them" (Jewitt, 2009: 14). The intersection between the different moods is substantial in making meanings.

I also rely on additional qualitative methods such as visual semiotics (Barthes, 1977), content analysis, and interviews with the artists.

I build on semiology as it offers a tool with which to visually analyze the performances and the meaning behind the signs within the Lebanese cultural specificities. By cultural specificities, I refer to religion, sex, politics, traditions, gender, and class, keeping in mind that the meanings are never fixed, and new meanings are always generated. Secondly, content analysis of both the artistic products and the online discourse (in the case of the drag queens) also remains essential. I look for what is being said, but also for the unsaid as both the spoken and the unspoken are equally important.

I extend my analysis by moving beyond the regular textual reading to perceive the performances as a practice where both the performance and the performer bring meanings that are directly

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connected to the lived experiences. My contextual analysis situates the performances within a broader context, linking them to socio-political, historical, and cultural factors that shaped the artistic product. The where, the when, and the who is performing remain vital to my analysis. Here, I view the Lebanese capital Beirut not as a space that is inferior to the bodies but, as Sara Ahmed writes: "a second space that unfolds in the fold of the body" (Ahmed, 2006:5). To understand how gender unfolds itself, we must deepen our understanding of the private vs. public space.

Sara Ahmed's narratives on "Queer Orientation/Disorientation" (2006) remain essential for my analysis. Orientation is "how the world acquires a certain shape through contacts between bodies" (Ahmed, 2006: 234). For Ahmed, bodies and emotions are shaped by the norms and experiences in which "we are affected by what we come into contact with" (Ahmed, 2016: 2). Through cultural orientation, the body not only learns what it may or may not do but also "gets twisted into shapes that enable some actions only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of actions" (Ahmed, 2004: 145.)

Thus, through orientation, societies inform individuals how to act and react, setting the objects we may or may not use to find our ways. Ahmed regards the heterosexual body as being "inline"—that is, aligned with other lines that shape the normal. For Ahmed, non-heteronormative bodies are disoriented outside of the lines.

Disorientation is to deviate from what Ahmad calls the "familiarity" or the normative. Although individuals will be perceived as getting lost, Ahmed comments that "getting lost still takes us somewhere… and being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling" (Ahmed, 2016: 7). Queer phenomenology remains with me throughout the whole thesis, even if I don't directly engage with it as a theoretical reference in all the chapters. It permits a wider recognition of things, objects, and identities that are usually restricted or hidden from sight. Hence, building on dis/orientation theory, I analyze how queer performances provide new "queer orientations" that support the construction of alternative bodies that continue to be reshaped by their dynamic relationship with the city and the context.

Additionally, the work of José Muñoz narratives on *Queer Utopi*a (2009), Martin Manalansan's concept of "queer mess" (2015), and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) work on

"respectability politics" travelled with me through the whole journey shaping my readings and analysis of the performances.

Muñoz explains queerness as something that is not in the present but is an ideal state in the future that can never be attained. While the present is a limitation for queers, they can only imagine a future and constantly fight for it (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz's optimistic approach to queerness as a horizon of radical potentiality (Muñoz, 2009) has guided me. The performances become the materials that construct the queer worlds. Inspired by him, I perceive the performances as the "concrete utopias" or as "daydreamlike," opening the way for "hopes as a collective, an emergent group or even solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many" (Muñoz, 2009: 3)

Martin Manalasnan (2015) defines "queer mess" as an analytical stance that negates the "cleaning up function of the normative" (Manalansan, 2015). It is a resistant strategy that transgresses the normative power structure through messing it up. I trace the mess that counters the mainstream normative ways of existing and doing while opening the possibilities for "alternative ways of being" (Manalansan, 2018: 495).

I also build on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) work on "respectability politics," which she defines as politics, actions, and lifestyles that marginalized groups demonstrate to reflect their adherence to the normative values, hoping to be accepted or granted rights by the dominant groups (Higginbotham, 1993). I will argue that queer artists and activists reject this archetypal, as they project anti-respectability strategies that free them from the self-policing and fear that normativity imposes on non-normative bodies.

1.5.   Selection Process

At the beginning of each chapter, I will discuss the selection process of the artists or the artistic productions. However, it is crucial to mention that as contemporary arts are marked by the innovation of styles, inviting artists to discover and innovate new styles and forms, I will refrain from evaluating the forms employed in order not to limit or reduce the thematic freedom of the artist. I will also not analyze the productions' artistic, creative, or technological levels, as the creation and final result rely not only on creativity but also on the "certainty of knowledge" and

the "privilege of positions" (Schoonover and Galt, 2016). Consequently, I will be looking for only one requirement: the subversion and the mess the form and the content are creating.

1.6.   Justification and Relevance

Mohja Kafh describes how a crisis in masculinity may have catalyzed the grassroots uprising of the Arab uprising revolutions (Kahf and Sinno, 2021). The same revolutions generated two uncommon images of Arab men. On one side, we saw the Islamist extremists, who embody extreme patriarchal masculine toxicity, and on the other side, non-normative bodies claimed back their voices. The radical changes assure the connection between gender and the future nature of the state. As I will argue in the next chapter, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets of Beirut projecting opposition against the system and its patriarchal nature. The activists reflected an intersectional vision where there are political and economic rights without gender liberation.

Despite countless studies, mainly undertaken through Western eyes, on LGBTQI+ and women's sufferance and oppression in both the Arab and Islamic Worlds, very few have looked at local queer activism. Studying queer activism as an analytical subject allows us to understand both power structure and the social weights exerted on non-heteronormative individuals in their daily life. Also, now more than ever performing arts have become a space of queer resistance and protest in Lebanon. Queer film festivals are becoming a yearly event, YouTube is full of videos of queer singers, and almost every weekend we can find a drag show in the city of Beirut. I believe that it is not only the moment to examine the connection between both fields— performing arts and queer politics—but also to look for the transgression potential of queer art in subverting hegemonic power and the status quo. This research aims to join a queer Lebanese local movement that intends to penetrate the "heterosexual matrix" and deconstruct it. I map the suggested other ways of being, doing, and saying to upgrade to a new, more holistic existence.

I choose to study queer activism as it is not only about LGBTQI+ bodies but also about liberating everyone who lives within the community. As normativity punishes homosexual people, it also constrains and confines heterosexual people. Queerness comes to liberate everyone from the rigid norms and undesired ways of being.

Here, I am not calling for a revolution; on the contrary, I am trying to document a small part of the revolution we are witnessing. The performances are part of the revolution that is already taking place.

It remains essential to situate my position as a researcher. I came to this research thesis not as an observer or anthropologist, but as a Lebanese with familiar ties with the local. I am immersed in the daily culture and habits and the city of Beirut. I am a Lebanese artist who lived almost all his life in Lebanon. I also acknowledge that I now live and research for a Western university, which obligates me to remain conscious of the hierarchy of power in academia and the cautions against speaking from the colonized voice to a colonizer reader. But as Berry states, "the field travels with us and within our bodies" (Berry cited in Moussawi, 2020: 25), I continue to be involved in the field in many ways. To decenter my analysis away from the Western/White discourse, I ask the reader to give me the opportunity to count on voices coming from my part of the world. I also request your attentiveness to our contemporary strategies and resistance tactics that might divert from the dominant and universal "gay assimilation" at this historical moment.

Finally, I want to clarify that I am not speaking on behalf of the artists, but trying to listen to and reflect on their work, examining the broader relations of the representations that they suggest with the cultural specificities that keep on reshaping gender (Gray and Cooke, 2018).

1.7.   Chapters Ahead

This thesis follows the model of its preparation through publications. I have produced two articles and two book chapters. Although at first glance, these four articles/chapters might look unconnected, on close reflection I believe they have a lot in common. Queer radicality, mess, empowering the marginals, and the disturbance of normativity are the cores of each of them. They all center queer activism against the status quo and the normative social powers.

The first contribution is an article entitled "LGBTQI+ activism in the Lebanese Revolution". The article was published in the *Journal of Sexualities* and accepted on the 23rd of August 2023.

In this article, I analyze LGBTQI+ radical participation and activism in the Lebanese revolution. I look at the meanings behind their critical engagements and tactics, arguing that radical activists have broadened LGBTQI+ activism beyond the homonormative discourse of visibility and

equality. They experience new forms of mobilization in the public space that stand against assimilation politics and respectability politics while creating a new form of what I call "LGBTQ emergent care" that appeared to empower and validate the self and the other. Although this article is not directly concerned with performing arts, it forms a starting point for my analysis as it allowed me to connect what the performances are suggesting to what is happening in the streets of Beirut. Even so, art was tackled as I analyzed the slogans, graffiti, and sit-in events that can be considered as a live performances, and what I describe in the article as "the gay street parties."

The second contribution was produced first in a form of an article published by *ILCEA Revue de l'Institut des langues et culturesd'Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie* in March 2022, titled: "Queering the Lebanese Instagram: Reimagining Futurity." In this article, I examine two Lebanese queer Instagram accounts, analyzing how they unsettle the normative understanding of sexuality and gender expression, besides raising new meanings and possibilities for local sexual politics. I examine the tactic employed by each account in generating queer realities, meaning, and embodiment. While "Artqueerhabibi" uses the medium of comics to reimagine a different queer reality and imagination of queer presence in the public space, "Takweer" archives the queer Arab history and popular culture. I argue that the archive not only revives the long-erased queer history, but also informs both the present and the future as the content comes back to life through discussions and responses.

The third contribution is a book chapter titled "Mi pluma es política: apropiaciones no occidentales del drag" that was published in the book *Feminismos, violencias y redes sociales: Prácticas y estrategias iberoamericanas contra los discursos del odio* (June 2022, Peter Lang, DOI: 10.3726/b18689). The chapter, that was co-authored with my supervisors Dr Iolanda Tortajada and Dr Cilia Willem, visits the Lebanese drag scene, the first and to date the only drag scene in the Arab World. It analyzes the possibilities that such art is providing for both the artists and Lebanese non-heteronormative bodies. Building on Judith Butler's narratives on "drag as subversive powers" (1990), and by means of interviews with four active drag performers, we argue that drag is breaking gender boundaries, inviting artists and audiences to an internal journey of self-discovery that results in the formation of more fluid identities. We also argue that drag acts are a political tool that contributes to non-normative visibility and futurity.

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The fourth contribution is a book chapter that will be part of Routledge Handbook on LGBTQI+ in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), edited by Dr Serena Tolino and Dr Arash Guitoo. My chapter is entitled "A Movie with a Messy Ending: Queer Mess in Lebanese Cinema". The chapter was accepted and currently I am working on the editors comments. In this chapter, and through analyzing two contemporary Lebanese queer movies, I trace the "queer mess" that non-normative bodies create to disrupt three main pillars of Lebanese patriarchy, mainly sectarianism, hegemonic masculinity, and the family as it remains the basic unit of the Lebanese society, as proposed by two contemporary Lebanese queer movies. I argue for a queer mess that transgresses the heteronormative power and the social dynamics while opening a space for non-normative bodies to exist. I present two main queer Lebanese tactics, "disclosure of sexuality for a better and more authentic family connection," and "disobedience" against the normative power, mainly the power of hegemonic masculinity and Lebanese sectarianism. I situate both tactics in relation to class and educational privileges as they shape each of the queer strategies.

2. Chapter 2

LGBTQ Radical Activism in the Lebanese Revolution
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Article

LGBTQ radical activism in the Lebanese Revolution

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Abstract

The Lebanese Revolution (2019) made two forms of LGBTQ activism visible. While *Helem* (2004–present), the first and the most renowned LGBT organization in Lebanon and the Arab World, called for wide participation, affirming the importance of visibility, pride, and equality, others expressed more radical forms of the LGBTQ political agency. In this article, I concern myself with the second form, analyzing LGBTQ radical resistance as an approach and a new form of self-politicization. I look at the meanings behind their critical engagements and tactics, arguing that radical activists have broadened LGBTQ activism beyond the homonormative discourse of visibility and equality. They experience new forms of mobilization in the public space that stand against assimilation politics and respectability politics while creating a new form of what I call "LGBTQ emergent care" that appeared to empower and validate the self and the other.

Keywords

Lebanon, anti-assimilation, anti-respectability politics, Lebanese Thaura, LGBTQ radical activism, LGBTQ emergent care

Introduction

On the evening of October 17, 2019, around 30 persons spontaneously gathered, marching through Beirut's streets protesting the new tax measures, including the WhatsApp 6$ monthly tax that the government announced. Within 2 h, thousands were filling and blocking roads across the country. In the following days, hundreds of thousands occupied the streets. They were driven by the rapidly escalating economic crises, the ongoing rampant corruption, increasing unemployment, the system's failure to

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provide 24-h electricity, and the absence of prospects for a better future[1] (Maalouf, 2020; Sullivan, 2019). The demands quickly escalated from demanding essential social and economic services to calling for the end of the sectarian system that had long governed political and social life. *kulun yaʿnī kulun* (all of them means all of them) became the most echoed slogan in the streets, demanding all traditional politicians to resign and be replaced by non-sectarian and uncorrupted figures.

LGBTQ protestors, among other marginalized groups, became the frontline of the movements, bringing their own sexual politics to the street to confront their oppression, neglect, and exclusion. As it was described by my interlocutors, the *Thaura* (The Revolution) was the opportunity that they had long awaited to express their anger toward the system's corruption, oppression, homophobia, and patriarchy. While *Helem* set up a tent in the *Thaura's* main square, providing legal support as well as advocating for LGBTQ equality and visibility, the streets of Beirut bore witness to a novel and more radical form of LGBTQ activism for the first time. I refer to the activists as radicals, as they shift the attention away from the mainstream LGBTQ activism that centers identity politics. They projected, as I will explain throughout this article, an anti-assimilation, anti-sectarian, and anti-respectability resistance, while being committed, to struggling against class and race oppression. In this article, I concern myself with this radical form of LGBTQ mobilization, arguing that the LGBTQ visibility in the *Thaura* cannot be debated only on the grounds of the increase in the number of LGBTQ protestors but because of the conscious turning away from the previous models of LGBTQ activism. I look at those elements that comprise the change, analyzing how key moments and actions in the revolution have established a new radical LGBTQ politics.

Previous research on LGBTQ activism in Lebanon has been heavily concerned with the institutionalized structure of LGBTQ movements (Chamas, 2021; Moussawi, 2015, 2020; Naber and Zaatari, 2014; Nagle, 2016, 2018). Ghassan Moussawi (2015, 2020) analyzed how the leading LGBTQ non-governmental organizations in Lebanon formulate their understanding of sexuality and sexual politics with respect to the global versus local LGBTQ identities (Moussawi, 2015, 2020). John Nagle (2016) examines how LGBTQ activists conceptualize mobilization strategies within or against power sharing, whereas Naber and Zaatari (2014) discussed how LGBTQ social movements resisted and responded to the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the possibilities and limits for the LGBTQ movement to be contained within a broad-based civil society movement. Nevertheless, the existing literature provides an incomplete analysis of radical non-institutionalized activism in the Lebanese urban space.

Although the "*Thaura*" did not occur in a vacuum. It builds on the foundation of two main anti-sectarian movements: the "*Laïque Pride*" or "*Secular Pride*"[2] (2010), and the "You Stink Movement"[3] (2015) (Abi Yaghi and Yammine, 2020), and even though LGBT individuals have been visible on the streets since 2003, when Helem activists participated in an anti-Iraq war demonstration waving the rainbow flag, the *Thaura* remains distinct from the past movements. Here, I don't aim to create a comparison between the *Thaura* and previous mobilizations, yet what distinguished it is the decentralization through the massive strikes, road blockades, and sit-ins across the country, and the breaking of the sectarian and class boundaries. It also forged a clear alliance between the marginalized

and most vulnerable bodies including non-heterosexuals, domestic migrant workers, refuges, and women who are still subject to gender-based and racial discrimination and inequality. They came together, crafting an intersectional framework to challenge the pillars that sustain the system. Finally, and what is of particular significance to this article, is the fact that in the *Thaura*, LGBTQ demonstrators deviated from past participation norms. While previously they limited their participation to advocating for the overall goals of the movements, this time they brought their own sexual politics, needs, and visions to the forefront, articulating a clear and direct confrontation. In the revolution, many LGBTQ individuals who had never previously been active in any non-governmental organizations or any political movements took part in the unplanned and maybe unmethodical process of mobilization and radical collective actions. Their discursive tactics are an important case study as they part company with from the ho-monormative and institutionalized structure of LGBTQ movements that may risk, in the case of Lebanon, reproducing the dominant heterosexual culture (Nagle, 2018), as well as replicating the state power and its security logic that oppresses non-normative bodies (Chamas, 2021).

In this essay, I draw on queer theory to challenge the normative conceptualization of LGBT activism and rights. Queerness here is defined as politics that challenge the dominant norms and practices that create spaces for transformational work to begin (Cohen, 1997). I draw on the writings of the black feminist and queer scholar Cathy Cohen (1997) on queer politics in relation to state power. Cohen problematizes the limited gay and lesbian agendas that focus on civil rights strategy and the taken-for-granted dichotomy between the "queer" and the "heterosexual" in queer activism (Cohen, 1997). Instead, she invites us to redirect our attention from queer politics that focus on sexuality to politics that are attentive to the complex and intertwined power relation of sexuality, class, and power (Cohen, 1997). I follow such invitation by looking at how LGBT activism challenges the intersection of the dominant normative powers that oppress them.

I also build on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) work on "Respectability Politics," which she defines as politics, actions, and lifestyles that the marginalized groups demonstrate to reflect their adherence to the normative values, hoping to be accepted or granted rights by the dominant groups (Higginbotham, 1993). I will argue that the LGBTQ radical activists drop such a model, projecting anti-respectability strategies that liberate them from the self-policing and fear that both the status quo and society impose on non-normative bodies. Finally, Sophie Chamas' analysis of how homonormative activism in Lebanon enhances security logic, on which the contemporary state power depends (Chamas, 2021), pushed me to look outside the dominant forms of LGBT resistance. In line with Chamas' findings and following Cohen's invitation to move away from identity politics and civil rights, I focus on queer transgressive strategies and actions that challenge and destabilize the normalization of the system power, sectarianism, and neo-liberalism that intersect and interact to oppress the lives of non-normative bodies. Through analyzing the meanings behind specific slogans and actions taken by the LGBTQ radical activists, my findings show that their resistance contradicts organizational activism as they project anti-assimilation, anti-respectability, and anti-sectarian[4] politics. I also argue that their

opposition was accompanied by the creation of an LGBTQ "emergent care" that aims to validate and empower the self and the marginalized other.

Methods

This article draws on interviews, my own observation during my limited participation in the revolution, analysis of the slogans, and five videos sent to me by the interviewees, as they captured special moments in the revolutions. I conducted 10 interviews between January and March 2019, while still being in contact with all the participants during the different writing processes of this article. I asked open-ended questions about how the protestors carried out their civil disobedience and the meanings behind specific tactics, actions, and slogans.

I relied on snowballing sampling, recruiting the first two activists I came in contact with in the revolution, in which I participated during my presence in Lebanon in the first week and a half of the *Thaura*. Then, using word of mouth and their private WhatsApp group, the two activists circulated a message I wrote explaining the purpose of the study, inviting those interested to contact me. My interviewees ranged between the ages of 22 and 32, and they all took part in a radical collective that was formed during the *Thaura*. The interviews lasted around 45 min and were conducted virtually, via Zoom. As LGBTQ activists continue to suffer from state oppression, I changed the name of all my interviewees and didn't mention the name of their collective, at their request.

Analysis

Anti-assimilation politics

All my interviewees lacked faith in the current political heterosexist system, assuring me that they were not interested in claiming rights from within. As the system recognizes LGBTQ people as neither political subjects nor as qualified citizens, the activists are positive that achieving any form of victory within the current structure remains impossible. Omar, gay, 30 years, commented:

> Everything within this system is systematically reproduced through heterosexuality. We cannot expect a parliament that rejects the discussion of civil marriage, or women's right to pass citizenship to their children, to support and protect gender diversity.

Contrary to the mainstream gay rights movements that construct mobilization strategies within power-sharing governments (Nagle, 2016), the activists were sure that the system was not to be reformed but destroyed. They recognized that such destruction is to be achieved by eliminating two of its main pillars: sectarianism and the neoliberal[5] economy.

As I discuss the activists' position toward sectarianism and religious institutions in the second part, in this part I elaborate on the activists' mobilization against the neoliberal privatization of the city through their confrontation with Solidere, a Lebanese joint-stock

company that oversees the reconstruction of Beirut's central district. The company transformed the downtown from a major hub for all the Lebanese to a luxurious place that is mainly accessed by the rich and tourists (Masri, 2009). My interviewees articulated a connection between social injustice and the system neoliberal economic policy. Both Moussawi (2020) and Nagle (2021) analyzed how the gentrification that came as a result of the urban reconstructions had created new forms of social exclusions and violence (Nagle, 2021). The city's restoration favored certain LGBTQ bodies that reproduced the image of beauty and modernity of the place, mainly the middle class and cis-gender (Moussawi, 2020; Nagle, 2021).

The protestors explained that their contestation to Solidere, "mother of Lebanese neoliberalism and the system pride" as Rawad, gay, 30 years, referred to it, is defiantly an opposition to the system's economic policies but also it comes to break the exile of the "displeasing bodies" that are unwelcomed in both capitalist and heterosexist spaces. Marwa, non-binary, 28 years, commented:

> For the system, the beauty of Solidere is maintained as long as the underprivileged, and the marginalized are unseen. That is the role of security men that are planted at every entrance of Solidere and *Zaitunay Bay*. They carefully select who can and cannot access the space.

The activists combated their displacement by engaging in different actions that reclaim the space. They painted various slogans on the walls of the city center to assure their presence as full citizens, such as: "Trans for revolution," "LGBTQ passed from here," and "*Thawretna Louteye*" ("Our Revolution is a Faggot"). The activists also helped organize and participate in various events to end space segmentation. They joined the picnic that came in the form of a sit-in at *Zaitunay Bay*, a marina at Beirut seaside that hosts multi-million-dollar yachts, or "the finest leisure destination in Beirut" as it is described on its website, and participated in the Sūq Abū Rakhūṣa (the market of super cheapness) initiative.

As public spaces gain their meanings through social processes and practices (Lefebvre, 1991), both urban interventions counter the gentrification mentioned above, replacing it with social integration. On the 11th of November, I joined Marwa and her friends on the picnic at *Zaitunay Bay*. The variety of food that they brought included *Keshek*, *Foul*, *hummus*, *Makdous*, olives, and a mixture of vegetables, all known as the "dishes of the poor," in contrast to the menus of the luxury restaurants that are spread along the marina. The gathering challenged the policy of the place, where security denies entrance to anything that might tarnish the image of luxury and elitism, including banning certain bodies such as Syrian refugees to enter, or even forbidding working-class people who can't afford the prices from bringing their own food. There, Marwa raised a toast to the "disturbance of the ugly, classy, and neat exclusive and racist Solidere." In Abū Rakhūṣa market, my interviewees spotted many non-normative bodies, creating a new socio-economical structure and presence by selling various goods. The image of non-normative bodies selling in the market ruptures the whole system's neoliberal construction of the space. They didn't aim for inclusion or to look more normative within the space but to challenge its construction by creating a counter-identity that dismisses the neo-liberal

normativity. The reclamation of the space didn't only threaten the sovereignty and security of the state classist and racist neoliberal policies but also provided an inclusive alternative that messes the order of things.

As the space is not authentically heterosexual "but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized" (Binnie cited in Oswin, 2008), I argue that through the domination of the space, LGBTQ activists reproduced it, even temporarily, in a way that is free from the privileges of class and heterosexuality. They opened up room for the marginalized to exist socially and economically. Nada, queer, 24 years, commented:

> It is true that the actions were mainly a reclamation of the space, but also they were messages for all the private neoliberal current and future investors that might be either collaborators or victims of the system's economic policies and manipulations. The message clearly says: the center is for us, for the refugees, and for the working class.

Anti-assimilation politics were also touched upon when I asked the activists about their opinion of Helem, which was initially found as part of the left-wing Lebanese movement to combat the existing orders of imperialism, sectarianism, racism, classism, and state oppression (Makarem, 2011). In a mocking voice, Ahmed commented: "They [Helem activists] are the well-behaved, educated, and sophisticated guys." Omar went further, describing Helem's work as "activism that has been hijacked" by fortunate individuals along the line of class, gender, and education.

None of my interviewees considered any LGBTQ organization in Lebanon as properly representative, conceiving their "Identity Politics" as exclusionist through missing the multiplicity of gender and the role of class (Moussawi, 2015).

Although the majority acknowledged many significant achievements by Helem, especially those concerned with sexual health, through "Marsa,"[6] or other projects that provide psychological support to LGBTQ individuals, they all assured me that their activism combat homonormative organizations, which hindered LGBTQ individuals from attaining what they referred to as "real liberty." They criticized their assimilation agendas that connect to compulsory heterosexuality through their aspiration for equality with the heterosexual homophobic body. Marwa commented on one of Helem's slogans, "Mithlī Mithlak" (We Are the Same), saying:

> In which way are we equal? How can we equalize between the oppressor and the oppressed? The homophobic society and the system traumatized us, teaching us self-hate. Equality is impossible anywhere in the world, especially in Beirut, where we are not viewed as humans.

Such an anti-assimilative approach recalls Seidman's (2002) and Duggan's (2013) criticism of LGBTQ organizational effort that seeks inclusion into the dominant heterosexual culture, as such equality will diminish neither heteronormativity nor heterosexism but create hierarchy within the LGBTQ community. Interestingly, Omar asked:

> As nothing in Lebanon is for free, at what cost does the system allows Helem to exist while the same system shut down a movie house, a sauna, and ban many movies that show a same-

> sex kiss? The only explanation is that the system needs Helem and some other pubs' presence as they end up validating it by refining its image.

Omar's question resonates with Ghassan Moussawi's (2020) writings, where he analyzes how the system permits the presence of few "gay-friendly" places as they serve the government agenda of Beirut exceptionality narratives to attract foreign investments to rebuild the country after the civil war.

The above positions against both the system and its neoliberal economy make anti-assimilation within the Lebanese cultural context take a different dimension than the Western discussion regarding bringing non-normative sexualities into mainstream civic practices and the discourse of gay marriage (Cohen, 1999). In Lebanon, anti-assimilation turns out to be the rejection of power-sharing with the current system (Nagle, 2016), while not falling for the system semi-validation that reduces certain LGBTQ subjectivities to consumerist bodies that serve the system's agenda of Beirut modernity. The semi-validation permits the existence of certain spaces and actions that threaten neither the patriarchal heterosexist system nor disturb the religious institutions. The activists' anti-assimilation stands turned out to be a condemnation of capitalism and displacement but also a stance against the class, education, and race hierarchical divisions between non-normative bodies.

Anti-respectability politics and the public sphere

As I showed earlier, LGBTQ activists reclaimed the space through various urban interventions that boosted LGBTQ visibility, declaring themselves as powerful "full citizens" that transcend the subordination to social conventionality. Their presence was not only anti-capitalist but also anti-respectable as it aimed to challenge the morality of the public sphere. In this section, I focus on how slogans, and what the activists referred to as the "gay street parties," acted as anti-respectability politics that liberated non-normative bodies from fear and the respectable homonormative styles of being.

In the streets of the *Thaura*, both the feminists and the LGBTQ activists mobilized actions to interrupt homophobia. When a group of heterosexual male demonstrators chanted against Gebran Bassil, the previous minister of Foreign Affairs and the most hated political figure for many protestors, singing "*Gebran ya Luṭi*" (Gebran, you are a faggot), the activists directly replied, "*Luṭi manna masabe*" (Faggot is not an insult). The stance that succeeded in limiting the usage of the chant, as my interviewees affirmed, not only reflected the protestors' agency in taking control over what was always used against them but also changed the discursive connections and stigma that have always been deeply rooted within the term.

In the streets, the activists proudly reclaimed the word "*Luṭi*" by introducing themselves as "*Liwāṭ*" (faggots) or by filling the walls of Beirut with slogans such as Liwāṭ *lil Thaura*[7] (Faggots for the Revolution). While Ahmad, queer, 29 years, expressed that the reclamation of the word comes as "[we] had enough of the gender shaming, and insults," Micka, non-binary, 23 years, explained that it is not only a reclamation of a derogatory word but also a reclamation of their body as a sexual and enjoyable agency. Micka said:

> I identify as a *luṭi*. For me, it is more powerful. It reflects our intense desire to enjoy our bodies. I love the mess it creates in the heterosexual mind. The term Gay is very niche and polite. That's why we have a lot of gay-friendly people but not a *luṭi* friendly people. Do you know why? Because the *Liwāṭ*, are much stronger than waiting for other's validation and friendship.

Such a stance reflects the emergence of a radical counter-existence that breaks with the patronization of politeness that shaped the previous activism.

My interviewees expressed their group consciousness against "the politics of respectability" (Higginbotham, 1993), believing that reclaiming the self means deconstructing polite manners, language, proper dress, and sexual politics. They affirmed that in a society that is marked by homophobia, any form of LGBTQ activism would be viewed as "disrespectable," as respectability for the system and its allies means silence. For them, it was clear that to disrupt the system, they had to unsettle its hegemonic moralities. Nader, queer, 26 years, said:

> To be able to defeat the system, we must do everything that our heterosexist culture tells us not to be. We have to exhibit everything that is not allowed. We must be loud, improperly dressed, love the refugees, be unmasculine, and defiantly be super gay.

As I mentioned above, there was a variety of slogans[8] etched on the walls or chanted in the streets that push LGBTQ visibility forward. However, during the interviews, my interviewees kept on mentioning two striking slogans: "pussy power" and "ḥulw ʿan ṭīzinā" (Get off our ass). The two slogans that give the body agency in their political contestation reflect the activists' outrage against the rhetoric of patriarchy that has always asserted control over their bodies.

LGBTQ activism was heavily centered in the body, the ground for their exclusions. The activists believed that their fight should start through the body and for the sake of liberating it from the limitations of toxic homophobic and patriarchal conceptualization of things. Such strategy recalls Wendy Parkins (2000), who argues "there is no political agency in abstraction from embodiment" (Parkins, 2000: 60).

Anti-respectability politics was also expressed through spraying slogans such as "Gays for revolution" on the wall of Saint George Cathedral at the heart of Beirut's city center. The fact that the slogans were heavily condemned, giving homophobic media and politicians the fuel they needed to paint the revolution as a "deviation," did not prevent radical activists from heavily criticizing the religious institutions.

All my interviewees affirmed that the *Thaura* broke all redlining employed by what they refer to as the system's number one allies: the religious institutions. Although mobility against sectarian political parties can be traced way before the *Thaura*, especially to the 2015 "You Stink" movement (Geha, 2019; Halawi and Salloukh, 2020; Nagle, 2021), it was in the *Thaura* that the activists dared to criticize the religious institutions openly. As a participant in the "You Stink" movement, I could argue that previous activism was mainly directed toward the sectarianism of the political system/state while dismissing the role of religious institutions in empowering and reproducing

secularism as well as classism, sexism, homophobia, and corruption. Marwan Kraidy's analysis of the "You Stink" movement confirms my thoughts as he argues that social class acted as an obstacle to the creation of a large mobilized public as the movement was mainly led by middle-class professionals who produced a classed discourse (Kraidy, 2016).

Radical activists perceived sectarianism as the product of multi-institutional alignments, where religious institutions, the primary justification for homophobia, are central. They considered the silence discourse toward the religious institutions as a recreation of their power that dehumanizes those who don't embody normative heterosexuality. For Alaa, a bisexual, 27 years, to "respect the religious institution means respecting patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia."

The gay street parties.   Almost every night, or when the activists blocked *Jeser al Ring* (The Ring Bridge), one of the main streets connecting the western part of Beirut with the eastern part, they would create what they referred to as "gay street parties." Three of the activists sent me both long and short videos that recorded various moments and dynamics of the gatherings. The videos show how the bodies were liberated entirely from normative constraints. Bodies contested the "proper sexual decorum" that has always been conceived as unquestionably normative, heterosexual, modest, and restricted to the private sphere. In the videos, we see how hegemonic masculinity was opposed through makeup and the outfits. The demonstrators were extremely loud, whether through the music, whistles, or banging together cookware sets that further amplified the noise.

Almost all the activists I interviewed stressed how their bodies find power in confronting the state, describing how, for the first time, they were not gripped by fear when looking straight into the eyes of the police. On the contrary, they challenged police authority every time they blocked the streets or attempted to dismantle the security barrier that protected the Lebanese parliament.

Taking the streets from the police, mimicking them with aggressive reactions, and provocative dancing in front of them were a few of the subversive and transgressive tactics that the activist mentioned. It overturned the system's power through the "unrespectable playfulness."

In one of the videos, which recorded a clash between a driver trying to make his way through the blocked street and the protestors, suddenly, while the driver was aggressively shouting, two activists started dancing in front of his car. What was striking about the video is while the heterosexual body looked doomed, non-normative bodies appeared to be very comfortable in their domination of the public sphere. Alaa commented:

> We were provocatively dancing in front of everyone every time we succeeded in cutting the roads. We were super loud. It was a pleasure to see the faces of homophobic heterosexuals in shock.

I argue that the parties are the queer counter spaces where LGBT bodies forge a place of resistance as they transgress the normative power dynamics and the ethics that control the streets. Through them, "the streets become queer" (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 204), as

the non-normative bodies celebrate their existence and power in the face of oppression and homophobia. They create different realities that counter the usual rhetoric of shame, disappearance, and fear. While the police were on high alert, the radical activists drank and danced. The parties were a life-affirming response to oppression and death (Shepard, 2009).

In his book *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (2009), Benjamin Shepard describes the role of play and pleasure in LGBTQ activism, writing that such strategies reduce alienation, create hope, foster networks, and help the actor to stay involved in the face of oppression.

Here, it will be interesting to look at the "gay street party" through a comparative lens at Bardo, the most famous gay bar in Beirut, where accessibility is reserved for subjects with class and education privileges (Moussawi, 2020). Bringing the "gay parties" to the street is not only a contestation of the heterosexist morality of the space but also a disruption of the neoliberal and capitalist exclusivity of the "gay nightlife" in Beirut as it remains dominated by middle-class educated Lebanese and foreign rich tourists, leaving working class, Palestinian and Syrian refugees, migrant workers, and transgender bodies outside (Moussawi, 2020). The parties are the alternatives that oppose the inclusivity and commercialism of gay places in Beirut. The gay parties are anti-respectable, free, and loud and dismiss the educational capital, as the ability to speak English or French is not required (Moussawi, 2020). The parties are an interclass contact in the middle of the urban space.

While respectability and assimilation politics make Bardo a de-sexualized gay space, the parties generate sexual expression and pleasure. Besides the provocative dancing I mentioned above, another video shows an activist rapping a song about alcohol, smoking, and being horny.

Elie, queer, 30 years, explained how the parties acted as an anarchist occupation where they celebrated the most vulnerable bodies as many acts came to denounce Lebanese classism and racism. He commented:

> One night when a group of Ethiopian migrant workers joined us on *Jeser al Ring*, we asked them to play their music. That night, we danced and celebrated in their honor.

Opening the space for the migrant workers is a stand against the exploitation and abuse that they experience due to the *Kafala*[9] system (sponsorship system). It is also an affirmation of the nature of the fight as a fight against racism, classism, and sexism. Ray Jueridini (2009) explores how middle-class families in Lebanon construct their prestigious identity through the hierarchal relation between housewives and employed domestic workers (Jueridine, 2009). Recruiting a migrant worker at home becomes a necessity for Lebanese to feel their superiority which is mainly fueled by racism toward the workers. In the streets, the presence and active participation of the migrant workers along the side of the LGBT activists puts Dima Kaedley's (2014) theory of "queer feminist movements" into practice. She defines it as a reimagination of a relationship between migrant workers and feminists in a more mutually inclusive way as "homophobia and

transphobia are not entirely disconnected from the abuse of the migrant workers" (Kaedbey, 2014: 166).

Enabling the migrant workers to choose their music honors their presence, bodies, and choice. It brings back their agency and autonomy that were stolen by the racist Kafala system. It defies the racial and class norms where the bodies of migrant workers don't usually measure up. It affirms the intersectional nature of the struggle where sexual liberation is interchangeable from a whole vision of social justice for every minority. The engagement with the migrant workers becomes transgressing not only as "it blurs the boundaries between communities in Lebanon" (Kaedbey, 2014: 161) but also as it empowers bodies that are considered a threat to the state's racist and classist agenda. It not only makes the migrant workers fully seen but also key participants in shaping the future.

Toward a new LGBTQ of emergent Lebanese care

As the queer scholar Martin Malanasan (2008) invites us to look for forms of queer care that "do not line up neatly in terms of gender binaries and normative familial arrangements" (Malanasan, 2008)[10], in this part I argue that the *Thaura* projected a new form of care which I call an "Emergent LGBTQ Care." It is emergent as such bonding is not a common behavior but a new convention that arises within the accelerating mobilization. Emergent care flourishes in certain unexpected moments, crises, and events. It produces a collective bonding where non-normative bodies interact and stand for each other, even if temporarily, to empower support or at least make a situation livable. Previous research documented moments where LGBT bodies stood together and for each other. Sophie Chamas and Sabiha Allouche (2022) analyze how the death of Sarah Hegazi[11] turned out to be a moment of solidarity and care as Arab LGBT bodies, both inside and outside the Arab World, collectively mourned Hegazi even though the majority didn't know her. They described the unity as a moment of "care towards those queers who remained in the intolerable presents, whose own vulnerability and proximity to death was inflated in the aftermath of her arrest…." (Chamas and Allouche, 2022: 245). In Turkey, Asil Zengin (2019) analyzes how the transgender women in Istanbul relate to one another creating novel, and I will add emergent, practices of care and love that arise in critical moments such as death (Zengin, 2019).

Previously, as we know from Merabet's ethnography (2014), Lebanese LGBT-identified individuals "did not express any particular group solidarity, neither one based on a perceived common sexuality nor one informed by a mutually embraced political cause" (Merabet, 2014: 113). Moussawi (2020) conceptualizes LGBTQ connectivity in Beirut not on the bases of a well-established community but on what he refers to as the "Bubbles," temporal spaces of connectivity and solidarity that are based not only on gender commonality but also on a range of similarities such as political, educational, cultural, and class alignment (Moussawi, 2020). My findings show that the *Thaura* forged new forms of relationality and fusion by creating bonds, solidarity, and socialization between LGBT members that cross the above communal requirements. Elie described the *Thaura* as a place of human connection. Before the movement, he was never in contact with any transgender person nor recognized their fears, rights, and difficulties. Today Eli

is very close to two trans women, acknowledging the daily threats and difficulties that they continue to face. He presented himself as an LGBTQ activist, a feminist, and a fighter for "trans dignity."

As the question of how to destroy or undermine the institutions is deeply connected to how LGBTQ people relate to each other (Heckert, 2010), my interviewees highlighted the importance of collectively caring and empowering each other as a basic principle of their activism. Their engagement brought together all who are forced or maybe choose to be outside the status quo. They devoted much of their time to supporting each other by trying to provide basic needs such as emergency housing and economic resources. Various WhatsApp groups were created to aid its members on different levels. Ahmad told me:

> We were opening our places to host or co-rent with each other, proposing job offers in safe working environments, and circulating contacts of LGBTQ-friendly lawyers that can provide free legal support.

Such actions contribute to the construction of LGBTQ social and economic autonomy, where non-normative bodies take care of each other without necessarily waiting for the heterosexist system and culture to aid or validate them. As my interviewees kept on mentioning both care and bonding between them, I argue that a new form of LGBTQ caring is rising. To be clear, I am not referring to a kinship that replaces the hetero-normative nuclear families or the Western narratives of chosen family. On the contrary, I am aware that Lebanese mainly return to support and be with their families, challenging the queer liberal discourse that "de-prioritizes the political focus on heteronormative families and children" (Naber and Zaatari, 2014: 105). It is a form of emergent care that is formed through connections that seek to empower and aid the most vulnerable and easily targeted bodies. It makes LGBTQ the only source of self-validation and empowerment.

All the activists I interviewed agreed that the *Thaura* created bonds that were full of intense emotions. The activists described how they raised solid relations, in which they engaged in thinking, planning, and taking action. For example, violence and harassment were contested by creating proximity between non-normative bodies. Rabab, a lesbian, 27 years, described how queers used to gather and move in packs to ensure safety, especially transgender and non-confirming bodies.

As respectability politics often fails in finding spaces for transgender and non-binary people through affirming the gender binary of gender representations (Robinson, 2018, 2020), the radical activists assured the inclusion of every marginalized body, giving them an equal right to space, resistance, and visibility. The activists described how the slogans, discussions, and tactics were tailored to meet the needs of everyone, especially trans and non-binary people. Nader described how everything mattered; acknowledging that what counted as a basic need or "rights" varies according to each and every gender. An interesting example that Nader gave was the discussion with activists who are also pharmacists on the possibility of sources or places for transgender women to obtain anti-androgen drugs for better prices.

Such consideration of each other's priorities and perceptions in relation to the daily struggle, and the environment, is vital to the construction of nutritious affinities. It also left

a positive impact on many LGBTQ bodies by breaking their isolation. Nada commented on how two of her transgender friends started to conceive of the public space differently:

> They used to hate going out, especially during the daytime, as they continuously experienced verbal and physical harassment. During and after the *Thaura*, they feel much safer and stronger to combat transphobia.

Finally, all my interviewees affirmed how the night discussion circles that radical activists organized, both LGBTQ and feminists, created additional space where many found agency, collectively engaging with the intersectional layers of injustice that everyone, especially transgender, refugees, sex workers, and migrant workers experiences.

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how, once again, LGBTQ activism changed the state of emergency to a state of opportunity for non-normative beings (Naber and Zaatari, 2014). It created opportunities to connect, mobilize actions, outreach, contribute to educating the larger public, fight exclusion, and generate new queer aesthetics around the city. For Rawad, the *Thaura* has ended what he calls the "I am OK" situation, where he used to pretend that everything was OK while repressing his sexuality in order not to disturb heteronormativity. "Before all that I wanted was to go grab a drink and return home safely, now we are fighters. We are fearlessly comforting both the system and homophobia" (Rawad, 30).

The radical presence and participation have created new trajectories in Lebanese LGBTQ activism, marking the beginning of a de-institutionalized engagement while breaking with traditional styles and tactics. It is anti-assimilation and anti-respectability activism. That activist's mobilization seeks the deconstruction of the system instead of attaining "rights" from within. They combat the gentrification of the neoliberal governmental agenda, which leaves the "undesired bodies" outside.

The reclamation of the space and their mobilizations reflect their ethos as incompatible with the homophobic and classist system.

The slogans and the "gay street parties" reflect their rejection of arranging their bodies in space within the politics of respectability. They create new realms of political agency that combat both homo- and heteronormativity. The festivities celebrate not only the activists' non-normative desire but also their power in creating discomfort for the heterosexist mind.

In the last part, I argued that their mobilization created a new form of LGBTQ emergent care that reproduces justice through care and empowerment of the self and the other. It is care that is based on empathy, where the activists described their ties as anti-categorical and anti-hierarchy, but that creates relations that respect, look after, and appreciate all the vulnerable bodies.

The *Thaura* not only succeeded in creating discomfort for the system that used the card of the "fear of the gay" to manipulate public opinion against the revolution but also raised movements that politicized non-normative bodies: bodies that were fully and fearlessly

engaged in creating alternatives that reflect "their desire for another way of being in both the world and time" (Munoz, 2007: 365).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this article focused on participation and activism as a moment and not on the long-term effects or the post- Thaura achievements. It celebrates the emerging possibilities, queer optimism, and refusal. Even though the subversion might sound unreal, or an over-romanticized, still, it remains important as an attempt that "punctures a hegemonic conception of reality that limited the scope of political imagination and action" (Chamas, 2020: 171).

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The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: Study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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Notes

1. For more information, see Jeffrey G. Karam, Rima Majed, 2022.
2. Between February and December 2011, and in the aftermath of the Arab uprising, several left collectives initiated the *isqat an-nizam at-ta'ifi* campaign (toppling the sectarian system), which later was known as the Secular Pride movement. Despite their efforts, the demonstrations failed to mobilize a significant portion of the population. For more information, see Fakhoury, 2011.
3. "*You Stink*" was triggered by the garbage crisis in 2015, when the landfill sites were closed, and the garbage started to accumulate in the streets. Rapidly, the movement broadened its focus from garbage to encompass larger issues surrounding government corruption and sectarianism.
4. In this article, sectarianism does not only refer to the sectarian power-sharing system, where power on the institutional level is distributed among religious sects, and the sect authority and governance over personal and family matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody, but also according to Rima Majed's theorization of sectarianism as a category of both self-identification and categorization of the other that is based on the politicization of religious identities. For more information, see Mikdashi, 2014; Majed, 2016.
5. The neo-liberal economic system was part of the late prime minister Rafik al Hariri's policies to reconstruct the country after the civil war (1975–1990). It constituted a set of beliefs and mechanisms such as privatization, deregulation of financial and labor markets, and the increase

of private bank capital at the expense of productive sectors such as industry and agriculture all with the aim of protecting the interests of the ruling class, the rich, and private banks. For more information, see Majed, 2016.

6. A sexual health center that provides many free services, such as HIV tests, for LGBTQ individuals.

7. Reclamation didn't only act as a resistance tactic by taking control of the words that oppress and degrade LGBT bodies but also permitted an organic growth of a movement that identifies through the term.

8. "We want to topple the homophobia, It must go," "Lesbians against homophobia," and "LGBTQ for the revolution" are some.

9. In Lebanon, migrants workers are excluded from the Labour Law and governed by the Kafala system, which requires that each migrant worker needs to be sponsored by a Lebanese citizen. It gives the employer a complete control over the immigrant worker that remains unprotected, making them a subject of various forms of physical and psychological violence.

10. In his article "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm," Martin Manalansan speaks about self-care as a form of queer care. In his upcoming book *Queer Dwellings*, Manalansan focuses on the various queer manifestations of care among immigrant queers of color in New York, identifying care relationalities that are based on detachment and disaffection. For more information about Manalansan's new book, please refer to the talk he gave titled "Queer Kinship and Care" on this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4M5UnrZre4.

11. Sarah Hegazi is an Egyptian communist and queer activist who was arrested after raising a rainbow flag at the concert of Mashrou'Leila in Cairo in 2017. After being accused of perversion, Hegazi experienced in the prison torture and sexual abuse. Three months later, she was resealed and was granted asylum in Canada where she committed suicide on June 14th, 2020. For more information, please see Chamas and Allouche (2022).

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3. Chapter 3:

Queering the Lebanese Instagram: Reimagining Futurity

(ILCEA: Revue de l'Institut des langues et cultures d'Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie*)*

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Introduction

1 In 2019, 85% of Lebanese opposed homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2020) in a country where same-sex attraction is still conceived as a deviation, sickness, and moral corruption. Nevertheless, more queer initiatives are rising, particularly within the virtual world, as the Internet altered how do we view the whole world, insinuating more tolerance towards non-normative gender identities (Correll, 1995; Campbell, 2004; Fox, 2007; Light, Fletcher, & Adam, 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010). For Chaarani, the Lebanese queer community exists more as a virtual crowd than a concrete physical group (Chaarani, 2009).

2 On Instagram, a growing number of accounts come to challenge the heteronormative power reclaiming queer representations and voices. Mathew Gagne describes being online as the "beginning of a meditative process in the consolidation of queer self where digital media and queer culture intersect and produce each other" (Gagné, 2012).

3 As the line separating the virtual world from the physical one has become blurred, merging both online with everyday identity (Fox, 2007), I analyze how the accounts contribute to the construction of the Lebanese queer identity.

Contextualizing Beirut

4 Institutionally, article 534 of the Lebanese penal code punishes sexual acts that are "contrary to nature" up to one year in prison. Although several legal wins were recorded in the Lebanese courts ruling in favor of sexual liberties and equalities (The

Legal Agenda, 2017), the state still relies on the above article to brutally crackdown on queer spaces and events, limiting queer presence and resistance (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

5 Moreover, the existence of few gay-friendly spaces in Beirut has been misinterpreted by Western media, which portrayed the city as "the gay Arab paradise" (Healy, 2009). Such labeling does not only dismiss the daily struggle that Lebanese queer face (Moussawi, 2013) but serves the state semi "Homonational" (Puar, 2007) policy in spreading the narratives of Beirut exceptionalism (Moussawi, 2020).

6 As modernity has been linked to sexual freedom (Butler, 2010), and gay visibility turns to be an essential indicator of liberties (Manalansan, 1995; Duggan, 2020; Butler, 2010), the Lebanese government promoted Beirut as the place of sexual freedom to attract capital money, foreign investments, and tourism to rebuild the country after the 15 years of civil war (Masri, 2010; Moussawi, 2018).

7 Bringing these neoliberal policies into action, the system permitted the existence of queer places and spaces, mainly clubs and pubs, which mirror such exceptional image while securing the limitation of any kind of activism that might disturb the heteronormative patriarchal nature of the system.

8 In the streets of Beirut, the LGBTQ community still faces various kinds of harassment, making them one of the vulnerable groups in the country.

Methods

9 I choose to focus on Instagram and not another social/dating app that is catered specificity to the LGBTQ community due to the fact that while the latter is much safer, choosing to advocate on platforms that are public, openly accessed, and predominated by heterosexuals and normative codes insinuates the binging of a new queer era that diverts from the long hiding history. It signals a change that breaks free from fear, taboos and stigma.

10 I closely examine two Instagram queer accounts: *Artqueerhabibi* and *Takweer*, locating how the content of their posts contributes to the construction of the new Lebanese queer identity. My selection was primarily based on the different strategies each account employs to address its audience and secondly on the content. Although more queer artistic Instagram accounts continue to appear, ArtQueerHabibi remains distinct due to the highly imaginative and creative standards where its contents bravely and unapologetically mirror queerness.

11 To fully comprehend how the two Instagram accounts are contributing to the Lebanese queer identity modulation, I conduct a content analysis of the posts analyzing the meanings and implications they are producing.

12 I move beyond both the traditional mainstream representation of queer victimization, which depicts the daily queer struggle in the Arab World, and the White Western narratives of queerness and modernity, presenting a de-colonized reading of the effects that both Instagram accounts are creating. I also depart from the homonormative (Duggan, 2020) binaries of pride vs. shame and out vs. the closet. Instead, focusing on how the posts are negotiating cultural realities to produce queer futurity.

13 I rely on Michael Warner's (2002) analysis of community constructions through texts and productions, as readers associate and identify with each other, forming a new bounding and a sense of belonging (Warner, 2002). Wendy Chun's "Homophily" also remains important as she refuses the claim that the Internet is an open space where everyone connects; instead, she argues that similarities are what breeds connections.

14 It is also important to clarify that although the radical visibilities that the illustrations suggest are still far from being present realities, I conceive the posts according to what Sara Ahmed refers to as "marks" and "traces" as they allow the viewers to "associate the experience of having an emotion with the very effect of one surface upon another, an effect that leaves its mark or trace" (Ahmad, 2004: 6). These traces accumulate to build "queer worlding" that is "not a state of being, but rather one of becoming" (Manalasan, 2013: 571).

Artqueerhabibi

15 With 90,000 followers and 107 posts, as of May 2021, *Artqueerhabibi* relies on the medium of arts illustration to reimagine a queer version of the Arabic cities. The artist who keeps his identity hidden for safety reasons said to Plastik magazine that his primary purpose is to spread love and acceptance through raising awareness, breaking stigmas, and pushing queer visibility forward (Plastik, 2019). The illustrations mainly depict famous locations, such as the Egyptian pyramids, a metro station, a famous restaurant in Beirut, with a queer twist through adding people, actions, and objects that defy gender binary and compulsory normativity.

16 Inspired by his own experience as a queer person residing in Beirut, his friends, the Lebanese revolution (2019), Beirut Drag queens, and other famous queer figures in the Arab world, the artist fills his page with pictures depicting queer romance, sex, desire, and non-normative bodies. In his drawings, we see men sharing flirtatious gaze, women hugging, men kissing at the airport, same-sex romance, and same-sex sexual encounters.

17 Navigating the public sphere has always been surrounded by difficulties and fear, especially for non-normative bodies and trans women who are ridiculed, harassed, and excluded (Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2020). *Artqueerhabibi* comes to mess things up, distrusting the normative coding of the bodies, objects, and spaces. It defies the geographical, safety, and cultural limits where queers unapologetically take the streets, expressing their presence, affection, and erotic desire. The pictures recall Michael Warner's definition of queerness that is to be conceived as what "let loose the rather wild smell of sexual rut to permeate, invade and stink up" (Warner as cited in Manalansan, 2013).

Figure 1. - Love (*Artqueerhabibi*, 2018).

18 Through kissing, romance, the gay gaze, the fetishized gaze, the artist is constructing what Martin Manalansan describes as "queer worlding," which "involve the creation of material and semantic knowledge about space that is dependent on structural locations and power locations" (Manalansan, 2013: 569). Sexuality, especially same-sex desire that has permanently been restricted to the private sphere is now the city's primary residence where bodies, identities, and both queer sensuality and sexuality are unchained.

Spaces as the extensions of the bodies

19 The streets, the train station, the airport, the sidewalk, and the nightclub are now taking a new life as queer subjectivities manifest themselves within. Sara Ahmed describes the space as a "second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (Ahmed, 2006: 5). The proximity and distances between the bodies and both the objects and the places reorient spaces with new meanings.

20 The terror that continuously escorts queer bodies had collapsed. There is no need anymore to adapt strategies to pass safely within the public sphere (Moussawi, 2020). On the contrary, the queer inhabitance is creating a new time and space outside the constraints of heteronormativity. The "here" and "now" are packed with happiness, love, eroticism, and desire. Queers bodies are not anymore the strange aliens that make heterosexuals look more humans (Ahmed, 2000); they are organically harmonizing with space, re-identifying the new cities that are free from exclusion.

21 Filling spaces with love and desire projects hope. Both feelings promise safety, security, and connection pushing the body into new directions within the space. Projecting queer love means overcoming the impossibility while defeating the cultural barriers,

homophobia, and patriarchy. To perform romance is to counter the heteronormative interpretation of queerness as deviation and sickness where there are no happy endings. The posts mirror happy stories that are craved by the silence of the image, "the many silence that are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (Sedgwick citing Foucault, 1990: 3).

22 The emotions the posts raise and expressed through the follower's comments are to be read as construction of queer embodiment and identity. Sara Ahmed stresses the impact of how emotions, along with repetition, create queer bodies. Hence, building on Butler's (1990) and Ahmed's (2004) narratives, I argue that through repetition; this account is not only reorienting the queer self but also normalizing the non-hegemonic gender concepts and performances.

Building one community

23 Wendy Chun's concept of "Homophily" counters the claim that the Internet is an open space that brings everyone closer. On the contrary, she shows that similarities are what breed connections and bonds in the name of comfort, predictability, and common sense (Chun, 2016). Homophily which she defines as "love as the love of the same" (Chun, 2016: 62), maps new connections based on resemblance making those who share common things "virtual neighbors" (Chun, 2018). For the oppressed queer minorities, such neighborhood acts as a vital resistance strategy opening up possibilities for social ties that breaks self-isolation while promising companionship, intimacy, reassurance, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and most importantly, improve mental health outcomes (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Heaney & Israel, 2008; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

24 *Artqueerhabibi* reinforces the love of the self, allowing its members to post comments, follow each other, share lived experiences and stories, and extend the social networks in a culture that teaches queers to hide and hate their stigmatized and shameful self/ identity.

25 The post's emotional appeal generates a sense of belonging as it produces connections, common understanding, and empathy, specifically between members who share a common understanding of marginalization and dehumanization (Cvetkovich, 2003: 38). Warner describes how the circulation of reflections and feelings produces what he calls the "public" and "counter-public," which are organized entities that gather on the basis of common recognition, engagement, and interaction with the content (Warner, 2002: 12). The public turns to be taking part in constructing and circulating the new uprising queer identity.

Demarginalizing the marginalized within their own community

26 Ghassan Moussawi (2018) argues that access to queer circles, spaces, and establishments is governed by exclusions based on class privileges, gender normativity, education privileges, and cultural capital (fluency in English or French) (Moussawi, 2018). Building on Chun's "Homophily" theory, I argue that the medium (Instagram) not only minimize such differences as the connections and the interactions are mostly

based on queer subjectivity and gender identity, but also erases additional limitations such as geographic locations, the fear of being outed or seen in specific locations, and cultural capital as the posts are written in Arabic and English.

27 Marginalizing the other within the community is also tackled within the content of the posts as they defy what Tom Roach calls the "ugly truth" of effemenophobia, racism, sexism, patriarchal masculinity, and classism that dominates queer communities (Roach, 2015).

Figure 2. - Nezel el Samak (*Artqueerhabibi*, 2019).

28 Gay men remain occupied with traditional notions of masculinity to "pass" as "normal" males while expressing negative attitudes towards effeminate behaviors in other gay males. To be desired, the body must be inscribed within the heteronormative code or what Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990: 151) of masculinity or as repeatedly expressed on dating websites and applications: "straight-acting/non-feminine" (Clarkson, 2008).

29 In his ethnographic analysis of the queer community in Beirut, Sofian Merabet (2014) analyzes what he refers to as the "homosexual homophobia" that is practiced towards effeminate men and transsexual women inside gay places (Merabet, 2014). Ghassan Moussawi also speaks of isolation that non-cis-males experience since being seen with a feminine body means being "dragged out" of the closet (Moussawi, 2020).

30 *Artqueerhabibi* challenges this gender normative understanding breaking free from masculine toxic conceptualization of the male body through posts that celebrate the male femininity. Cross-dressing, male in a voguing position, male belly dancing, drag queens, and travesties are all illustrated, creating spaces for the followers to safely express emotional and embodiment vulnerability beyond the bounds of hegemony. It is mirroring a daily internal struggle that queer Arabs continue to live with as they

constantly practice "masculinity consciousness," ensuring that they pass as "straight-looking men." The fair presentation of everyone, including the most stigmatized and marginalized bodies within their community, projects a regeneration of a community that is free from exclusions. Warner writes: "only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human" (Warner, 1999: 31).

31 I read the posts as an open invitation to rethink the impact of masculine hegemony and evaluate the self while engaging the followers with an embodiment of unconstrained masculinity that deconstructs the source of toxic expression that limits them.

32 The positive comments posted on such pictures reflect the slipping of power (Kimmel, 2012) from the hands of hegemony and traditional notions of masculinity towards more liberal and unrestricted gender performances. The comments reflect potential new dynamics where cis-males and effeminate men are not relating anymore to each other within the term of dominant versus subordinate. On the contrary, the account reflects the construction of a holistic approach of masculinity that embraces a more affirming sense of self and embodies functional masculinity that operates outside the bounds of hegemony.

33 Deconstructing classism is also tackled within the posts. As I mentioned above, Ghassan Moussawi presents the importance of social classes in shaping access and experiences in queer spaces and circles. Some illustrations in the account mess up the long history of Lebanese classism and class demarcation. Here love and desire are what matters. The inter-class queer encounter becomes the norm. In one of the posts, a man is kissing a taxi driver, a "low-class" profession within the Lebanese socio-economical standers. Another post shows a man bringing a flower to his same-sex lover that sells Falafel, traditional food known as the "dish of the poor." The posts are undoing classism, demolishing the continuous "White middle-class" understanding of queerness that dismisses the working-class experiences.

Takweer

34 *Takweer* is another Instagram account that was created on the the 11th of September 2019. In Arabic, Takweer means to make something spherical, as a new version of the spherical world that we live in. It also sounds the same as the English word "queer." With 5.247 followers and 67 posts, as of May 2021, the owner describes it as a place to explore queer narratives in Arab history and popular culture. The posts document various practices and gender identities, uncovering queer historical figures, artists who defied gender norms, non-normative cultural habits, and homosexual TV and movie characters across centuries.

35 Posts of Effeminacy, non-binary, Transsexuality, Drag queens, cross-dressing, and homoerotics are all displayed. In an interview with Huck magazine, Marwan Kaabour, the founder of the account, stated that the main motive behind the account is to uncover queer Arabic experiences of those who came before us "shedding light on the pre-colonial narratives, so we can feel that our existence is a continuity of one that stretches way back" (Huck magazine, 2021).

36 On the contrary to the previous account, *Takweer* takes us on a journey to the past as it relies on archiving strategies to bring queer rhetoric forward. Jack Halberstam

describes the importance of queer archiving writing: "Archive is not simply a repository, it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity" (Halberstam, 2005: 169–170). For Foucault, an archive is not just a material site filled with documents but as a space of enunciation (Foucault, 1972). To archive is to revive wiped realities that had been intentionally erased either by the European colonial past (El- Rouyaheb, 2005) or due to the rise of Islamist fundamentalism[1] (Dalacoura, 2014). The images and videos posted turn to be "evidence of existence" of the long queer history and customary practices within the Arab culture. They counter the narratives around queer "alienated" origins and the claim that queerness is either a Western product imported to the Arab World to destroy Arab moral values (Whitaker, 2006; Habibi, 2007; Dalacoura, 2014; Amer, 2012), or even a new form of cultural colonization where gays are intruders and victims of Western Imperialism (Massad, 2007).

37 On September 24th, 2007, in a questions/answers session at Colombia University, the previous Iranian president Ahmadi Najad stated: "In Iran, we do not have homosexuals like in your country… In Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I do not know who told you we have it" (Goldman, 2009).

38 The anthropologist Samar Habib explains the denial of the homosexual presence in the Arab World as it comes from colonial imposition in which Arabs define themselves through opposing the West. "So if the oppressor (the West) has gays, then we do not have them. If they do not execute, we do. That is how we define ourselves through the relations of the other" (Salma, Nayrouz, & Ghaida Moussa, 2011: 10).

39 The posts "as evidence" also counter the Western "Orientalist" discourse (Said, 1978) of the "Homophobic Muslim" narratives depicting the Arab race as inherently homophobic and sexist and Muslims as direct threads to sexual freedoms. The evidences drop the Western conclusions that present Arab queers as not "queer enough" as they do not conform to the neoliberal codes of modern queerness, as well as their fate of living in continuous fear and oppression.

40 *Takweer* proves the opposite. In one of the posts, the creator presents a collection of pictures titled "The Khawal Dancers," documenting the "*Khawalat*" or the male transvestite dancers who took part, until the late 1950s, in popular festivals and celebrations besides being a standard character in many films. Garay Menicucci coded their presence as "to imply the existence of a homosexual subculture or transgressive sexuality in general… They also often possess uncanny wit, a cynical sense of pragmatic realism, and personal integrity lacking in the conventional heterosexual characters that are surrounding them" (Menicucci, 1998).

41 Portraying Arab local queer figures that the audience can culturally relate to in such a positive context leaves its impact on the viewer's self-perception. Kivel and Kleiber explain how queer individuals rely on various media sources to learn about their identity by searching for individuals to whom they can relate (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Studies also showed how non-heterosexuals who model after successful media figures/ role models they share similarities with, develop a stronger sense of self-efficiency (Ochman, 1996; Cheung & Yue, 2003; Hammack, 2005; Lockwood, 2006).

42 One of the remarkable posts the account presents are pictures from "Miss Hanafi" (1954), an old black and white Egyptian comedy movie inspired by the story of the first Egyptian transsexuals. *Hanafi*, the main character, portrays a misogynist male authority controlling every aspect of his fiance's life. Before the wedding, he was admitted to the

hospital where accidentally, the doctors perform a "sex reassignment surgery," turning him into a female character named *Fifi*. The post comments on the movie writing:

> The film showed a relatively progressive view of gender reassignment, as it did not criminalize it or poke fun at it, but rather show it as a "normal" issue, and was treated as such by the film characters. In a very insightful dialogue in the film, the x fiancé reminds Fifi: There is no shame in a man becoming a woman or a woman becoming a man. The shame is men's selfishness, how they deprive girls of education and turn their life into the prison that we live in (*Takweer*, 2021).

43 These progressive archived materials are to conceived as essentials that secure meanings of the past (Derrida,1995) and as sites of knowledge and power that produce historical truths (Foucault, 1972).

44 However, archives not only narrate the past but also inform the present as the content comes back to life through discussions and responses. For Derrida, Archives are sites to "question of the future itself, the question of a response, of promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida, 1995: 37).

45 Arab queer histories are the starting point for any future construction of local queer identities away from the Euro-American homonormative understanding of gender, queer liberation, and modernity. Pierre Bourdieu explains how history hunts us to become "inscribed in our dispositions: how we see ourselves and the extent we can envision alternative outcomes to those histories" (Bourdieu, 1990: 57); in other words, he suggests that our habitus/bodies are formed through the ways we embody history. (Bourdieu, 1990)

Conclusion

46 Both *Artqueerhabibi* and *Takweer* contribute to the construction of the new Lebanese queer identity moving the discourse from the private to the public sphere while raising a collective and wider sense for the "possibilities of being." The representation that they suggest is rooted within the Lebanese local cultural realities and specificities breaking free from both the Western and global understanding of gender and the Western orientalist discourse that depicts the Arabic world as a place of total oppression.

47 The representation is complicating the understanding of identities that usually rest on the binaries of "in the closet" vs. "outside the closet," "out" vs. "oppressed," and pride vs. shame. The work created by queers to other queers who share the same struggle establishes a heteroglossic narrative that counters the normative discourse projecting a queer common futurist perspective.

48 Taking both Michael Warner's (2002) analysis of community constructions through circulating discourse and Wendy Chun's "Homophily" where similarities bring connections, as a focus of my analysis, I argued that the discussions, emotions, and the reactions the posts raise are producing an organized entity that shares new meanings, beliefs, and self-understanding. The uprising queer politics turn with time and repetition to form new normalities. What started as an artistic attempt had turned to be a site of collective activism and community building.

49   By examining Artqueerhabibi's posts, I argued that the account is reorienting the public spaces by giving them new shapes and meanings that are packed with familiarities and safety (Ahmed, 2006). They end the long history of hiding and

escaping their ender realities while reimagining the city away from nostalgia, sadness, loss, and lust. The new realities are reversing the traditional queer immigration where queer Arabs are now moving towards their cities.

50 The content of the posts is also touching upon the collective being as a community that is free from oppression, hierarchies, and power dynamics based on an obsession with masculine normative performances and social classes that respectively control the accesses to queer circles and places. *Artqueerhabibi* resists the pressure to conform to normative and social class performances by empowering and celebrating effeminacy and anti-classism.

51 With *Takweer* I shed light on how archiving is reopening discussion around queer Arab history, leaving its impact on both the present and the future. The posts offer a new "structure of feelings" (Williams, 1977) in a crucial moment of queer becoming. They are the evidence of the long Arabic queer history challenging both local claims about the foreign origin of homosexuality and the Western assertions in which they conceive Arab/Muslims as not queer enough. Building on Derrida and Bourdieu, I also showed how reinterpreting the past that hunts shape the queer future embodiment.

52 In conclusion, the production of queer love and the archiving of queer historical power and success replace the long traditional "generative of failure" (Halberstam, 2005) by connecting, achieving, and reproducing power.

53 Both accounts move beyond "the promises of happiness" (Ahmed, 2010) to imagine the possibilities of being. The mess that they create is discomforting heteronormativity constituting a new reading for potential queer Arab identity and community building.

54 As this paper was mainly interested in the production of Lebanese queer identity through Instagram's posts, It remains important for future studies to investigate the reception within the Lebanese cultural context and between queer members paying more considerable attention to the subjectivities produced by the followers, mainly their comments and reactions on the posts.

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NOTES

1. Hamas Islamic resistance movement in Palestine, Al- Qaeda, the Egyptian Islamic Brothers, and the Iranian Islamic Revolution are the most famous Islamic fundamentalist groups formed in the 1970s and 1980s.

ABSTRACTS

Social media platforms have become an important arena for sexual politics equipping queers with safe alternative spaces while pushing their visibility and connectivity forward. My article examines two Lebanese queer Instagram accounts analyzing their contribution to the current construction of Lebanese queer identity. I examine how the tactic employed by each account is generating queer realities, meaning, and embodiment. While "Artqueerhabibi," use the medium of comics, to reimagine a different queer reality creating a sense of belonging to the uprising community, "Takweer" archive queer Arab history and popular culture. The archive not only revives the long wiped queer history but also informs both the present and the future as the content comes back to life through discussions and responses.

Queer here is used both as an identity and an adjective to describe how both accounts are unsettling the normative understanding of sexuality and gender expression, besides raising new meanings and possibilities for local sexual politics.

Les réseaux sociaux sont devenus une arène importante pour la politique sexuelle. Ils offrent aux homosexuels des espaces alternatifs sûrs tout en faisant évoluer les visibilités et les connectivités. Cet article étudie deux comptes Instagram homosexuels libanais. Il analyse leur contribution à la construction récente d'une identité libanaise queer. Cette étude vise à montrer comment la stratégie employée par chaque compte génère des réalités queer et d'autres significations et incarnations queer. Tandis que le compte « Artqueerhabibi » utilise la bande dessinée comme moyen d'imaginer une nouvelle perception et projection queer dans l'avenir, le « Takweer » archive l'histoire du monde arabe à travers la documentation, l'art et la culture populaire. Ces archives ne font pas seulement revivre l'histoire de l'homosexualité, mais informent également le présent et l'avenir, car le contenu revient à la vie concrète grâce aux discussions et aux réponses.

Le terme « queer » utilisé ici renvoie à la fois à une identité et à un adjectif pour décrire comment les comptes Instagram perturbent la compréhension normative entre la sexualité et l'expression de genre pour soulever de nouvelles significations et possibilités pour la politique sexuelle locale.

INDEX

Keywords: queers, Instagram, gender representation, Lebanon, identity
Mots-clés: queers, Instagram, représentation du genre, Liban, identité

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4. Chapter 4:

Mi Pluma es Politica: apropiaciones no occidentales del Drag

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Mi pluma es política: apropiaciones no occidentales del **drag**

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Resumen

En este capítulo, revisamos la primera y única escena Drag en ascenso en el mundo árabe, analizando las posibilidades que este arte está generando tanto para los artistas como para la comunidad queer libanesa. Basándonos en las narrativas de Judith Butler (1990) sobre el poder subversivo de lo drag, y después de entrevistar a cuatro drag queens en activo, argumentamos que el drag rompe lo binario al invitar a los artistas y al público a un viaje de autodescubrimiento interno que da como resultado la formación de identidades más fluidas fuera de la heteronomatividad. También sostenemos que los artistas drag actúan como una poderosa herramienta política que impulsa la visibilidad queer y el futuro.

Introducción

El 12 de enero de 2020, Beirut fue testigo de la segunda edición de "Beirut Grand Ball", donde alrededor de 30 artistas *drag* compitieron en cuatro categorías frente a un jurado y un numeroso público, que superó el aforo de la sala. El arte *drag* recién despegado se había movido rápidamente a la vanguardia de la escena queer de Beirut, atrayendo la atención de medios locales e internacionales. Sasha Velour, la famosa reina estadounidense *Next Drag Superstar*, expresó durante su espectáculo en la capital libanesa su asombro por las intrépidas, creativas e innovadoras *drag queens* y activistas que están empujando los límites (Revista Plastik, 2019).

El *drag* ha sido descrito como una de las mejores herramientas desestabilizadoras para la identidad de género, ya que hace visible su carácter performativo e imitativo (Butler, 1990; Garber, 2012; Halberstam, 1998; Lorber, 1994; Muñoz, 1999). En este capítulo visitamos la primera y - de momento - única comunidad de *drag queens* que emerge en el mundo árabe, analizando las posibilidades que crea ese arte tanto para los artistas como para la comunidad *queer*. Examinamos cómo las *drag queens* viven y experimentan su género, analizamos la transgresión de las categorías de género y del binarismo normativo a través de sus prácticas y recogemos las experiencias de empoderamiento a través de ese arte.

Sin embargo, teniendo en cuenta que el *drag* - que surgió como un símbolo de la liberación gay - resultó ser controvertido dentro de los círculos feministas que lo criticaron por perpetuar el binarismo de género al replicar la imagen hegemónica de la (hiper)feminidad que complace el deseo patriarcal y la mirada masculina (Bridges, 2010; Dolan, 1985; Gange y Tewksbury, 1998; Mulvey, 1975; Schacht, 1998, 2000), nos vemos obligadas a tomar una posición en el debate sobre lo que significa empoderamiento de género a través de lo *drag*. Con este capítulo queremos añadir una nueva capa a este debate al estar más atentas a la interacción entre diferentes realidades raciales y culturales, sin olvidar las tensiones entre la comercialización y estetización televisiva de lo *drag* en programas populares como "RuPaul's Drag Race" y la dimensión subpolítica que tienen los diversos espacios *drag*, que no son un mero entretenimiento sino que construyen identidades que, desde la centralidad del cuerpo, trascienden lo personal y elevan el debate a lo político (Beck, 1998).

Si bien el malestar feminista sobre la hiperfeminidad en las performance *drag* es razonable, y muchas *drag queens* tienen un trabajo ingente por hacer en este aspecto, sostenemos que en el caso del mundo árabe - lejos de occidente - ese debate toma otra dirección, ya que las preguntas que surgen son: ¿La impersonación de mujeres realizada por *drag queens* empodera a las mujeres árabes al traer de vuelta sus voces en una sociedad que las oprime continuamente? ¿Cómo la celebración del cuerpo y el deseo femininos en el escenario crea normas de género progresistas que liberan - también - a las mujeres de todas las restricciones patriarcales en un lugar donde el sexo prematrimonial puede costarles la vida a las mujeres?

Aunque este capítulo no pretende dar respuesta a las preguntas anteriores, las consideramos un punto de partida de nuestro análisis al desmarcarse del supuesto de que el género es un concepto universal. Así, asociamos el género y la sexualidad con el espacio, la raza, la salud, la educación, el empleo, la religión, la inmigración y las relaciones de poder que dan forma única a las identidades (de género) en cada lugar (Moussawi & Vidal- Ortiz, 2020) y

adoptamos una perspectiva crítica respecto a las miradas masculina (Mulvey, 1975) e imperial (Kaplan, 2000) con las que, a menudo se trata este fenómeno, tanto desde la representación como desde la academia.

Las personas que hemos entrevistado en el marco de nuestra investigación defienden su autoidentificación como hombres (gays) que buscan ampliar la definición de masculinidad, sin interés en ser o representar mujeres, por lo que preferimos atender al significado que las personas dan a sus propias exhibiciones de género, entendiendo que muchas de ellas no tienen un destino predeterminado o una forma final unívoca sino que son fruto de una configuración en los escenarios y más allá. *Zuhal*, uno de nuestros interlocutores *drag*, expresó su identidad de esta manera: "No quiero ser mujer, solo soy una *drag queen*. Vivo como una persona no binaria, creando personajes libres de género que se liberan de cualquier restricción social y opresiva" (entrevista con *Zuhal*, junio 2021).

Por lo tanto, este capítulo se basa en la propuesta de Barrett (1995) de percibir lo *drag* no como el amor por la feminidad, sino como el deseo de liberarse de los binarismos de género (Barrett, 1995). Además, creemos firmemente que en un lugar como el Líbano y el mundo árabe en general, donde tanto las mujeres como los homosexuales sufren todo tipo de discriminaciones, la prioridad sigue siendo reemplazar la guerra fronteriza entre minorías de género (Halberstam, 1998) por una alianza para derribar los pilares del patriarcado que oprime a todo el mundo.

Por ello, en este trabajo, revisamos los escritos de Butler sobre el *drag*, analizando cómo la comunidad libanesa *drag* está experimentando su poder subversivo (Butler, 1990). Argumentamos que el *drag* cuestiona los binarismos heteronormativos a través de la apertura de nuevas mezclas y autodescubrimientos que resultan en un concepto más fluido de la identidad de género. Y mostramos cómo las reinas se están apoyando en su arte como una herramienta de resistencia para empoderar a la comunidad queer mientras apuntan a un futuro más próspero.

Finalmente, aunque el *drag* hace referencia a la mezcla de géneros, no debe entrar en conflicto con el colectivo transgénero/transexual o el travestismo, ya que cada uno tiene definiciones de identidad distintas (Fournet, Forsyth y Schramm, 1988; Namaste, 2000), a la vez que podemos tener en cuenta todo aquello que tienen en común para aunar su sentido y sus luchas (Platero, Rosón y Ortega, 2017). En todo caso, lo *drag* juega con el género abriendo las posibilidades de ser y estar fuera del estricto paradigma normativo heterosexual (Berkowitz et al., 2007), sea en el marco de un evento concreto y puntual, sea en un contexto desfavorable y opresivo (Platero, Rosón y Ortega, 2017). Recoger las voces de *drags* libaneses nos ha permitido acercarnos a una visión no occidental de lo *drag*, así como captar el sentido de unas prácticas poco visibles,

que habitualmente se leen desde el entretenimiento, el espectáculo o lo estético, y que, sin embargo, tienen una dimensión identitaria y política trascendental.

El drag en el Líbano

Como el *drag* se ha realizado de manera diferente a lo largo del tiempo y la geografía (Bakshi, 2004; Senselick, 2000; Swarr, 2004), nos concentramos en el *drag* en el Líbano, dividiéndolo en tres fases. La primera fase se remonta a hace un par de décadas, por sus raíces en la celebración ortodoxa cristiana de Santa Bárbara[1] (4 de diciembre). Al igual que en el *Halloween* occidental, todos - y principalmente las personas *queer* - tenían una oportunidad anual única de vestirse libremente, superando las limitaciones sociales. Aunque los *queers* en ese entonces no lo denominaban como un arte *drag*, sí vieron una oportunidad de enfatizar su lado femenino a través del travestismo como el género opuesto, sin ser blanco de acoso y homofobia.

La segunda fase comenzó con el personaje legendario de Bassam Fghali, quien llevó el *drag* a los principales medios de comunicación durante la década de 1990. Fghali, que hoy se considera la principal fuente de inspiración para muchos *drags* locales, entre otros para quienes han participado en esta investigación, era conocido principalmente por hacerse pasar por famosas y crear sus propios personajes femeninos representando los estereotipos libaneses. A pesar de su apariencia, personajes controvertidos y discursos no normativos, Fghali logró su propio programa de televisión diario durante el mes sagrado del Ramadán, un mes en el que las estaciones de televisión suelen elegir cuidadosamente el contenido de su programación para que se adapte bien a la moral del mes sagrado.

La tercera y actual fase del *drag* libanés comenzó con la creciente popularidad del programa "RuPaul's Drag Race", que influyó en toda la escena *drag* mundial (Moore, 2013). El espectáculo introdujo a muchos artistas jóvenes en el mundo del *drag* y sus referencias tal y como se conciben en Occidente, como la cultura del baile de salón.

"RuPaul's Drag Race" se ha convertido en un fenómeno cultural *queer* que ha llevado la escena *drag* al mainstream. En España conoció su primera edición en mayo 2021 bajo el nombre de "Drag Race España". Aunque "RuPaul's Drag Race" definitivamente está contribuyendo a la visibilidad y aceptación *queer* en todo el mundo, fue criticado por muchos por limitar la representación al glamour hiperfeminino, insinuando la necesidad de hacerse pasar por una mujer cis y rechazar cualquier forma de actuación andrógina. En cuanto a su vertiente comercial, Feldman y Hakim hablan de cómo el programa transformó la naturaleza subversiva de lo *drag* y su relación ambivalente

con el capitalismo como negocio de las industrias culturales (Feldman y Hakim, 2020).

Sea como sea, los *drags* libaneses modelan la forma de sus espectáculos en base a "RuPaul Drag Race", aunque distanciándose del contenido. Debido a la ubicación geográfica, las leyes libanesas y la realidad cultural, han terminado identificándose con la definición tradicional *underground* de *drag*, donde nacen los espectáculos para crear espacios alternativos de expresión, seguridad y creatividad, y para sentirse parte de una comunidad alternativa (Moore, 2013).

Hoy, navegando por Instagram, podemos detectar la existencia de al menos treinta jóvenes *drag queens* libaneses, y cada año se unen más. Actúan principalmente en lugares *queer* y *queer-friendly* o en fiestas privadas.

Sin embargo, una escena *drag* dinámica y en auge no significa una ruta fácil para los artistas. Por el contrario, las reinas, como todo cuerpo *queer* y no normativo tanto en el mundo occidental como en el mundo árabe, enfrentan desafíos diarios para escapar de la vigilancia patriarcal y heterosexual y crear espacios seguros. Aquellos que no encarnan su género siguiendo los cánones establecidos no sólo son empujados directamente al margen, sino que experimentan diferentes tipos de acoso, opresión e incluso ataques homófobos (Makarem, 2011; Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2020; Whitaker, 2006).

Conceptualizando el género en Beirut

Para comprender la experiencia vivida por nuestros participantes, tenemos que profundizar en las políticas sexuales en el Líbano. Un estudio reciente mostró que el 85% de los libaneses se oponen a la homosexualidad (Pew Research Center, 2020), en un país donde la atracción por personas del mismo sexo todavía se considera una desviación, enfermedad o corrupción moral. En la invitación al *Grand Ball* de Beirut en enero 2020, los organizadores escribieron: "Sé tú mismo, sé libre . . . Deja tu marca en la pasarela . . . No se permiten desnudos ni referencias o accesorios religiosos" (Lebtividad, 2020). La normativa, que se leyó en voz alta al inicio del evento, recordando a la audiencia que tomar fotografías estaba estrictamente prohibido, fue establecida precisamente para garantizar la seguridad de los participantes y de la audiencia, manteniéndolos alejados de la mirada del público y evitando así la represión de las poderosas instituciones religiosas. Tal preocupación refleja la incertidumbre y las realidades contradictorias que vive la comunidad LGBTQ+ en un contexto opresivo.

A nivel institucional, el artículo 534 del código penal libanés castiga los actos sexuales que se consideran contrarios a la naturaleza con hasta un año de prisión.

Aunque se cuenta con varias sentencias de los tribunales libaneses que fallaron a favor de las libertades y la igualdad sexuales (Human Rights Watch, 2018), el Estado aún se basa en ese artículo para reprimir brutalmente los espacios y eventos *queer*, limitando la presencia y la resistencia *queer* (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

La existencia de espacios seguros para el colectivo LGBTQ+ en el Líbano ha sido malinterpretada por los medios internacionales, que etiquetaron Beirut como el paraíso árabe gay (Healy, 2009). Este discurso neocolonial, orientalista (Said, 1978) e imperial (Kaplan, 2000), no solo sirve para difundir las narrativas del gobierno sobre el excepcionalismo de Beirut (Puar, 2013), sino que invisibiliza completamente la lucha diaria que experimentan los *queer* libaneses (Moussawi, 2013). Como la modernidad se define por la libertad sexual (Butler, 2010), siendo la visibilidad gay un indicador esencial de las libertades en una sociedad (Manalansan, 1995; Dugan, 2002; Butler, 2010), el gobierno libanés adoptó tal narrativa publicitando el país como un lugar de libertad sexual absoluta en comparación con el entorno tradicional - e islámico - para atraer inversión extranjera y reconstruir el país después de la guerra civil que duró 15 años (Masri, 2010; Merabet, 2006; Moussawi, 2018).

Sin embargo, en la práctica, la tolerancia queer en el Líbano se limita a lo que sirve a la imagen general y al turismo occidental, reprimiendo todo lo que representa un peligro real para el sistema patriarcal existente[2] (Merabet, 2006).

A pesar de las dificultades, y como comentábamos en el apartado anterior, hay una comunidad drag en Líbano que se identifica con la definición tradicional *underground* de *drag*, que se apropia de lo comercial para trascenderlo y que está consolidando espacios seguros en los que expresar el talento.

Metodología

Inicialmente, el objetivo para este capítulo era asistir a los espectáculos *drag* analizando sus contenidos, realizar entrevistas en directo con las reinas, y documentar la transformación que tiene lugar detrás del escenario. Sin embargo, debido a la pandemia del Covid-19 y las restricciones de movilidad, decidimos realizar las entrevistas de manera virtual y examinar el contenido de sus cuentas de Instagram. A medida que la línea que separa el mundo virtual del físico se ha vuelto borrosa, fusionando lo online con la identidad cotidiana (Fox, 2007), examinar la presencia de las reinas en las redes sociales era la mejor alternativa a la observación directa.

Con el cierre de todos los locales de actuación, Instagram se convirtió en la única plataforma para expresiones *drag* durante la pandemia. Además, Instagram juega un papel fundamental en acercar el *drag* de la escena *underground* al público en general, haciéndolo visible y facilitando la comunicación

y la reflexión entre las reinas y su audiencia. Así pues, leemos las publicaciones como un ejercicio reflexivo de autorrepresentación, una decisión consciente tomada por las reinas con respecto a cómo quieren ser percibidas.

Realizamos entrevistas en profundidad con cuatro *drag queens* de entre 24 y 28 años para conocer cómo dan sentido a sus prácticas y explorar la influencia del *drag* en la comprensión tanto individual como colectiva de las identidades de género, y las posibilidades de impulsar las políticas y los derechos *queer* en la agenda política de la sociedad libanesa.

El proceso de selección se hizo después de 15 días de seguimiento intensivo y exhaustivo de diferentes cuentas de Instagram de *drags*, buscando las reinas más activas, ya sea a través de publicaciones, *stories*, en vivo o participando en paneles y mesas redondas online. También nos aseguramos que las reinas seleccionadas actuaban en un escenario al menos dos veces al mes en la época anterior a la pandemia.

Antes de las entrevistas, recopilamos datos básicos de cada cuenta y adaptamos nuestras preguntas en consecuencia. Sin embargo, siempre se plantearon las mismas preguntas principales sobre su relación con la masculinidad y la feminidad.

Las entrevistas, que oscilaron entre 45 y 80 minutos, se dividieron en tres secciones principales: la autopercepción, lo *drag* en el contexto libanés, y la relación tanto con la comunidad *queer* como con el mundo heterosexual. Todas las entrevistas comenzaron preguntando por sus pronombres para dirigirse correctamente a las *reinas*. De las cuatro *drag queens* entrevistadas, solo Zuhal será referido como él, tanto dentro como fuera de *drag*, ya que mencionó en la conversación que se percibe a sí mismo y a su personaje de *drag* como hombre.

Por razones de credibilidad, y teniendo en cuenta nuestra posición fuera de la escena *drag queen*, preguntamos al final de cada entrevista si había alguna pregunta relevante que no hicimos, si había algún comentario que les gustaría añadir, y cómo vivieron la entrevista.

Romper el binarismo

"El drag rechaza todo lo que la sociedad te ha enseñado. ¡Estamos desaprendiendo conceptos que aprendimos a los cinco años!"

(Sultana, 24 años, 2021)

En la misma línea que McCall y Simmons (1966) cuando afirman que los roles se improvisan principalmente para satisfacer las necesidades del individuo en un momento dado, las personas entrevistadas manifiestan que su necesidad y curiosidad por expresar su lado femenino fue el motivo principal

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que las impulsó a hacer *drag*. Sin embargo, enseguida se dieron cuenta de que la masculinidad y la feminidad no están ni claramente separadas ni funcionan a través de la dinámica de los opuestos. Sus personajes *drag,* que comenzaron como una réplica de los estereotipos de género al suscribirse a la (hiper) feminidad hegemónica, se convirtieron rápidamente en una herramienta para buscar una definición única de sí mismos. El *drag* los había guiado en un viaje interno de género y en su autodescubrimiento fuera de lo normativo y los binarismos de género. Un viaje que recuerda a la definición de Butler: "lo *drag* es subversivo en la medida en que refleja la estructura imitativa mediante la cual el género hegemónico se produce, disputando los reclamos de la heterosexualidad sobre la naturalidad y la originalidad" (Butler, 2011: 125; traducción propia).

Para Sultana (24 años), el *drag* aclaró muchas dudas que tenía desde la infancia:

> Solía preguntarme si tal vez era transexual. Esto se debía principalmente a un fuerte deseo de aparecer como mujer, con maquillaje y un vestido. Sin embargo, gracias al *drag* descubrí que todo esto lo podía hacer perfectamente como hombre biológico. Hoy me identifico como en algún lugar entre el género fluido y una persona no binaria (Sultana, 24)

La experiencia de Sultana expone "la ilusión de la identidad de género como una profundidad y una sustancia interior intratables. Como efecto de una performatividad sutil y políticamente impuesta, el género es un 'acto', por así decirlo, que está abierto a la escisión, la autoparodia, la autocrítica y esas exhibiciones hiperbólicas de 'lo natural' que, desde la exageración, revelan su estado fundamentalmente fantasmático." (Butler, 1990: 146–7; traducción propia)

Zuhal (26 años) al principio se esforzó por pasar por hiperfemenino, borrando las características de su cuerpo masculino al practicar el *tucking*, dibujar la raya de las cejas y usar tonos de maquillaje. Sin embargo, hoy concibe su feminidad como un lado natural de su virilidad. Debajo de uno de los videos que publicó en Instagram, Zuhal escribe:

> Este video realmente me abrió los ojos a tantas cosas que sabía pero de las que nunca me había dado cuenta, y en particular esto: soy un hombre. La gente siempre me pregunta por mi pronombre, y nunca tuve uno, pero ahora sí. Incluso cuando estoy de *drag*, soy Él. ¿Por qué? Porque los hombres pueden ser lo que quieran ser, también las mujeres y todos los demás. El concepto de masculinidad y virilidad necesita mucha reevaluación desde dentro de nuestra comunidad, más que desde fuera. El género no tiene nada que ver con la apariencia física, excepto cuando así lo decidamos. En cuanto a mí, Zuhal no es una imitadora, sino que

> es una hermosa versión teatral de Ziad, y si Ziad usa maquillaje y atuendos, aún puede ser un hombre, de la manera más auténtica … (Zuhal, 26)

El crecimiento personal que experimentan las reinas refleja la naturaleza performativa del género (Butler, 1990), donde el número de categorías sexuales es infinito (Stryker y Whittle, 2006). En su análisis de las expresiones de género en la cultura del salón de baile, Bailey (2013) argumenta que este tipo de lugares crean una gama más amplia de categorías de género y subjetividades sexuales que las que son normalmente reconocidas dentro de la matriz heterosexual y binaria. Describe las identidades como inacabadas y concibe el sexo del cuerpo como "el resultado de un proceso o actividad en curso en vez de un hecho biológico" (Bailey, 2013: 34; traducción propia). La teatralidad del *drag* ya no es un mero reflejo de la realidad (Dolan, 1985), sino un laboratorio para construir identidades de género alternativas, modelos de comportamiento y autocomprensión, evidenciando la artificialidad de la naturalización del género y la importancia de las interacciones y la aprobación social en la construcción de las autopercepciones de género (Goffman, 1979).

Eliminar el estigma alrededor de lo afeminado

Al seleccionar lo que les conviene para parecer más o menos femeninas, las reinas están deconstruyendo el rígido binarismo de género, abriendo el camino para que surjan nuevos significados y definiciones de la naturaleza del género. Están transportando el género desde el 'ser' hacia una simple herramienta que nos ayuda a acceder a varios aspectos del yo. En su perfil de Instagram, Sultana se describe a sí misma como "nacida de la falta de expresión; marinada en opresión de género y sexual; sazonada con patriarcado tóxico y acabada con una pizca de belleza". Todas las reinas entrevistadas estuvieron de acuerdo en que el *drag* les da una plataforma para probar, sentir, reflexionar y luego elegir. Para Zuhal, *drag* no tiene un libro de pautas, pero "cada reina lo experimenta de manera diferente según qué personaje, por qué y cómo actúa, y para quién".

La fluidez de género se expresa en gran medida al romper la ilusión de feminidad al presentarse a sí mismas como lo que Baker (1994) denomina "reinas radicales": reinas que adoptan "actitudes más juguetonas, casi andróginas … decididas a sacar lo mejor de ambos mundos" (Baker, 1994: 240; traducción propia).

Tanto el radicalismo como el no-binarismo se construyen sumando y restando elementos de género para crear una mirada final que contrarreste la expectativa social hegemónica. Una estrategia común para rechazar la

representación convencional del género es evitar el *tucking*, mantener la barba y el vello corporal, o incluso publicar fotos fuera de *drag*. Con motivo del día de la mujer trabajadora de 2021, Zuhal apareció en una de las publicaciones con la mitad de su rostro en *drag* con maquillaje y peluca, y la otra mitad como Ziad. Debajo, los hashtags: #boy, #girl, #male, #female, #genderfluid. Una foto que nos invita a repensar el binarismo alejándonos de la jerarquía de género. "Son mis dos lados que abrazo por igual" (Zuhal, 26).

Al principio, el público complicaba el proceso experimental, ya que esperaba de la intérprete que se hiciera pasar por una mujer femenina ciñéndose a lo esperado. Zuhal comenta: "Cuando era niño, querían que fuera más masculino; hoy, cuando soy *drag queen*, querrían que fuera más femenino". Sin embargo, la negativa de las reinas a adherirse a la expectativa normativa del género empezó a crear nuevas formalidades de mezcla de género, que con el tiempo y la repetición, comenzaron a ser reconocidas por el público. Las *drag queens* se convierten en los extraterrestres que, al entrar en contacto con ellos, hacen que "los hombres alteren su propia forma". (Slusser, 1987: 8). Narcissa (28 años) comenta: "hicimos entender al público que su género solo se construye a través de sus propias elecciones". Ella se presenta a sí misma como la única persona que controla su cuerpo. "Me niego a rendirme a cualquier limitación cultural. Mi cuerpo toma forma a través de mis sentimientos, pensamientos y creatividad" (Narcissa, 28). Así, se desarrolla una actividad política en espacios de política no tradicional, una forma subpolítica (Beck, 1998) centrada en el cuerpo y en la estética que hace compatible la exhibición y el activismo.

La plena conciencia de la naturaleza performativa de género facilita el proceso de subversión. Zuhal señala que "hoy Ziad y Zuhal están en total armonía. Si Ziad quiere dejarse crecer la barba, Zuhal no tiene ningún problema. Al contrario, mi personaje *drag* a veces me pide que me lo quede" (Zuhal, 26).

Las nuevas percepciones que se desvían de la heterosexualidad y la normatividad obligatorias también son transmitidas por la audiencia, que acaba cuestionando dichas expresiones de género. Precisamente, West y Zimmerman (1998) definen el género como una actividad producida gracias a la interacción social y en la que "En cierto sentido, desde luego, son los individuos los que 'hacen' género. Pero es un hacer situado, llevado a cabo en presencia virtual o real de otros de los que se presume que están orientados a la producción del género" (West y Zimmerman, 1998: 168; traducción propia). Finalmente, este intercambio con el público, lejos de justificar las hiperitualizaciones de la feminidad esperadas, permite entender el género en un sentido goffmaniano, una materialización no esencialista, un atributo que se

construye en la exhibición y que, por tanto, puede desnaturalizarse (Goffman, 1979).

Narcissa describe cómo el *drag* revela fantasías que ponen las cosas al revés para todos, lo que permite a la audiencia negociar la expectativa social del yo de manera vulnerable:

> Los hombres heterosexuales se excitan al besarnos, a pesar de los genitales masculinos debajo de nuestro vestido. Los chicos *gay* se acercan a nosotras reflejando su deseo de abrazar su lado femenino. Incluso las mujeres lesbianas fetichan nuestra hiperfeminidad. (Narcissa, 28)

Una de las reinas comenzó un experimento social creando un perfil para su personaje *drag* en una app de citas. Aunque mencionó claramente que era una *drag queen* masculina, la cantidad de mensajes que recibió de hombres cis-heterosexuales fue interminable. Ella comenta: "la forma en que se acercaron y me fetichizaron fue una prueba de que el género no existe en la esfera privada, lejos del ojo social". Tal replanteamiento del deseo desafía en última instancia los tópicos existentes sobre las identidades de género.

Como en el espectáculo *drag* todo es exagerado, colorido y brillante, la normatividad tiende a ser aburrida. Las reinas hablan de cómo la audiencia las sorprende continuamente con sus atuendos, reacciones y comentarios. Diva (23 años) comenta: "Sientes que la creatividad es contagiosa. La normatividad se vuelve tan aburrida que el público, incluso el heterosexual, revoca sus límites normativos". En el mismo sentido, Narcissa comenta que muchos hombres que en público constantemente juzgan su actuación en términos de masculinidad o feminidad, durante el espectáculo se expresan con mayor libertad: "Usar maquillaje y caminar 'con pluma' se convierte en lo normal".

Este tipo de estilización del cuerpo produce en los espectadores nuevos códigos más allá del estereotipo, la etiqueta y el estigma (Goffman, 1963) y efectos de género (Butler, 1990) que implican una mayor positividad con respecto a su propia masculinidad.

El **drag** *como poder*

> *"Siempre fuimos ridiculizados por nuestra 'pluma'. Ahora en el escenario estamos ridiculizando su masculinidad tóxica."*
>
> *(Diva, 23 años, 2021)*

A través del *drag*, las reinas encontraron un espacio seguro para experimentar haciendo cosas que la persona debajo de la peluca nunca se atrevería a hacer. Butler describe el poder del *drag* como: "una apropiación que busca

redefinir los términos de dominación" (Butler, 1993: 137; traducción propia). Efectivamente, nuestros interlocutores veían el *drag* como una experiencia de cambio de vida que empoderó tanto a la persona como a toda la comunidad queer. Narcissa - vocablo derivado de narcisismo - elige su nombre como un recordatorio del amor propio en una sociedad que enseña a los homosexuales a odiarse a sí mismos: "Necesitamos amarnos a nosotras mismas como primer paso, y luego podremos luchar por nuestra presencia y nuestros derechos" (Narcissa, 28). Ella describe cómo empezó a traducir sus ideas y pensamientos a través del *drag*, rompiendo el largo silencio que mantenía para mezclarse entre la sociedad. En el mismo sentido, Sultana explica que el *drag* le proporcionó por primera vez el placer de ser percibida de la manera que ella quería, al tomar el control de su cuerpo, voz y su expresión: "En el escenario transmitimos nuestros deseos, fantasías, sentimientos y esperanzas. Lo que está prohibido en el mundo exterior se celebra dentro del espectáculo" (Sultana, 24).

El hecho de que Zuhal, durante sus actuaciones, salga fuera de los límites culturalmente aceptados, independientemente del peligro y el estigma que eso conlleva, refleja el empoderamiento que le otorga el *drag*. Comenta: "Nada es más poderoso que ser uno mismo. Estamos desafiando la intersección entre el patriarcado, la religión, la cultura, la misoginia y las tradiciones" (Zuhal, 26). Cuando les preguntamos a las reinas si temían la censura o la homofobia, especialmente después de que hubieran unas cuantas redadas policiales en Beirut, nos aseguraron de que no tenían miedo y afirmaron que ahora tenían un mayor compromiso con lo que hacían. "Al contrario, ellos [los funcionarios del estado] nos tienen miedo a nosotras porque estamos sacudiendo el poder tradicional. Los queers están obteniendo pequeñas pero diferentes victorias que se irán acumulando" (Narcissa, 28).

Aunque *drag* implica la acción de transformarse en una persona diferente, nuestros interlocutores expresaron cómo su personaje *drag* se convirtió en una extensión saludable de su vida personal. Ziad reconoce a Zuhal como su mejor entrenador de vida que le enseña a defenderse: "Ziad es tímido e incapaz de defenderse, mientras que Zuhal es valiente, intrépido, extrovertido y valiente. Me guía y me anima cada vez que necesito apoyo psicológico" (Zuhal, 26). Curiosamente, Ziad describe que su personaje *drag* es más varonil que él, según la matriz social masculina. Tal afirmación responde a los conceptos anteriores que percibían el arte de *drag* como un fracaso de la masculinidad (Newton, 1979, Perkins, 1996, Tewksbury, 1994). La autorepresentación les permite romper con una imagen de patologización socialmente impuesta y aparecer como sujetos políticos ya que, lo que empieza como una disconformidad particular se convierte en una experiencia política y colectiva sin tener que renunciar a la identidad y procesos propios (Tortajada et al. 2021).

En su estudio etnográfico, Knutson y Koch (2019) identificaban el *drag* como una habilidad de afrontamiento al constatar que las incidencias de depresión y disforia de género tienden a ser más bajas entre las *drag queens* que en otras categorías de género (Knutson & Koch, 2019). Diva habla sobre cómo el contenido de su espectáculo refleja sus altibajos personales: "Funciona como una catarsis. Al representar nuestra tristeza, nos recuperamos".

El *drag* no solo es reparador, sino que también subvierte las dinámicas de poder convencionales otorgando un nuevo poder a los hombres femeninos tradicionalmente estigmatizados (Harris, 1997). Para Zuhal, "estar en *drag* te da permiso para decir lo que quieras a quien quieras, y ellos lo aceptarán y se reirán de ello" (Zuhal, 26). El *drag* pone fin al contrato social en el cual los homosexuales son reprimidos, convirtiéndolos en el centro de la mirada, ya que suben al escenario con seguridad y sin tener que disculparse. Diva comenta: "Fuimos ridiculizados por tener 'pluma'; ahora estamos ridiculizando y avergonzando la masculinidad tóxica, la homofobia y la heteronormatividad" (Diva, 23).

A través de las bromas, canciones, anécdotas y parodias, el humor actúa como una forma de resistencia que socava el poder de la heteronormatividad (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Una estrategia que parece ser efectiva ya que el estudio de Steven Schacht muestra cómo la mayoría de los hombres supuestamente heterosexuales se siente bastante intimidada por estas reinas tan 'intrépidas' (Schacht, 2004). Como "ser famoso automáticamente eleva tu estatus dentro de la comunidad gay" (Levitt et al., 2018: 8; traducción propia), los *drag* están usando sus plataformas para crear un cambio en diferentes niveles. Katie Horowitz (2013) analiza cómo el *drag* produce efectos "tan reales como actuaciones aparentemente no escenificadas: mítines políticos, intervenciones legales y protestas organizadas, por nombrar algunas" (Horowitz, 2013: 305; traducción propia).

En este sentido Sultana comenta: "Para seguir actuando con seguridad, necesitamos derechos *queer*, y para lograrlo, necesitamos solidaridad". Esta solidaridad cimienta los espacios *drag* y trans* de disidencia política, compromiso y autoafirmación (Tortajada et al. 2021), una comunidad de reconocimiento necesaria para enfrentar un contexto todavía hostil.

Tanto en sus espectáculos como en Instagram, las reinas comunican sus creencias sociales y políticas sobre género, derechos humanos y toda la situación política del país. Constatamos que su discurso está dirigido a dos públicos principales: la comunidad queer por un lado, y el mundo heterosexual por el otro. Para Diva, es crucial transferir el amor propio que ella consiguió a través de *drag* a los miembros de la comunidad: "Como todo en el mundo exterior devalúa la homosexualidad, venimos a celebrar nuestra diferencia. El

público es testigo de un ritual de festividad que celebra actuaciones no normativas" (Diva, 23).

Narcissa siempre trata de empoderar a los miembros LGBTQ+ asegurándose de que si ella, un hombre con vestido, sobrevive a la ingente cantidad de acoso y opresión, "todos pueden hacerlo siempre y cuando transmitan sus sentimientos, amándose a sí mismos y mostrando apoyo". Expresarse libremente sigue siendo uno de los objetivos principales en los espectáculos. Diva comenta: "Les pedimos que se muestren como son. Prohíbo tomar fotografías para que todos se sientan cómodos" (Diva, 23). Comunicarse en un estado de ánimo tan festivo y lleno de positividad crea una mejor cultura queer que se refleja también en el cuerpo (Butler, 1990). Warner (2002) describe cómo la circulación de reflexiones y sentimientos produce lo que él llama contrapúblicos, que son entidades organizadas en los márgenes que se reúnen en base a la autoconciencia, el reconocimiento, el compromiso y la interacción y que generan discursos propios y alternativos para cuestionar lo hegemónico. Este nuevo contenido está lleno de positividad, seguridad y optimismo. Diva afirma la importancia de "presenciar y celebrar las historias de éxito con final feliz".

Hacia una comunidad queer inclusiva

El espectáculo, entendido tanto como espacio físico como contenido, borra las fronteras, uniendo a los miembros de la comunidad. En su etnografía, Ghassan Moussawi (2018) sostiene que el acceso a círculos, espacios y establecimientos *queer* se rige hasta ahora por exclusiones basadas en privilegios de clase, normatividad de género, privilegios educativos y capital cultural - por ejemplo la fluidez en inglés o francés (Moussawi, 2018). Como el género se concibe y se naturaliza de acuerdo con la matriz heterosexual (Butler, 1990) y las convenciones sociales (Goffman, 1979), tanto la efeminofobia como la transfobia siguen teniendo una gran presencia dentro de la comunidad LGBTQ+. Los hombres gay recrean la jerarquía de poder basada en la masculinidad hegemónica a través de la valoración de lo masculino y la devaluación de lo afeminado (Connell, 1992; Merabet, 2014; Schwartzberg y Rosenberg, 1998).

Ya sea debido a la homofobia interiorizada (Schwartzberg y Rosenberg, 1998), que se puede considerar como un intento de preservar los privilegios hegemónicos masculinos (Connell, 1992), o como un acto de autoprotección, ser visto con chicos afeminados podría provocar la mirada del público con la consecuencia de atraer vergüenza, rechazo y acoso verbal y físico (Annes y Redline, 2012; Goffman, 1963; Merabet, 2014; Schwartzberg y Rosenberg,

1998). Sea como sea, los cuerpos afeminados acaban experimentando una doble forma de opresión: la homofobia generalizada y lo que Merabet (2014) denomina homofobia homosexual.

Las reinas dedican gran parte de su trabajo a desafiar lo que Roach (2015) denomina la fea realidad de la efeminofobia, el racismo, el sexismo, la masculinidad patriarcal y el clasismo que aún domina las comunidades *queer*. Sultana lamentó la muerte de Suzie, la transexual libanesa más famosa, dedicando un espectáculo a su memoria: "La comunidad había hecho la vista gorda ante su sufrimiento, cuando tenía necesidades básicas como comida, refugio y seguridad. Si no nos apoyamos entre nosotras, nadie lo hará" (Sultana, 24). En uno de sus espectáculos, Narcissa apareció con un vestido blanco luciendo las palabras 'Orgullo', 'el amor gana', 'Feminismo', 'Trans Lives Matter' y 'Queers'.

Los espectáculos también deconstruyen el clasismo. Como mencionamos antes, el acceso a lugares *queer friendly* está muy condicionado por el estatus social y económico. Dado que la entrada a los bares gay sigue estando limitada a las clases media y alta, Zuhal no quiere aumentar la entrada de 20.000 liras libanesas[3] para que su espectáculo siga siendo accesible para todos. Narcissa se niega a actuar en un lugar exclusivo: "Deben ser acogedores y estar libres de cualquier tipo de opresión de clase, género y social."

El cambio y la aceptación que las reinas están intentando plantear, proyecta una regeneración de una comunidad LGBTQ libre de exclusiones. Warner escribe: "sólo cuando esta indignidad del sexo se extiende por la sala, sin dejar a nadie fuera y, de hecho, uniendo a las personas, emerge la dignidad del ser humano" (Warner, 1999: 31; traducción propia).

Así, estos actos subpolíticos están lejos del narcisismo o el egocentrismo y combinan la estética, la búsqueda identitaria y la reclamación de derechos, tal como Beck (1998) definió la individualización: como un proceso reflexivo y solidario que rompe con las inercias mercantilistas. Los contrapúblicos que se construyen alrededor de estas prácticas *drag* tienen que ver con la libertad de expresión, la ausencia de tabús o de autocensuras, el aprendizaje, el apoyo mútuo y la creación de referentes alternativos (Tortajada, Caballero & Willem, 2020).

Además, lo *drag* lanza un mensaje para el mundo exterior heterosexual. Para Zuhal, actuar de *drag queen* es un recordatorio constante para una sociedad que intenta borrar la presencia *queer* de manera persistente: "Vivimos en una cultura que no solo niega nuestra existencia, sino que nos ve como intrusos, productos importados desde occidente o incluso adoradores de Satanás" (Zuhal, 26). La visibilidad sigue siendo crucial, ya que es "necesaria para el estatus emergente y la influencia percibida" de lo *queer* (Fuchs,

2014: 182). Narcissa describe los espectáculos como una oportunidad para que la audiencia heterosexual escuche y aprenda cómo realmente pueden apoyar a la comunidad. En su página de Instagram, compartió una publicación titulada "Cómo ser un aliado de la comunidad árabe LGBTQ+ ", en la que pide a los heterosexuales que reconozcan y usen sus privilegios para hablar abiertamente a favor de aquellos que son silenciados.

La programación del verano 2021 de Diva ya está llena, con varias bodas y despedidas de soltero. "A pesar de que obviamente nos contratan para reírse un buen rato, con el tiempo se acostumbran a nuestra presencia" (Diva, 23). Este año, Sultana estuvo en un programa de televisión en Alhurra News (febrero de 2021), hablando sobre el arte del *drag* y los obstáculos que las reinas - y cada cuerpo no-normativo - experimentan a diario:

> Debemos predicar, informar y desmentir muchos malentendidos. Los queers son tergiversados por los medios, y algunos heterosexuales tienen muchas preguntas que responder. Las historias queer solo deben ser contadas por queers (Sultana, 24)

Todo está conectado. Todo es político

Las reinas que entrevistamos afirmaron que lo *drag* es puramente político, y que todos los temas están entrelazados. Como el *drag* sigue siendo una salida para autoexpresarse, descubrimos que cada reina había elegido diferentes batallas políticas en función de su experiencia personal, sus antecedentes o intereses. Diva, que había estado insegura por sobrepeso durante muchos años, había decidido celebrar el mes del orgullo este año (2021) destacando los diferentes tamaños, formas y colores de cuerpo, e invitando a todas y todos a abrazar su cuerpo sin vergüenza. Debajo de la publicación de Instagram donde aparece desnuda, cubriendo solo sus genitales, Diva escribe:

> Durante mucho tiempo me sentí insegura por mi cuerpo, pero finalmente estoy en un lugar donde puedo decir que me siento cómoda con él sin importar su forma. O la forma que toma . . . Lo que quiero decir es que amarte a uno mismo es una de las cosas más importantes que he aprendido, y espero que todo el mundo tenga la fuerza y el apoyo que necesite para tomar el camino del amor propio y la autoaceptación . . . (Diva, 23 años)

Para Narcissa, la opresión de su lado femenino durante toda su vida tuvo un gran impacto en la creación de su personaje *drag,* que representa a mujeres intrépidas. Inspirada en personajes históricos, se divierte con joyas y ropa que desprende poder y glamour: "Las historias de las brujas, María Antonieta, Cruella, Cleopatra y todas las grandes mujeres, fueron escritas por hombres

que temen el poder de las mujeres" (Narcissa, 28). Bajo uno de sus mensajes de Instagram donde representa a la reina francesa María Antonieta, Narcissa escribe: "No puedo dejar de preguntarme, ¿era una santa o una pecadora?" Para Narcissa es extraño que la gente solo recuerde su famosa frase "que coman pasteles", pero nunca recuerde ninguna frase de su marido, el rey y el verdadero gobernador. "¿Era tan estúpida? ¿O lo suficientemente lista como para engañar a todos? Si ese es el caso, ¿los historiadores masculinos se atreven a escribir que los hombres fueron engañados por la fuerza de las mujeres?" (Narcissa, 28).

El activismo de Sultana va más allá al abordar diferentes asuntos políticos, el tema de la corrupción o las opresiones tanto en el escenario libanés como en el internacional. Durante el último conflicto palestino-israelí, publicó un video en apoyo de los derechos de los palestinos a vivir libremente y lejos de la ocupación. Sultana respondió a quienes la culpaban por ponerse del lado de los palestinos homófobos, diciendo: "Elijo continuar educando a la gente en lugar de aplaudir el *pinkwashing* que se utiliza para servir a la agenda nacional de colonización".

Finalmente, Zuhal suele dedicar los últimos 15 minutos del programa a discutir lo que está sucediendo tanto en la escena política como en la *queer*: "Cuando hay una violación, una revolución, drogas, las elecciones, la homofobia, hablamos de ello". En uno de los espectáculos a los que asistimos antes de la pandemia, Zuhal habló sobre "Molly" - una droga consumida muy frecuentemente en las comunidades LGBTQ - afirmando: "Los que venden drogas a la población queer son unos malditos homófobos". Aunque tal afirmación fue muy criticada por aquellos que creen que consumir drogas es una elección libre, Zuhal aseguró que siempre defenderá sus creencias a favor de su comunidad y de su gente.

Sus contribuciones no solo permiten trascender tanto la posición (Kaplan, 2000) como la mirada (Mulvey, 1975) masculinas sino que generan un punto de vista propio y antiimperial (Kaplan, 2000). Además, sitúan los tránsitos de género como un espacio de lucha del que toda la sociedad se beneficia.

Conclusiones

Antes de adentrarse en el mundo *drag*, y como miembro habitual del público, los espectáculos para Sultana eran el único lugar donde podía detener la cruda realidad del mundo exterior. Durante dos horas, podía ser ella misma sin la necesidad de adoptar estrategias de supervivencia o pensar en el miedo, la homofobia y la opresión. Los espectáculos eran donde la realidad se alejaba, y surgía la magia y la fantasía.

En este capítulo argumentamos que la definición tradicional que limita el *drag* a la escenificación del sexo opuesto ya no es válida, al menos en el caso de la comunidad *drag* libanesa, que presenta el *drag* como un medio de autodescubrimiento, empoderamiento de la comunidad y de uno mismo, y un herramienta política para la resistencia *queer*.

Al crear los personajes *drag*, las reinas generan nuevos cuerpos completos y válidos, proyectando la capacidad de construir/deconstruir lo que se da por sentado. También denuncian los presupuestos sobre la unión 'natural' del género con los genitales de una persona, abriendo espacios para experimentar fuera del binarismo hegemónico. Horowitz lo describe así: "El *drag* se labra un espacio donde la única identidad de género estable es aquella que se desvía de la norma" (Horowitz, 2013: 313; traducción propia).

El *drag* desmonta los mitos de la masculinidad al tiempo que deslegitima su superioridad. Los que eran concebidos como almas enfermas y traidoras de la masculinidad (Segal, 2007) ahora están al mando. Son los creadores que derrumban todos los límites abriendo las posibilidades de un ser alternativo. Su celebración de la feminidad está creando nuevas normas para ser inscritas en el cuerpo masculino, que Butler define como "un medio, o mejor aún, una página en blanco" (Butler, 1993; 130; traducción propia).

Los espectáculos *drag* son un refugio tanto para las reinas como para la comunidad queer para expresarse y experimentar de manera segura y abierta, reemplazando el largo y tradicional generador del fracaso (Halberstam, 2005) conectando, consiguiendo, experimentando y reproduciendo. De esta manera están empoderando tanto a las reinas como a la comunidad. A través de la curación de sus traumas, expresando sus miedos y necesidades, reivindican su presencia. Además están desmontando las jerarquías sociales de clase y de género, que controlaban el acceso y las interacciones entre los miembros de la comunidad.

Los espectáculos *drag* desafían la ley y la sociedad que criminaliza la homosexualidad, al llevar los viejos tabúes a la esfera pública donde las reinas son los ambajadores que construyen nuevas alianzas, desmontan mitos y defienden los derechos fundamentales.

Notas

1. La fiesta de Santa Bárbara es una celebración anual que tiene lugar el 4 de diciembre en el Líbano donde cristianos libaneses se disfrazan de diferentes personajes mientras se mueven por los pueblos simbolizando la historia de Santa Bárbara, que se disfrazó para huir de la persecución romana.
2. En 2018, el presidente del parlamento y el delegado libaneses en la asamblea parlamentaria internacional en Ginebra votaron en contra de un proyecto de ley

titulado: "El papel de los parlamentos para acabar con la discriminación en base a la orientación sexual y la identidad de género y garantizar el respeto a los derechos humanos de las personas LGBT" (The Daily Star, 2018). Más recientemente, el ministro de Relaciones Exteriores libanés se negó a firmar la declaración final de la "Conferencia Global por la Libertad de los Medios" que aborda el riesgo de los periodistas que pertenecen a comunidades vulnerables como las personas LGBT. El ministro tuiteó que no firmó por la presencia de frases que contradicen la ley libanesa (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

3. En la actual crisis económica, 20,000LP representa menos de un euro.

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5. Chapter 5:

A Movie with a Messy Ending: Mess as a Queer Tactic in Lebanese Cinema

Routledge Handbook on LGBTQI+ in West Asia and North Africa (WANA)
(Forthcoming)

A Movie with a Messy Ending: mess as a queer tactic in Lebanese Cinema

Abstract

This article is concerned with the "queer mess" that non-normative bodies create to disrupt three main pillars of Lebanese patriarchy as proposed by two contemporary Lebanese queer movies. I argue for a queer mess that transgresses the heteronormative power and the social dynamics while opening the space for non-normative bodies to exist. It is a liberating mess that favors the bodies of those who don't measure up on the homophobic, classist, poverty, and sectarianist matrix. Through the lenses of textual analysis, I present two main queer Lebanese tactics; "Disclosure of sexuality for a better and more authentic family connection", and "Disobedience" against the normative power; mainly the power of hegemonic masculinity and Lebanese sectarianism. I situate both tactics in relation to class and educational privileges as they shape each of the queer strategies.

Keywords: Queer cinema, Queer mess, Lebanon, Queer Activism, Anti-sectarianism.

Introduction

In their book "*Queer Cinema in the World*" (2016) Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt best describe queer cinema as what invites trouble (Schoonover & Rosalind, 2016). My analysis looks for these troubles in two contemporary Lebanese movies, looking at how the movies interrupt and subvert the hetero-normative social rules of being and doing in Lebanon.

My analysis is mainly informed by Martin Manalansan's theorization of "queer mess" which he defines as analytical stances that negate and resist the "cleaning up function of the normative" (Manalansan, 2015). Such a mess becomes an ontological necessity for queer bodies to survive

while opening the possibilities for "alternative ways of being" (Manalansan, 2018; 495). I trace

the creation of the disorder and the chaos that non-normative bodies create, considering mess as

a queer tactic and a resistance strategy as they refuse to be "cleaned".

Mess is defined here as a deliberate subversion of societal norms and expectations, that

challenges normative powers while generating alternative possibilities. It arises out of actions

that counter the mainstream normative ways of being and doing. This is what makes it queer.

Mess is suitable to research sexualities in Lebanon, not only because they "abounds with

messiness, contradictions and unruliness" (Allouch, 2020; 11), but also as Beirut remains the city

of Mess.

Mess is not a stranger or a newcomer to Beirut, but a persistent resident of the city. A short

walk in Beirut is enough to witness the mess of the civil war, corruption, segregation, the mess of

ongoing garbage crises, the mess of electric wires in a city that doesn't have electricity, pollution,

the mess of mobility, driving, cars, and public transportation, the absence of the peace of the

mind, the mess of the port explosion (2020), and finally the mess of the economic crises where

everything is collapsing. In his book Sami Hermez (2017) describes how the present of the

Lebanese that is full of various forms of political, social, and economic violence, and continues

to be shaped by the past civil war[3] that they keep on remembering, and the upcoming future wars

that they "obsessively" keep on imagining (Hermez, 2017). Sociologist Ghassan Moussawi

(2020) theorizes *Al-wad '* or "the situation" as an analytical tool to capture and understand the

"imminent disruption" that controls everyday life in Beirut. Moussawi presents *Al-wad'* as the

historical condition of bearing on daily life in Beirut, as well as an analytical lens to unpack the

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[3] For more information on the history and the impact of the civil war and violence on daily life in Lebanon, see: Samir Khalafs' book: Civil and uncivil violence: A History of the Internationalization of communal conflict in Lebanon (2003), and Sami Hermezs' book: War is coming: Between past and future violence in Lebanon (2017).

everyday strategies used to navigate these disruptions. He shows how LGBTQ interlocutors inhabit multiple, fluid positionalities that are always changing in relation to al-wad'. Yet, while Moussawi focuses on how non-normative bodies rely on "practices of negotiation" (Moussawi, 2020: 6) to survive *al-wad,* in this article, I trace how non-normative bodies depart from a stance of reacting to their hostile environment to assuming a more resilient position through transgressing the normative conventions through the mess that they create. Here, I want to present the idea of "Queering *al- wad'*" as a queer tactic in Beirut. It means to mess with the already messy situation. Messing it more not to make things clean and stable but to upset the unitary normative effects of the usual mess. My argument is, as the messy *al- wad'* normalize homophobia, sectarianism, and oppression, non-normative queer bodies need to mess up the already established normalized mess. In other words, what is normally messy for some, needs more mess for non-normative bodies to liberate and crave their queer existence. I present messing with the mess within the Lebanese context, as a queer rebellious local tactic, where it signals the shift of moving from passively oppressed to actively challenging the oppressor and its messy order of things. The queer mess here becomes an aesthetic, creative, and inventive tactic that the marginalized bodies project to refuse and resist the normalization of the messy, homophobic, and violent *al-wad'*.

Throughout the article, Queer is summoned to accurately index the moments where non-normative bodies create an irritation that disrupts the coherence of normative moods while opening spaces for the "transformational work" to begin. Queer mess becomes what disconnects and de-assimilates with normativity, while fabulously allowing non-normative bodies to connect with their authentic self in their fight to exist. My analysis shows how mess becomes a tactic to challenge, but also to liberate the self from the fear and terror that traditionally escorts non-

normative bodies. The central question becomes: How the protagonist in each movie messes things up for other characters, and in the mind of the audience as they do the usual?

To understand the depiction of the "queer mess", I employ both content and textual readings. I choose the movies as they summon troubles while unfolding undesirable bodies. They provoke many of us as they awaken our insecurities, as we view nudity, and as they "fuckup" with the sanctity of death. They challenge us by departing from what is normative in the local Lebanese sense, but also from Wester's conceptualizing of queerness as they dismiss the ideology of identity politics, as well as pride and closet narratives. The first movie I examine is "*Ghurfat li-rajul"* or *"A Room for a Man*" (2017) directed by *Anthony Chidiac*, while the second is "*Shahīd" Martyr* (2017) directed by *Mazen Khaled* (2017). I put these two movies in conversation as they cast a different narrative, complicating the mono-universal story of queerness, but most importantly as they project a contrast class experience and educational privileges.

The mess here, as identity politics, is not static but is shaped by class. Antje Schuhmann (2014) describes how the "intersections of privileges organized around gender, race, class, and sexuality are reflected in our commitment to change and our complicity with the status quo" (Schuhmann, 2014: 94). Hence, Class and education privileges figure the counter of my thinking as I argue that the mess suggested in each movie is shaped by the class reality of the protagonist. Keeping this in mind prevents me from falling in comparing strategies, overlooking who looks "queerer" or "heroic", mainly according to the Euro- American standards, while invalidating the experiences of the unprivileged working class keeping them on the margins. Thinking about the role of class, allows me to consider the experience of those "who do not "measure up," who don't exist under the gay radar, or who are... [portrayed as] recalcitrant subjects" (Manalansan,

2018; 493). Thus, I don't compare or contrast both movies nor do I want to evaluate whose tactic is more queer.

In the first part of my analysis, and through focusing on the first movie "*A Room For A Man*", I analyze how the protagonist messes up the family setting by bringing his sexuality to the front. I argue that Anthony's disclosure is not a form of identity work, but a messy queer tactic to authentically exist and connect with the family. Next, through mainly focusing on the second movie *Martyr,* I analyze "Disobedience" as a second queer tactic. I trace the disobedience that messes with two main pillars of Lebanese patriarchy and forces that oppress non-normative bodies in Lebanon: transgressing hegemonic masculinity, and both sectarianism and the control of the sect over non-normative bodies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that following Gilles Deleuze's (1989) narratives of "Fabulation" as the ability of cinema to fabricate rather than just reflect reality, and inspired by the work of Saidya Hartman (2008) on the fabulation and critical speculation, my analysis is not concerned with how real or fanciful the tactics are, but how fabulous are they as they narrate certain impossibilities (Hartman, 2008). As Hartman who tried to bring light to the stories of the Black women, who were historically forgotten, by visiting the archive and looking for some scattered facts, to create semi-fictional fabulous stories about them, I construct my analysis based on fragments, signs, or words that I find within the movies in my attempt to hear the excluded bodies and adjust the imbalance of their representation. I look at how fabulous are the movies as they re-orient us towards the above-mentioned "undesirable bodies" and different possibilities. Why might not be fully here yet, is being shaped at the moment enacting a queer resistance or as Muñoz notes, they "are an opening" (Muñoz, 1999; 91) that rehears a new way of being.

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The Movies:

The first movie that I choose is *Ghurfat li-rajul* or *A Room for a Man* (2018), an autoethnography where Anthony, the director, narrator, and the protagonist, shares with us intimate details of his life and his house in Beirut, where he lives with his mom and his dog. Through the mood of voice-over, interviews with the family members mainly his mom and uncle, and old photos that uncover the family history and memories of his childhood, Anthony a middle-class Lebanese gay man, attempts to express and explore his own sexuality and family relationalities The renovation of the room becomes mixed with the act of reconstructing his own identity.

Shahīd or *Martyr* (2017) tells the story of Hassan, who belongs to an economically unprivileged family and is trapped between the conservative family and the hard socio-economical reality of Beirut. In the morning he decides to leak out of his parents' pressure to find a new job, by joining his friends on a day trip to the rocky beach at Beirut's waterfront. After he decided to jump from a rock, Hassan dies. The funeral is the climax of the film, as it turns out to be a mourning of grief and death, but also an act of queer care, and a celebration of love and non-normative desire.

Messing family settings: Queering Connectivity

In *A Room for a Man*, Anthony queers the family setting as he resists the normative framing of how to connect and exist as non-heterosexual within the Lebanese family. He messes with what Suad Joseph (1997) refers to as the "Connective Patriarchy" that constructs self-hood in Lebanon as an extension of the others, mainly the close family members who are the only source of protection and kinship (Joseph, 1997). Through discoursing his sexuality, Anthony rejects the

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patriarchal normative power that normally forces LGBTQ bodies to hide their sexuality due to their worry of losing family ties, disappointing their parents, or due to the fear of backlashes on the family from the social surrounding (Moussawi, 2020). In this part, I will focus on Anthony's disclosure of his sexuality as a queer tactic that crystallizes a new order of power structure and relations where non-heterosexuals are not the weakest. I will argue that this strategy brings back LGBTQ agency over their bodies, as they become the ones who lead the setting.

In the movie, Anthony is the one who initiates conversations, mainly with his mom and uncle, asking questions and assuring that they acknowledge his feelings and thoughts regarding his sexuality. The protagonist is not escaping from kin pressure by moving away or adapting strategies to please the family[4], but he is negotiating the terms of connectivity. He redefines the lines of the homosexual presence and interactions with the family where there is no more need to partially or fully occult.

Although at first, I was hesitant to analyze Anthony's disclosure of his sexuality as I was actively looking for local tactics that mess with Lebanese normativity while dismissing the Western narratives of identity politics, mainly the "coming out" discourse, its presence as a central theme of the movie, and building on Moussawi's analysis of coming-out in the Lebanese context as not necessarily an adoption "of the Western level of comfort" (Moussawi, 2020: 85), pushed me to instead of ignoring it, to analyze the context in which the disclosure was invoked and the kind of mess it creates. In this part, I look at the meanings attached to such revelation from a local perspective.

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[4] In her article Normativity and Strategic Marriage, Sabiha Allouche (2020) documents how some Lebanese men and women with homo-desires enter into "strategic "heterosexual marriage to appease their immediate family.

As the movie unfolds, we sense that the disclosure is not a form of identity work or a projection of the pride narratives, but a relational strategy to authentically and queerly connect primarily with his mom and then with the rest of the family members who reject Anthony's non-normative sexuality. Bonding with the biological family remains essential for non-normative bodies in Lebanon. On the contrary to the West where the nuclear family is constructed as a set of "exclusion, denials, betrayals, and disappointments…." (Peletz, 2020; p.413), and remaining outside the family is a condition to experience a "free" and "modern" sexuality (Blackwood, & Johnson, 2012), previous literature (Georgis, 2013; Naber & Zattari, 2014; Merabet, 2014; Allouche, 2020, Moussawi, 2020) asserted how Lebanese LGBTQ+ bodies remain inclined towards their family kinship. In her close reading of *Bareed Mist3ajil,* Dina Georgis (2013) analyzes how Lebanese non-heterosexuals resist choosing between traditions and family and what she refers to as "modern queer [Western] life (Georgis, 2013:235), as familial ties become an investment towards a "material and emotional survival" (Georgis, 2013:243). In their analysis of LGBTQ+ relief and humanitarian work in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, Nadine Naber and Zeina Zaatari find that non-normative individuals prioritized aiding and standing next to their families. To quote one of their interlocutors saying: "In the end, we were all going back to our families…. I mean, in the end, if anything happened to me, it is not the Feminist collective that's going to rescue me, my parents will….it is my parents who will take care of me, it is my parents that love me (Naber& Zaatari, 2013:98).

Anthony mirrors the above literature as he craves a better connection that can potentially bring his mom closer, or as he says: "We could have been best friends". As autoethnographies are process-oriented (Pidduck, 2009), Anthony brings his sexuality to the center of the family setting to negotiate his presence at home. He enters conversations and opens dialogues with the

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hope of forging a new model of connectivity. The story reflects his emotional needs and the efforts to authentically exist, as a non-heteronormative body, at home, a place that he needs the most. We sense Anthony's deep attachment to his mom during the many intimate scenes. He conceives his mom as a refuge that breaks the continuous isolation that he experiences. Anthony narrates: "Out its hell. I came back… crying in front of her" (8:38).

In another scene, Anthony asks his uncle "What do you think of me?" Through this question, the director was not looking for an answer that he already knows, but he hopes and cares to open a discussion for the sake of a better bonding, while at the same time subverting the patriarchal power that the uncle represents. The disclosure becomes a queer messy tactic as it turns to be a transgression to the "patriarchal connectivity" (Joseph, 1997), the society, as the family is perceived as the basic unit of Lebanese society (Joseph, 1997), and to the Lebanese state that is built through a specific form of families and personhood (Joseph, 1997). So, while Anthony is trying to forge new meanings through a queer family connectivity, he is subverting a bigger heteronormative social institution. He is reconstructing new families and moods of kinships that threaten the patriarchal nature and culture of the state and society.

As each tactic needs a strategy, insistence on opening dialogues becomes part of the approach. The mom's continuous anxiety about her son's sexuality didn't deter Anthony. On the contrary, he insists on engaging in debates to normalize the topic or at least try to partially convince her. As Manalansan (2015) writes "discomfort and intimacy could coexist" (Manalansan, 2015; 499), Anthony is aware that his mess is creating discomfort for the family. Tension lingers with us the whole movie due to the family's disapproval. The interviews and the random conversations leave them irritated as they feel threatened first by his sexuality, and second by its disclosure through creating a movie about it. The uncle asks Anthony to leave the country, as outside he can do

whatever he wants in a place where no one knows him and thus doesn't bring shame to the family. Here I want to be clear that Anthony is not messing to hurt his family, "but is about the potentials and possibilities behind quotidian practices and struggles of peripheral lives (Manalanasan, 2015). Anthony understands the family's feelings and fears, as he tries to address them persisting in finding a way for them to overcome such distress.

Part of the dialogue comes in the form of education work, as Anthony tries to tutor his mom about his sexuality. In one of the scenes, when the mom aggressively comments on the homophobic attack that Anthony was subject to in the street, saying: "Stop your psychological complexes…… he would have respected me, feared me, but he did not respect you. Nor he feared you because he thinks you are a small little one… Because when you are a sissy, everyone will provoke you!!" (9:34), Anthony replies sedately, "Calm down, stay here" (9:35), asking her: "Where does masculinity come from?" (9:44). It was clear that Anthony wanted to work on the fraught feelings and ideas that the mom has regarding his sexuality. His question about the constructive nature of gender comes with the hope to educate her and resolve the unease that she feels or even reduce the alienation of his sexuality. In their study of the conflict work done by LGBTQ+ adults to maintain ties with their parents that reject their sexualities, Rin Reczek and Emma Smith (2021) speak about "Conflict Educational Work" as a common strategy that LGBTQ+ sons and daughters rely on to resolve LGBTQ+ related conflicts with parents who disapprove their children's sexualities. They define it as a strategy where non-normative bodies try to educate their parents about their gender in the " hopes that parents will be more accepting over time" (Reczek & Smith, 2021). Anthony wants them to understand and learn, hoping to open the possibility of inhabiting the space differently.

Here, Anthony connects through his sexuality, queering family connectivity, and relationality. Countering the Wester way where queer liberty and modernity can only be achieved away from the family (Edelman, 2004). Such a local tactic is creating a third space of being. Instead of simply choosing between hiding his biggest secrete or going away from the family. In the third space, where happiness in the Lebanese local context becomes a disclosure that secures a place of authentically being within the family. Anthony is messing with normal where status is gained through the emphasis on heterosexuality, misogyny, and hypersexuality, by bringing the agency to his homosexuality. His load association with non-heterosexuality reshapes power dynamics. While Lebanese society de-personalizes homosexuals, reducing their presence to debauchery, Anthony's discourse and representation not only legitimize his non-conformity but empower it by providing his gender with social status. Such status is simulated by firstly unapologtaicly gaining a force, and ending the previous necessity where homosexuals needed heterosexual validation. Here, I want to be clear that as we see in the movie, the desire of non-normative bodies to bond with their families doesn't mean erasing the self or negotiating their non-normative presence and identity construction. On the contrary, as mentioned above, Anthony is looking to authentically be within the family setting through better communication. Better connection as a strategy is very distinctive from seeking validation. Throughout the movie, Anthony is not looking to satisfy his family, nor he is self-questioning his sexuality. On the contrary, he celebrates his non-normative self, describing himself as "invincible", where no one can stop him (24:35).

Mess as a Class product :

It is important to observe the interconnection between Anthony's class and his mess strategies. As identity politics, queer tactics are highly shaped by class and educational privileges (Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2020). Anthony's mess and disclosure become possible due to his class reality and cultural capital as such discourse travels through the power of political economy (Moussawi, 2020). He comes from a middle-class family, he speaks French, English, and Spanish, and his class made it possible for him to choose to major in cinema in a prestigious Art school in Beirut[5]. Anthony also lives in Ashrafeye, a Christian middle-class district that is represented, at least until the production of the movie in 2017[6], as more tolerant of sexual diversity in comparison to other areas (Totten, 2013; Moussawi, 2020), and where almost all the gay-friendly spaces exist in Beirut.

The family class, that shaped Anthony's agency, individuality, and his decision to disclose his sexuality, also affected the family response, as class privileges create different family reactions, regarding the children sexuality (Mezey, 2008). Here, I argue that the family class is what made the whole narrative possible. The calmness and the decision of the uncle, that insists on speaking in French to reflect his urban modern values, to accept to discuss the issue in front of the camera are also a class product. The image that the uncle tries o embody through his gestures, choice of world, accent, and outfits well fits with Samira Aghacy's (2004) study on how Lebanese urban

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[5] As the movie is an autobiography, I visited the director/actor's Curriculum Vitae posted on his LinkedIn Profile where he writes: "Graduated from one of the top academic institutions in the Middle East, the Saint Joseph University of Beirut" (add link), mentioning his capability of speaking English, French, and Spanish besides Arabic, which allows him to access the Western queer discourses and queer identity politics. Being a graduate of the same university, I can assure the tolerant environment that the university provides.

[6] I say at least until 2017, as lately since 2020, Ashrafieh started to witness a new phenomena that consists of hundreds of Christian armed men that claim themselves as the *junūd al-rabb* or the Soldiers of God, who identify themselves as the fighters for the word of Jesus, and the protectors of Christians in Lebanon. These guys got really famous for their homophobic and hate discourse against homosexuals and Syrian and Palestinian refugees. For more information see: "Who are Ashrafieh's 'Soldiers of God'
https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1304447/who-are-ashrafiehs-soldiers-of-god.html

middle-class men are now looking for new understandings that are "well-matched" with modernity (Aghacy, 2004).

Disobedience as a queer Tactic

In the second movie *Martyr (2017)*, contrary to *A Room for a Man, Hassan* comes from an economically disadvantaged family where he lives in one of the most marginalized parts of Beirut's Southern Suburb *(*al-ḍāḥiyya), a Shi'a stronghold heavily affiliated and controlled by Hizbullah political party. Despite the raising political and economic power that the Shi'a population had gained, it remains marginalized at the social level[7]. His class and geographical reality obscure the above-discussed middle-class models of both mess and queerness. Yet, he still crafts a mess that responds to his reality. Disobedience becomes his queer tactic as he mainly resists the pressure to conform to the dominant hegemonic masculine obligations that he is expected to embody, as a male son, and a member of the Shi'a sect.

Martyr opens with a clash between Hassan and his father who is irritated by his son's decision to quit his job due to the boss's maltreatment. As in Lebanon, work is the most fundamental consideration of masculine identity and successful masculine formation (Aghacy, 2004), the father keeps on repressing Hassan by continuously criticizing his masculine failure or as he describes it "over sensitivity and coquetry". The father who refuses to conceive the boss's abuse as a convincing excuse to leave the job, as men have to endure everything for the sake of working and gaining money, had already spoken with a friend to hire Hassan at his shop. Yet, Hassan evades

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[7] For more information on The Southern Suberb and Hizballah, see Mona Harb article: "Deconstructing Hizballah and Its Suburb (2007), and Lara Deeb's book An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon (2006).

the offer, overstepping his father's request. Instead, Hassan joins his friends on the beach. His decision is a departure from the normative time and space as it transgresses the connection between the labor regime and hegemonic masculinity. His disobedience and insistence on "failing more" messes with the normative "success" and order of things inside the household. He undermines the social conventions of masculinity as well as the power of patriarchy. By privileging pleasure, Hassan recalls Halberstam's narratives of "queer failure as a tactic", as he chose to "fail" outside the "dominant script" (Halberstam, 2005) of being.

Although Hassan's failure is accompanied by negative feelings such as sadness, fear, and misery, which he expresses due to his economic uncertainties, his failure liberates him from the hetero-patriarchal norms, and from the hegemonic social disciplinary boundaries that the father is trying to enforce. *Hassan's* failure becomes fabulous, as in it he encompasses vulnerability, tenderness, and emotional depth that disrupt traditional constructions of masculinity that valorize toughness while preventing men from authentically connecting with their emotional sides. In her analysis of the suicide of a young Kurdish immigrant in Belgium, Rojda Yavez (2020) perceived suicide as a queer act as through it the man "exists the national and diasporic temporality and spatiality" (Yavez, 2020). As Suicide transgresses hegemonic masculinity that is normally naturalized through futurity, I argue here that both disobedience and the insistence on failure become a queer tactic as they create a fracture in masculinity that is defined normally through success. The act messes up with the normative imagination of a "successful future" and articulates a desire for different times and different spaces. The pleasure that he found on the beach, counters all the responsibilities and becomes what Sabiha Allouche (2019) calls the "emotive labor of new [Lebanese] men and women eager to express and reclaim their rights to a place to call home…" (Allouch, 2019: 558).

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Through being in contact with his vulnerability, Hassan's body starts to take non-normative proximity towards Mohammad, as both bodies queerly orient towards each other (Ahmed, 2006) creating a new linear that diverts from the previous normative storyline. The Anger that was constantly accompanying Hassan is suddenly replaced by desire. The way the fingertips move on the handlebars of the motorcycle, and the tenderness as the two shoulders touch during the intimate conversation on the beach, create new paths for both bodies.

Hassan's mess extends to transgressing sectarian masculinity. As the image of Lebanese Militiamen continues to be iconic in post-war Lebanon (Hourani, 2008), Lebanese men, especially within the marginalized community, tend to embody the figure and the ideology of the previous militiamen, that is fueled by sectarianism[8]. As hegemonic masculinity must be manifested in the public sphere, a common form of sectarian masculinity embodiment becomes when young mainly unmarried working-class men join the gangsters of the neighborhood, where they mark their territory, controlling what is happening, and its entrances as they try to keep "their space" homogenous, and self-contained. Anger against the "sectarian other" becomes central as they aim to reinforce their power and superiority. *Hassan*, not only shows no interest in joining the gangs of his street but reverses this directive as he connects best with *Mohammad*, a Sunni man that represents the "sectarian other".

As sectarian masculinity requires taking care of fellow sectarian, *Mahdi*, the chief of the gang, stops *Hassan* asking him if he needs any help, wondering why he is not spending time with the group. *Hassan* rudely replies: "I am busy working". The excuse was not convincing to *Mehdi*, who

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[8] For more information, see "Tripoli's Unseen Faces" where Mohamad- Ali Nayel documents the experiences of the Sunni militiamen in the city of Tripoli. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31678/Tripoli%E2%80%99s-Unseen-Faces

sees *Hassan* wearing his swimming suit, yet he replies, "No worries, go enjoy and let us see you at night." *Hassan* didn't care much about the invitation, driving to another area to meet Mohammad. Here, queer bonding beats sectarian division. I describe their love here as queer, not in terms of homosexuality, but queer as it opens the possibility of inter-sectarian connections, challenging the geographical disunion and the socio-political boundaries in Beirut.

Anthony in *Room for Men* also messes with his uncle's pride in the family's sectarian and chauvinistic masculine history. As many x- militiamen in Lebanon feel defeated due to their loss of considerable privileges after the civil war (Haugbolle, 2012), the uncle, who among other men of the family formed part of a Christian militia which gave them power and social status, is now not only nostalgic for the civil war version of masculinity, but also insecure about the present as he feels threatened by *Anthony*'s non-confirmative masculinity which he conceives it as threats to the family's reputation. The uncle urges *Anthony* to leave so he doesn't damage the family reputation or as the uncle states "stays out of the frame of the family glorious image, the family of important men, tough guys, and chiefs. They [those tough guys] will not accept one of their branches [Anthony] to wither, to be wrong". Yet, Anthony responds by renovating his room. An act that not only signifies that he is staying but also remodeling the place according to his own confronts.

Although we can only glimpse Anthony's body in the last scene, his voice accompanies us throughout the movie. He speaks either with his own voice, as he holds direct conversations with other characters, or through a female voice-over that narrates his thoughts. The switch in the voice situates Anthony in a state of androgyny that transcends "the duality of gender differences imposed by a culture" (Krishnaraj, 1996). Something he conceitedly confirms in one of the scenes as he states: "[I am] not a man, not a woman." (29:28).

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The feeling of shame that the family experiences due to Anthony's masculinity doesn't prevent him from proceeding in being and experiencing his authentic self. In a significant scene, while Anthony speaks about his childhood, we see him opening an old photo family album. The scene recalls Marianne Hirsch's concept of "Family Gaze" (1997), where in her reading of Ronald Barthes's *Camera Lucida,* Hirsch explains how Barthes's observation of his mom's pic "provokes a moment of self-recognition which, in the reading process, becomes a process of self-discovery, a discovery of self- in- relation" (Hirsch, 1997: 2). Yet, what was remarkable in "A Room for a Man" is that while Anthony opens the album to see his mom's wedding pictures, it only contained two pictures from the wedding, then a couple of empty pages, and the rest are pictures of him, where the camera stand still on one of them. Here, and contrary to Barthes, the absence of the mother's pictures, and the focus on Anthony's own pic, can be read as his effort to discover and create himself distinctively away from the normative family gaze and ideology that his mom and the rest of the family embodies.

A Mess that Transgresses Lebanese Sectarianism Power

Queer resistance to sectarianism has drawn significant scholarly attention, investigating the queer tactics, resilience, and strategies to combat both the sect and the sectarian system[9]. Naber and Zaatari (2014), analyze how engaging in an intersectional political project that includes anti-racism, anti-sectarianism, and anti-imperialism becomes a form of queer resistance (Naber & Zaatari, 2014). Sabiha Allouche analyzes how inter-sectarian love becomes a queer resistance as it not only destabilizes the normative intra-sectarian connectivity but also a projection toward the impossible (Allouche, 2019). More recently, John Nagle and Tamirace Fakhoury (2021) analyze

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[9] In this article, I understand resisting sectarianism not as the reformation of the laws to minimize the power of the sect over our bodies, but I perceive it as a queer anti-respectability politics that enter into a confrontation with the sect and the sectarian state, that made sex and gender a security issue in Lebanon (Joseph, 2011; Mikdashi, 2017) aiming to transgress their power.

how the Lebanese Revolution *(2019)* formed a crucial step in Lebanese LGBTQ+ direct radical activism against religious institutions as they remain a key source of non-heterosexual oppression and the best ally for the corrupted patriarchal system (Nagle & Fakhoury, 2021). The films contribute to this fight, as we see the protagonists in both movies transcend the sectarian power that controls and reproduced, the body, sexual subjectivities, and the personal matters (Merabet, 2014; Allouche, 2019; Mikdashi, 2020, Moussawi, 2020).

In A Room for a Man, Anthony presents himself in contrast to his religious mom. At odd with his mom, that plays religious prayers the entire time that she is at home, and prays before she goes to bed, Anthony describes himself as "a devil". His faith abdication becomes political, creating queer opposition against the religious institutions that erase non-normative presence. What was significant is how such identification came directly after a previous scene where the mom prays for Saint Antoine to protect her "little Anthony". Here, the association with the devil acts as a direct response, a rejection, and a protest against the church.

In *Martyr*, the queer resistance against the power of religious institutions takes a more radical form. In this part, through a close reading of the funeral scene, and by answering Asil Zengin's important question of "Who can touch and gaze on the deceased body and how?" (Zengin, 2022), I will argue that the movies project a queer anti-sectarian resistance as it transgresses the control of the sect over the queer body while bringing back a queer agency to it. After *Hassan* passed away by jumping from a high place on the beach, the friends bring *Hassan's* body home. Directly, a neighbor calls a *sheikh* to come and wash the dead body according to Islamic tradition. Yet, the father requests that the friends take care of preparing the corpse for its final journey. The father's decision creates discomfort for the attendees who object, as the friends are

the "sectarian others"[10]. In the next scene, while we see the friends start the washing process, the Sheikh presence becomes useless as he sits alone in a corner outside the room doing nothing. The decision of who has the right to perform the washing ritual is a determination of having control over the queer body. It is also as Zengin reminds us that it is "a struggle over the future because the care work of the deceased is in fact a care work of the living, for those still alive" (Zengin, 2022; 367). The symbolic scene cuts with the normative sovereignty of the sect, transferring kinship and care to fellow queers. The washing that involves nudity, gaze, touch, and care turns to be a site of transgression for the social and sectarian restrictions that prohibits such queer proximity and intimacy. As Phillip L. Hammack et al. remind us that queer intimacy is what takes "other possible forms yet unknown" (Hammack et al., 2019), I argue that we should look for queer intimacy in the least expected places, such as death, as it is in this moment's true alliances, relationality and kinship can be demonstrated (Zengin, 2022; Chamas & Allouche 2022).

In *Martyr*, Death becomes figurative, as it turns to a place outside the binary of life and death. It is a place of queer transformation, as non-normative previously oppressed bodies break free from the supervision and regulation of normativity and the supervision of the sect while taking new queer shapes outside the normative folds. I will expand this by looking at the dance scene that converts mourning into a queer festivity of love, life, and desire.

In *Martyr*, the washing scene takes us to an erotic dance scene between Hassan and Mohammad. Here, queer intimacy and homoerotic become visible for the first time in the movie, as the bodies

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[10] Islamic sects strictly regulate how and who can perform the washing of the dead body, as it must be performed by a person of the same sex and sext, accompanied by a family member of the same sex as the deceased.

start to experience a different sense of proximity. The erotic dance makes death figurative as it symbolizes the death of the past. It is the death of the current homophobic and oppressing reality and the rebirth of queer free body. The dance transgresses the normative Islamic understanding of death. *Hassan* is not waiting for the resurrection of the body on *Yawm al-din* or The Day of Judgment, to be judged by *Allah,* where he most probably ends up in hell as Islam condemns homosexuality. On the contrary, the funeral is a celebration. It is the rites of passage for a queer utopia future world that is ruled by happiness and pleasure (Muñoz, 2009). It is a self- deconstruct that cuts with the previous modes of existence while opening the way for the queer mood to exist where bodies are liberated from both social norms and power. I read the erotic moments in the dance according to Georges Bataille (1991) who defines, eroticism as not simply sexuality, but it is a conscious act of transgressing the taboo of sexuality (Bataille,1991), the dance is the "transgressive pleasure" that messes with the sacred (death), and the power that controls it. The dance queerly transgresses the moral redlines that oppress the non-normative body. Queer bodies unite in pleasure to demolish the normative societal boundaries that prohibit queer existence and queer desire.

The interpretation of death as a path toward freedom is not new, but has been previously discussed. Paul Gilroy (19993) analyzes how the mass suicides by African slaves reformulated death as an act of freedom. In the Arab World, Mbembe (2003) analyzes how the death of suicide attackers in Palestine becomes "the space where freedom and negation operate" (Mbembe, 2003; 39). More recently Sophie Chamas and Sabiha Allouche (2022) analyzed how the death of Sara Hegazi, which they describe as both productive and generative, "breathed life into a queer Arabness that had been denied" (Chamas & Allouche, 2022; p.242). The authors analyzed Hegazi's suicide not as a failure to endure the harsh homophobic reality, but as a reasonable resilience

approach to the systemic socio-economic and political normative power. *Martyr* resonates, even if metaphorically, with these analyses, as death becomes an act of queer life, as in it queer bodies are rebirthed. It is the rebirth that is liberated from the homophobic reality that oppresses non-normative bodies.

Conclusion:

In this article, and through analyzing two contemporary Lebanese queer movies, I traced the "queer mess" that the protagonists create to transgress the conventional engagement with family relationality, masculinity, and Lebanese sectarianism. I paid special attention to the characters' class reality and its effect in producing and shaping different queer strategies that resonate with the socio-economical context, lived experiences, and geographical location. I traced how the movies deconstruct without falling into the need to construct fixed identity narratives.

Within the first movie, my findings showed that the disclosure served beyond the homonormative Western liberal imagination and linear identity politics of pride and "the closet" narratives, but as a form of messy tactic to authentically connect with the family. I argued that as Lebanese non-normative bodies remain inclined towards their nuclear family, they tend to mess up the family settings queering power dynamics instead of just going away from it. So Contrary to the West where normally, coming out is associated with pride, and independence, in the movie the disclosure signals the attempt to seek familiarity in the most familiar space.

With the second movie, I argued that *Hassan's* working class shaped a different strategy to resist heteronormativity. Disobedience became his tool, as he rebels against the social, and economic normative responsibilities and expectations, and power dynamics that it suggests. He liberates his body from masculine hegemony as well as resists the sectarian dominance of his

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body while reclaiming queer agency over the queer bodies. I paid special attention to the funeral scene, and how it made death figurative. Death is no anymore cutting the queers apart, but it is a start or an entry to the queer world that is yet to come. A world where non-normative bodies unite as they beat their harsh reality. The dance liberated the queer body from social punishment, shame, or oppression while filling it with joy and queer pleasure.

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6. Conclusion

Conclusion

> Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.
>
> (José Esteban Muñoz, 2009:1)

It is 24 June, I am back in Beirut. It isn't exactly a field visit, as this city has never left me. It traveled with me. I embodied my field and carried it with me. I write these lines in a coffee shop in the neighborhood of Mar Mikheil, a district that was destroyed during the port blast. The renovated street looks very familiar in a city that is becoming unfamiliar. I feel like a local yet a stranger. But isn't this queer? The contradiction and uncertainties make things queer. Both feelings leave us in ambiguity as they transgress the normative way of feeling, seeing, and experiencing. The performances that I dealt with in the past four years and my thesis are like the city. They are indefinite, provocative, and sometimes confusing and contradicting. The performances knew no borders, no redline, but also no clarity. They stimulate us as they create new models of living and fight the chaotic substance of politics. Laughter and discomfort go side by side as we are alarmed. They show us how happiness and safety can be created not only in unexpected places and times, but also at home and not necessarily elsewhere or abroad, for example. They make "Arab queerness" a reality.

In her article "Queering Heterosexual (Intersecterian) Love in Lebanon", Sabiha Allouche (2019) asks: "What traces remain, if any?" (Allouche, 2019: 549). I ask myself the same question: What traces do the performances create? What stays?

In this thesis, I tried to follow such traces, and I found them deeply stuck on my and our bodies, as Sara Ahmad (2004) explains. The emotions that the artists mirror get stuck on our bodies as they create impressions. The emotions reshape us as they take our bodies in different directions. Within the performances, I understood how my "sissyness" - or "mi Pluma" in Spanish—is political. How my whole existence and the discomfort that my body and presence create for the normative is political and subversive. They are the traces that empower us and push us to continue regardless of the social, cultural, economic, sectarian, and legal pressure.

The artists are not only creative, but they are fighters, philosophers, and activists who resist in a dark moment in a country of absolute failure. They transgress the normative order of things, while radically and queerly re-envisioning the queer body and society, as well the state.

This thesis aimed to study the mess that queer contemporary performing arts create as they transgress the normative heterosexist power in Lebanon. I presented mess as a queer tactic to subvert the normative order of things, while craving new spaces for their existence and self-empowerment. Through a multimodal analysis and theories from four main disciplines; queer studies, masculinity studies, performing arts, and post-colonial studies, I looked at how the performances mess things up. I listened to the voices of those who don't measure up, first on the heteronormative matrix, and second according to the White and middle-class universal experience. I looked at what the artists are doing to undo, analyzing their queer tactics and strategies. I located the meaning that they raise within the larger socio-cultural context and various local factors. This approach allowed me to explore queer activism through a new outlook. I traced a local form of queer activism that is anti-assimilative and anti-respectable. It is an activism that breaks with the organizational activism that seeks rights and validation from within the system.

My selection of the artists and the artistic productions was not based on who is more creative or entertaining, but on who and what is creating more mess. I was following the queer chaos that subverts the power of the normative. During this thesis, I departed from focusing on identities to focusing on tactics, strategies, and practices that interrogate and subvert the correct normative ways of being. Practices are queerer as they reflect instability and multiplicity (Ferguson, 2004; Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz, 2020). Unlike identities, practices do not result in the unification of one "proper style" of being queer, but go beyond the monolithic understanding, accounting for the various factors (class, race, religion, sect, power, authority, immigration, health, nation, and urbanism) that shape the unique and personal experience of every non-normative body. I looked at local tactics as I avoided the universalization of gender. I tried to understand their activism as an authentic local product while reimagining and requestioning the universality of gender and queer activism. Hence, throughout this research, "queer" and "queerness" were summoned to accurately index the moments where non-normative bodies create an irritation that disrupts the coherence of normative moods while opening spaces for the "transformational work" to begin.

Queer mess becomes what disconnects and de-assimilates with normativity, while the artists fabulously connect with their authentic selves in their fight to exist.

I choose to focus on performing arts as they share with queerness its deconstructive spirit. They are both employed to "deconstruct and decentralize assumed allegiances between bodies and identities, space and practices, and norms and subjectivities" (Robinson and Davies, 2012: 2).

My research opened by looking at LGBTQI+ participation in the Lebanese Revolution (2019). I choose the Thaura as my starting point as by seeing what was happening in the streets of Beirut, I could compare or link what the artistic productions are suggesting to reality. In the article "LGBTQ Radical activism in the Lebanese Revolution", my findings showed that the radical LGBTQI+ participation forged a new form of LGBTQI+ activism which is anti-assimilation and anti-respectability. Contrary to the mainstream gay rights movements that construct mobilization strategies within power-sharing governments, I have shown how the activists mobilized strategies that combated the systems by transgressing two of its main pillars; sectarianism and the neoliberal economy. In the second part of the chapter, I analyzed how the LGBTQI+ protestors challenge the morality of the public sphere through their anti-respectability politics. The slogans and their bodies broke free from normative constraints, as they contested the "proper sexual decorum" that has always been conceived as unquestionably normative, heterosexual, and modest.

In the final part of this chapter, I introduced the concept of "Emergent LGBTQ care". It is emergent as such bonding is not a common behavior but a care that flourishes in certain unexpected moments, crises, and events. It produces a collective bonding where non-normative bodies interact and stand for each other, even if temporarily, to empower support or at least make a situation livable. Contrary to previous studies that showed that Lebanese LGBTQI+-identified individuals have no interest in showing solidarity, my findings show that the Thaura had forged new forms of relationality and fusion by creating bonds, solidarity, and socialization between LGBTQI+ members that cross the above communal requirements.

In the second contribution titled "Queering the Lebanese Instagram: Reimaging Futurity", I traced how the posts of two queer Instagram accounts, Artqueerhabibi and Takweer, challenged the heteronormative power while reclaiming queer voices, presence, and history. With the first

account, I showed how the posts mess things up, disrupting the normative coding of the bodies, objects, and public spaces. Non-normative sexualities that are normally restricted to the private sphere have now become the city's primary residents, reorienting the space with new meanings that are free from exclusions. Building on Chun's theory of "virtual neighbors" (Chun, 2018), I argued that the account acts as a vital resistance strategy, opening up possibilities for social ties that break self-isolation while promising companionship, intimacy, reassurance, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and most importantly, improve mental health outcomes.

With the second Instagram account, I have shown how archiving the queer Lebanese and Arab history not only acts as "evidence of existence" of the long queer history but also provides us with data about the present and future. Also, it provides Lebanese non-heterosexuals with local figures to whom they relate, which leaves a positive impact on self-perception. The posts also counter from one side the Western "Orientalist" discourse that depicts the Arab race as inherently homophobic and sexist and Muslims as direct threats to sexual freedoms. On the other side, they counter the local homophobic discourse that claims queerness as a Western product imported to the Arab World to destroy Arab moral and Islamic values.

In the third contribution, titled "Mi Pluma es Politica: apropiaciones no occidentales del drag," I analyzed the contemporary drag queen scene in Beirut, examining how drag art resists gender binaries while empowering both the performers and the LGBTQI+ audience. Drag had guided them into an internal gender journey and self-discovery outside the normative understanding and gender binaries. It created a wider range of gender categories and sexual subjectivities that are normally not recognized within the heterosexual matrix. I also traced how the shows empower both the performers, who use their voices to create change, and the audience, by breaking the long silence and the necessity to conceal.

In the fourth contribution, "A Movie with a Messy Ending: Mess as a queer tactic in Lebanese Cinema," I looked for the queer mess in the two contemporary Lebanese movies, and how it transgresses the heteronormative power and the social dynamics while opening the space for non-normative bodies to exist. Through the lenses of textual analysis, I present two main queer Lebanese tactics, disclosure of sexuality for a better and more authentic family connection and disobedience against the normative power—mainly the power of hegemonic masculinity and Lebanese sectarianism. I situated both tactics in relation to class and educational privileges as a mess, as identity politics is not static but is shaped by class.

With the first movie, I analyzed how the disclosure of the protagonist's sexuality is not a form of identity work or a projection of the pride narratives but a relational strategy to authentically and queerly connect with the family members. The disclosure becomes a queer messy tactic to assert the self while looking for a better engagement at home. It is a mess that forges relational possibilities while pushing non-normative bodies to move in new directions.

In the second movie, I analyzed how "disobedience" against the pressure to conform to the dominant hegemonic masculine obligations that he is expected to embody, as a son and a member of the sect, becomes a queer tactic. I argued that the films transcend the sectarian power that controls and reproduces, the body, sexual subjectivities, and personal matters. Through focusing on two main scenes—the funeral and the dance scene—I looked at how death becomes a site of transgression as it cuts away from the normative sovereignty of the sect, transferring kinship and care to fellow queers. The washing that involves nudity, gaze, touch, and care turns out to be a site of transgression for the social and sectarian restrictions that prohibit such queer proximity and intimacy. The erotic dance within the funeral becomes the "transgressive pleasure" that messes with the sacred (death), and the power that controls it. The dance queerly transgresses the moral redlines that oppress the non-normative body.

I would like to conclude this thesis by presenting a new concept that accompanied my thoughts for future research. The artists' deployment of anti-system politics and their local strategies that turn activism inward toward the LGBTQI+ self and others, without seeking the validation of the heterosexual world, lead me to introduce "homo-anarchy" as a new queer concept. By this term, I refer to anti-assimilation, people-oriented activism that seeks to bring consciousness to the non-normative self and its power. I present it as a decolonial strategy that manifests itself in communities where LGBTQI+ individuals and circles continue to empower themselves, feeling ready to denounce the injustice and oppression, yet acknowledge the reality of the homophobic nature of their political system and culture. As in Lebanon the state is by no means ready to accept or advocate any change that progresses LGBTQI+ individuals' lives, and on the contrary, the system is manifesting its homophobic nature more and more every day, LGBTQI+ activists relate to each other instead of orienting toward the state to claim equality and gay rights within the heteronormative institutions. While they totally lack hope and trust in the system, they seek sexual liberation through individual and collective empowerment. As anarchism, they relate

differently by turning away from the paternalistic state, and toward engaging with their own community. I call it homo-anarchy as it echoes the anarchist spirt of freedom of the body and the mind.

I understand homo-anarchy as a collective experimentation of self-power, that allows LGBTQI+ individuals and circles to create alternative narratives and both private physical and virtual spaces that validate queer autonomous existence and possibilities within the dominant culture. I understand it as a route, not the outcome, and the changing of the self rather than the society.

Homo-anarchy opposes homonormativity (Duggan, 2002; Luibheid, 2005; Benedicto, 2014; Puar, 2018) as it breaks free from the mainstream narratives of gay rights, gay marriage, the closet, and pride/shame narratives. In contrast to this experience, it challenges the efforts to assimilate with the system. It rebels against the state control where there is a total distrust as well as its neo-liberal policies that marginalize non-normative and unwanted bodies. It relies on anti-respectability politics to create a mess that reclaims queer power and existence. In opposition to homonormativity, and in the Lebanese case, homo-anarchy rebels against the sectarianism instead of wanting to merge with it. As anarchism, it favors self-determination while rejecting patriarchy, sectarianism, capitalism, and neo-liberalism. It doesn't want the approval of the church, for example, but it seeks to subvert its power that controls their bodies. It favors forms of self-determination and self-validation that break with the "normal." Its unpleasant discourse, slogans, and body manifestation generate the shocks "that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution" (Rubin, 2011: 149).

Finally, as in this thesis the feminist discourse and Lesbian/female artwork and subjectivities were not examined, I find it essential for my future work to engage with them, as well as other LGBTQI+ marginalized bodies in Lebanon, such as LGBTQI+ refugees and domestic workers. Also, I believe in the importance for any future studies to engage with other forms of queer arts and exhibitions such as photography, video art, and music.

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