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QUEER DISRUPTIONS: MODERNITY AND NON-NORMATIVE GENDER AND
SEXUALITIES IN POST-WAR BEIRUT

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Queer Disruptions: Modernity and Non-Normative Gender and Sexualities in Post-War

Beirut

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My dissertation addresses the changing historical meanings of sexual practices and identities, and the effects of political turmoil and conflict on the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in post-war Beirut. Drawing on ethnographic observations, life history interviews and content analysis, I rethink how claims of modernity and progress operate by focusing on queer sexualities in Beirut since the year 2005. Dominant Euro-American understandings of coming out and LGBTQ visibility are often used as indicators of non-Western societies' modernity and progress. My work complicates this stance, illustrating how queer lives in Beirut unsettle and disrupt binaries of visibility/invisibility and tradition/progress. In addition, I show how dominant narratives of modernity view the emergence of "gay rights" in the Middle East as a marker of progress, without taking into account local exclusionary practices. I examine public discourses, personal narratives, and collective organizing strategies in a number of different contexts.

Unlike much research that focuses on how sexuality emerges as the most salient marker of difference in LGBT people's personal narratives, my research illustrates that LGBT individuals in Beirut emphasize how gender, class, and sectarian identities act as their primary modes of visible self-making. Rather than treating queer visibility as a hallmark of progress, individuals devise strategies of visibility such as creating and living in what they refer to as "imagined bubbles." Queer Beirutis' strategies vary across different family and social contexts and are shaped by political turmoil, regional instability, and sectarian conflict. Using a feminist intersectional lens, I highlight how various queer social circles contest, yet unwittingly reproduce, the exclusionary practices of Beirut's cosmopolitanism that sideline gender-nonnormative and transgender persons, as well as migrant workers and refugees. Marginalized queer Beirutis, particularly working-class and gender-nonconforming individuals, question Beirut's cosmopolitanism and carve out new understandings of queer visibilities that challenge dominant understandings of modernity and progress.

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Chapter One

Introduction

“Because Lebanon is not Kandahar”

In mid-February 2014, topless calendar pictures of Jackie Chamoun, a female Lebanese skier who was recently competing at the winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, were leaked on Lebanese media. These pictures were taken three years prior, at a photo shoot for a German sports calendar. The circulation of these pictures prompted the Lebanese minister of “Sports and Youth” to publicly proclaim that Chamoun needs to be interrogated for what he described as the “immoral” and “questionable” nature of her act. The condemnation of Chamoun’s photos sparked an uproar by Lebanese youth, particularly on various social media. A number of Lebanese youth started an online campaign titled “#stripforjackie” where they posted pictures of themselves semi-nude with their genitals hidden, suggesting solidarity with the Lebanese skier. One of the striking images circulating on Twitter and Facebook was that of a topless Lebanese woman who held a #stripforjackie sign, with a comment: “Because Lebanon is not Kandahar and it will never be!” With this image and comment, the woman was making a statement that Beirut is a place of “sexual freedoms,” distancing it from Kandahar, where people presumably do not have these “freedoms.”

This campaign distinguished Lebanon from the rest of the Middle East, and portrayed the Lebanese as distinct, “tolerant” and exceptional in the region.¹ This online movement for solidarity was meant for Lebanese youth to express themselves and

particularly make clear that they stand in solidarity with Chamoun by appearing and circulating semi-naked photos and proving or showcasing that Lebanon is not a “conservative country.” Female nudity and exposure of the body are linked to a concept of “freedom of expression,” which in this case gets employed to make distinctions between those who are presumably “modern” and “free” and those who are not. Hence, this campaign consisting of both women and men stripping for Jackie presents Lebanon as “more modern/less traditional/less conservative” in comparison to the rest of the Middle East. The uncovering of the body, in this case, gets explicitly defined as signifying a move toward “progress” and “freedom of expression.” Women’s bodies, the hijab, and, more recently, mainstream gay and lesbian visibility are employed to make statements about autonomy and freedom of expression in order to further the divide between “tradition vs. modernity,” and to signify “other” Muslims as outside of Western modernity (El-Tayeb 2011).

Chamoun responded to these images on Facebook by apologizing and stating: “I want to apologize to all of you, I know that Lebanon is a conservative country and this is not the image that reflects our culture.”² Her response did not align with the #stripforJackie campaign, where she apologized for the images claiming that Lebanon is a “conservative country,” presumably *not yet able* to accept such images. Whereas the solidarity campaign aimed to show that Lebanon is unapologetically open and “progressive,” her apology reinstated that Lebanon is indeed a conservative country and her picture was at odds with, or did not represent, “Lebanese culture.”

This story presents an example of how certain ideas of openness around sexuality are marked as signs of progress and modernity in Lebanon. This uncovering and

celebration of semi-naked bodies is linked to incitement to discourse about gayness and coming out (making oneself visibly queer) that operate within global imaginaries and concepts of modernity. That is, modernity and progress of a society are measured or assessed based on particular types of visibilities for women, gay, and queer individuals. In many cases, gay visibility in particular becomes a presumed sign of modernity and national/cultural progress (Manalansan 2005). In addition, modernity and progress get measured by how tolerant, and presumably “cosmopolitan,” a society is. However, not all populations are included within these discourses of “tolerance” (Brown, 2006). For example, Muslims in Europe are a minority that is not tolerated because of their supposed “lack” of tolerance (El-Tayeb 2011). The use of sex and sexuality to determine whether a country is progressive or not is part of a much larger system of circulating discourses about modernity and progress, currently animated by the specter of Islam. In the Lebanese case, these discourses are made possible by situating Lebanon in the Arab Middle East and comparing and distancing it to other Arab countries; however, it is a discourse that has its roots in a colonial history.

Research questions and overview of the dissertation

In this dissertation, I examine how discourses of modernity and progress are circulated and articulated by LGBTQ individuals in post-war Beirut since 2005. I examine public discourses about gender and sexual diversity, LGBT persons’ narratives, and queer mobilization strategies to understand how they unsettle dominant binaries of tradition/progress and visibility/invisibility. In addition, I show how queer subjects both

contest and reproduce local exclusionary practices based on race, class, gender, religious sect, and immigration and refugee status.³

Dominant Euro-American understandings of coming out and LGBTQ visibility are often used as indicators of non-Western societies' modernity and progress. My research complicates this stance, illustrating how queer lives in Beirut unsettle and disrupt binaries of the closet/outness, visibility/invisibility, and tradition/progress. In addition, I show how dominant narratives of modernity view the emergence of gay rights in the Middle East as a marker of progress, without taking into account local exclusionary practices. My research addresses the changing historical meanings of sexual practices and identities, and the effects of political turmoil, conflicts, and wars on the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in post-war Beirut, rethinking claims of how modernity and progress operate by focusing on queer sexualities in Beirut and the Arab Middle East.

Toward this end, my dissertation explores three questions: First, how do LGBTQ individuals in Beirut negotiate their lives in relation to the political turmoil, instability, and sectarian tensions and conflict that have emerged since 2005? Second, how do gender, class, and religious sect inform how people express queer subjectivities? Third, how do Lebanese LGBTQ personal narratives employ and/or contest Euro-American concepts of visibility, rights, and narratives of progress and modernity? I examine public discourses, personal narratives, and collective organizing strategies in a number of different contexts.

First, I look at how popular articles represent homosexualities in Lebanon, and analyze contemporary journalistic articles that have appeared since the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Contemporary popular press often celebrates and describes gay

life in Beirut in terms of a linear progress narrative, gauging improvements in relation to the rise of tolerant attitudes and the growth of Western-style gay identities, gay-friendly spaces and LGBT organizations. Such representations highlight Beirut's exceptionalism, and represent what I call "fractal Orientalism" or "Orientalisms within the Orient." These depictions reproduce binary conceptions of modern/non-modern, Muslim/Christian, progress/tradition, and visibility/invisibility. In addition, these representations reproduce gender binaries by essentializing gay masculinities and by the erasure of female homosexualities. "Progressive" representations of LGBTQ communities in places like Lebanon focus almost exclusively on questions of culture and rights, emphasizing Lebanon's "exceptionalism" in a region known for political and religious conflict and overlooking local patterns of exclusion based on race, class, gender, and immigration and refugee status. Such narratives come in the way of recognizing the exclusionary and violent practices enacted by the Lebanese state and people, particularly against women, refugees and migrants. However, these discourses don't only circulate in Euro-American journalistic accounts and are not only textual. These discourses are also taken up and used by local actors. For example, as I illustrate in chapter three, the local gay tour agency, Lebtour, uses Orientalist discourses about Lebanon and the Arab World to attract potential tourists. In addition, local advertisements cite and use Euro-American newswires and journalistic accounts on Lebanon to promote Beirut. For instance, on a research trip to Beirut in the summer of 2011, I saw advertisements for a high-end shopping and restaurant promenade that primarily relied on reproducing selections from Euro-American magazine articles which highlighted the notion that Beirut is regaining its place as a top tourism destination. The circulation of statements such as "Beirut is back

on the map,” and “the revival of a landmark,” illustrate that Beirut is being regarded as a new touristic destination and good for investments, by Western news outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, Agence France-Presse, the Financial Times and the New York Times [see pictures in Appendix C].

Second, I analyze how such progress narratives influence the everyday lives of LGBTQ individuals in post-war Beirut. Toward this end, I conducted and analyzed ethnographic observations and 20 open-ended interviews with queer Lebanese women and men and genderqueer individuals. I employ a feminist intersectional analysis that centralizes gender, class, religious sect, and sexuality to understand how self-identified queer individuals negotiate issues such as visibility, community, “coming out,” and rights. In addition, I consider the experiences and material effects of displacement, conflict, political instability, and wars, which interviewees nebulously refer to as *al-wad*, or “the situation.”⁴ This is particularly pressing given the current war in Syria, which has displaced millions of individuals as refugees in Lebanon. Therefore, I examine how LGBTQ individuals negotiate “the situation,” and how various LGBTQ communities exclude and include people based on class, religious background, gender identities, and/or refugee or migrant status. I illustrate how the ideas of Lebanese and Beiruti exceptionalism alternately rely upon and reproduce these multiple exclusions. Unlike much research that focuses on how sexuality emerges as the most salient marker of difference in LGBT people’s personal narratives, my research illustrates that LGBT individuals in Beirut emphasize how gender, class, and sectarian identities act as their primary modes of visible self-making. Rather than treating queer visibility as a hallmark of progress, individuals devise strategies of visibility such as creating and living in what

they refer to as “imagined bubbles.” Queer Beirutis’ strategies vary across different family and social contexts and are shaped by political turmoil, regional instability, and sectarian conflict. I highlight how various queer social circles contest, yet unwittingly reproduce, the exclusionary practices of Beirut’s cosmopolitanism that sideline gender-non-normative and transgender persons, as well as migrant workers and refugees. Marginalized queer Beirutis, particularly working-class and gender-non-normative individuals, question Beirut’s cosmopolitanism and carve out new understandings of queer visibilities that challenge dominant understandings of modernity and progress.

Third, I consider the impact of queer organizing on LGBTQ people’s lives in Beirut through case studies of Helem and Meem⁵, the only two LGBTQ organizations in Lebanon. Helem is a publicly visible, rights-based NGO working on LGBTQ rights in Lebanon; Meem, by contrast, is a partially underground, grassroots group working for lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women’s empowerment and community building. Helem adopts an affirmative strategy of “visibility,” pride and coming out, albeit in a more cautious way than in Western contexts, by taking advantages of the ambiguities and discrepancies between the law and its irregular enforcement in Lebanon. Meem, however, adopts a strategy of relative invisibility, focusing on internal community building and empowerment, while being critical of the international human rights discourse. This comparison of their identity deployment and organizing strategies illuminates the differences in their strategic choices, particularly regarding visibility, alliances, community building, and legal claims on rights. In addition, it illustrates how both groups define and conceive of LGBTQ identities and communities by both simultaneously contesting and engaging with dominant models of Euro-American

LGBTQ organizing. I use these cases to underscore the importance of analyses that centralize gender and geopolitical context. By analyzing data from the three different sites mentioned above, I highlight the central role that gender and sexualities occupy in global understandings of progress and modernity.

Broader contributions

In this dissertation, I address the civilizational narrative that posits the emergence of gay rights in the Middle East as a marker of progress, illustrating that it does not consider the exclusionary practices and modalities of power that render certain queer ways of being more legible than others. I argue against the tendency to focus almost exclusively on questions of culture and rights in studies and representations of LGBTQ communities in places like Lebanon. I suggest that such an analysis celebrates the experiences and hardships of non-Western LGBTQ individuals, without taking into account the multiple exclusionary practices enacted by the state and people. It also exceptionalizes Lebanon in relation to the rest of the Arab World.

Contesting a number of problematic approaches, I challenge the idea that Beirut is a “safe haven” for LGBTQ individuals. Drawing on my interviews and fieldwork, I argue that discourses about the sexual openness and gay-friendliness of Beirut mask the multiple forms of privilege, hierarchies, and exclusions that are constitutive of the Beiruti public sphere. I ask, in other words, for whom is Beirut a gay safe haven and for whom is it cosmopolitan? What are the conditions of possibility for those forms of gay flourishings that are enabled and celebrated in dominant transnational and elite gay discourse? What forms of violence, racisms, sexism, classisms, and exclusions are

rendered invisible in celebratory discourses about the gay-friendliness of places like Beirut? What assumptions about class, gender, religion and secularism underlie such discourses? What neoliberal practices get normalized in celebratory discourses about Beirut exceptionalism? What kinds of tolerances get celebrated?

I argue that, in the case of Beirut, the production of discourses of “exceptionalism” are coupled with and based on exclusionary practices of the state and people. By demonstrating the multiple exclusions (often-times violent, classist, and racist) and local hierarchies and distinctions, my aim is not to re-inscribe the ideas that the Middle East is inherently homophobic or intolerant towards difference. Rather, my aim is to raise questions about the politics and elisions of discourses of tolerance and linear (teleological) narratives of progress.

Using a queer of color analysis, I centralize the experiences of race, gender and class, and therefore understand queerness to be about issues other than coming out, the closet and mainstream visibility. I move away from analyses that assume that queer subjects in the Arab World are always in the process of resisting and/or adopting Western conceptions of LGBTQ identities. In addition, it is not about resisting “local” understandings of sexualities. My interlocutors do not situate their lives along the lines of this rejection/adoption dichotomy. They do not simply adopt LGBTQ identities, nor do they really attempt to fit their lives within a dominant intelligible framework. The majority of my interlocutors understand their sexual subjectivities to be intertwined with their class, gender, and religious sect. In addition, a majority of my interlocutors do not necessarily want to take part of “gay globality” discussed by a number of theorists (Altman 2001, Benedicto 2014). Many queer individuals are aware of the multiple

exclusions that “gay globality” is built on and are not necessarily working towards being included by engaging with global gay cultures or movements. Rather, they actively form conceptions of queerness that centralize context, gender, class and religious sect.

Finally, I show that the category of “third world queer” is fractured and based on privileges and distinctions. Hence, I consider the multiple and shifting privileges and marginalizations within already marginalized groups, such as queer individuals in Beirut. Privilege and marginalization circulate differently and are experienced differently based on one’s gender, class, religious sect, and migrant status.

Disruptions

My dissertation tells the stories of multiple disruptions, both intentional and unintentional. My fieldwork has been disrupted multiple times by “the situation” in Lebanon. My interlocutors disrupted the dominant narratives of coming out, visibility, and modernity. And I attempt to disrupt dominant representations of sexualities in Beirut and the Arab Middle East. One of the unintended consequences of working in and on a place like contemporary Beirut is the necessity of grappling with the question of how we understand a social phenomenon like gender or sexual non-normativity in a place that is so shaped by political turmoil and multiple disruptions. People’s lives in Beirut and Lebanon are always experienced through *al wad’*, or “the situation,” a term which refers to general political instability, the specter of war, turmoil, and conflict. Even though individuals might not specifically mention *al-wad’*, not mentioning or talking becomes an example of how it is normalized and sometimes can become invisible to those living in it.⁶ In response to *al-wad’*, individuals create and live in metaphorical and physical

spaces that I refer to as “bubbles.” The bubble is a metaphor of privilege and of certain kinds of spaces (gay friendly, feminist) that only certain individuals are able to access. An individual or sets of individuals create the bubble in response to political unrest, economic instability, and violence, and also to open up queer spaces. Therefore, the bubble creates a feeling of continuity and a relative safety from external disruptions. These disruptions are sometimes about safety and survival; people disrupt “the situation” and create “bubbles.” At the same time, these bubbles can create a distance and shelter people from the socio-political environment. Coupled with certain practices of denial of “the situation,” these bubbles have the unintended consequence of reproducing narratives of Beirut’s exceptionalism in the region.

Homosexuality and the law in Lebanon

Although same-sex behavior is technically illegal in Lebanon and can be punished by up to one year in prison, Beirut has been recently represented as a more open city for LGBT individuals in comparison to other cities in the Arab world, primarily due to the somewhat open gay and lesbian events, bars, clubs and an LGBT travel agency (Moussawi 2013).⁷ Despite the fact that Beirut has been recently hailed as the “Provincetown of the Middle East,” (Healy 2009), a “safe haven for homosexuals” in the Arab World and a “beacon of hope” for many gay Arabs (Zoepf 2007), stories of arrests and crackdowns and, most recently, “anal probings,” are not unheard of, and they especially target individuals or groups of people who already occupy marginalized positions in society (Makarem 2011). On July 28, 2012, the Lebanese Internal Security forces raided a porn cinema in the district of Burj Hammoud in Beirut, arresting 36 men

accused of engaging in what they termed “indecent and immoral acts” (Al Akhbar 2012). This raid, as has been discussed on various internet social media outlets, was directly linked to the airing of a Lebanese talk show called *Enta Horr* (“You Are Free”) a few days before the arrests on the Lebanese station MTV, where the host had outed such cinemas and exposed what he referred to as the “deviance” and homosexuality that occurs there. Following the arrests, the men were taken to the infamous Hobeich police station and were subjected to anal examinations and probes to “prove” their engagement in homosexual activities. These “tests of shame,” as local activists have called them, were performed by forensic doctors and sparked an outrage within Lebanese LGBTQ circles and a number of mainstream media outlets. However, days after the tests, a decree was issued by the “Lebanese Order of Physicians,” Lebanon’s main medical association, “making these anal examinations unlawful and warning doctors they would face disciplinary measures if they carried out the act” (Al-Akhbar 2012, para 14).

Data and methods

For this research project, I draw on three types of data: ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and textual and discourse analysis. I conducted ethnographic research among Lebanese LGBTQ individuals in Beirut in 2013-14. I also conducted life-history interviews with 20 LGBTQ-identified individuals between the ages of 18-35, in the years 2007-08 and 2012-2014. In addition, I conducted content analyses of over 20 journalistic articles, and analyzed Lebanese LGBTQ organizations’ official websites, blogs, newsletters, and speeches dating from 2004. [I provide a detailed and fuller description of my methods in Appendix A].

Chapter outline

In chapter two, I situate my project historically and present an overview of the literatures on the sociology of gender and sexuality, queer theory, queer of color critique, and postcolonial feminist studies. In chapter three, I study contemporary representations of gay and queer Beirut, and think about the ways that Beirut gets represented as exceptional in the Arab Middle East. Building on Edward Said, I argue that this is made possible through what I call “fractal Orientalism,” or distinctions and binaries within the Middle East. In chapter four, I analyze the strategic uses of identity in everyday life in Beirut and the centrality of gender, class and religious sect. In chapter five, I analyze various understandings of queer visibilities, focusing on individual and collective (in) visibilities in the city and the history of visibility within LGBT communities in Beirut. In chapter six, I study the two major LGBTQ organizations in Lebanon Helem and Meem and compare and contrast their organizing strategies, particularly: identity deployment, visibility and rights. In chapter seven, I analyze how my interlocutors reproduce and contest narratives of modernity, progress and Beirut exceptionalism. In addition, I look at how these narratives of exceptionalism are premised on the exclusion of multiple marginalized populations in the city. Finally, in chapter eight, I discuss how queer Beirutis live between *al-wad'* and the bubble, and I suggest that living in bubbles, coupled with everyday practices of denial, helps maintain narratives of Beirut exceptionalism.

¹ Other individuals invoked Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan

² For more see: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2557362/Topless-calendar-pictures-Lebanese-Olympic-skier-spark-calls-ministerial-inquiry-Beirut-leaked-online.html#ixzz3N0p8nXID>

³ My understanding of religious sect refers more to the positionalities that individuals occupy in Lebanese society with regards to their sect, and the history of sect as opposed to religiosity and social sect. Mikdashi's (2014) explanation of sect as incorporating "shared historical narratives, shared religious beliefs and practices, and for many, shared political aspiration and anxieties" is very instructive for my analysis (282).

⁴ People distinguish between *al-ahdath* (the events) in reference to the civil war and *al-wad'* (the situation). In both cases the terms are very general and nebulous.

⁵ Helem is an acronym which refers to "Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders" (www.helem.net) Whereas, the name "Meem" is derived from the Arabic letter "m" which stands for "majmouaat mou'azara lil-mar'a al-mithliya" (a support group for queer women) (www.meemgroup.org). Meem no longer exists as Meem.

⁶ Using "the situation," in understanding queer sexualities in Lebanon, particularly the civil war, is vividly represented in fiction such as that of Rabih Alameddine's 1998 novel *Koolaid*s.

⁷ I use the term "technically illegal," since the penal code 534 explicitly states that it outlaws "sexual acts that are contrary to nature," without defining what such acts consist of. However, the law has been and can be used as proxy for same-sex sexual acts (Makarem 2011).

Chapter Two

Theoretical frameworks

Despite the growing field of research on transnational and global LGBTQ subjectivities and communities, there is little research on contemporary LGBTQ lives and non-normative sexualities in the Arab Middle East.¹ Most academic studies of non-normative sexualities in the Arab world focus on the role of a nation or a region's "culture" and state-led oppression of gays and lesbians, the possibilities of the existence of "gay" and "lesbian" identities, communities, documentations of underground lives, and nascent LGBTQ organizing (Whitaker 2006, McCormick 2006, Habib 2007, Ritchie 2010). Euro-American journalistic articles, however, have more readily covered LGBTQ lives in the Arab world.² However, the discourse of rights (and lack of thereof) and their links to the presence (or, most notably, absence) of LGBT communities is still the dominant lens by which (homo) sexualities in the Arab world are written about and accounted for. Critical historical research and cultural studies that employ queer theory to understand gender and sexualities in the Arab Middle East have been more prominent. Within the field of history, studying sexualities in the Arab Middle East has involved looking at the changing historical meanings of sexual practices and identities, and questioning concepts of modernity and progress as they link to place and people (Najmabadi 2005, 2013, Massad 2007, El Rouayheb 2009).

In this dissertation, I introduce a sociological analysis of gender and sexualities in post-war Beirut, building on and engaging with postcolonial feminist approaches, queer

theory, and queer of color analysis. I offer a way to rethink how claims of modernity and progress operate by focusing on queer sexualities in Beirut and the Arab Middle East.

I explore the emergence of multiple queer subjectivities in contemporary Beirut in light of queer and gay globalization, which have afforded new and multiple possibilities for understandings of queer identities, alliances, resistances, and consumerism (Cruz Malave and Manalasan 2002). Examining the formations of queer subjectivities and how they constitute and are constitutive of dominant discourses on modernity, gayness, and queerness entails an engagement with dominant notions of coming out/closet, visibilities/invisibilities, and LGBTQ rights and organizing in Beirut since the year 2005. These three interrelated themes (coming out, visibilities and rights) have been heavily contested in relation to multiple understandings of sexualities, whereby dominant narratives of gayness assume and assess “non-heterosexualities” through coming out, mainstream visibilities, and LGBT rights, which are in turn used as markers of a society’s “liberation” and progress. Sexual politics, as argued by Judith Butler, have become linked to assumptions and understandings of modernity where, she argues:

We can see how modernity is being defined as linked to sexual freedom, and the sexual freedom of gay people in particular is understood to exemplify a culturally advanced position, as opposed to one that would be deemed pre-modern (Butler 2010, 105).

In other words, the realm of sexual freedom has become one of the ways by which people and places are situated, positioned, and ultimately assessed within and in relation to a narrative of modernity and progress, whereby “tolerance” to and a celebration of certain forms of sexual diversity signifies the cultural advancement of a society.

Following the assassination of ex-Prime minister Rafic Harriri on February 2005, anti-Syrian Lebanese groups and coalitions took to the streets in what came to be known and characterized by some as the “Cedar Revolution,” or the “Independence Intifada” (Young 2011). This uprising, which called for the end of Syrian occupation of Lebanon, and led to the Syrian troops withdrawal from Lebanon, was regarded as a turning point in recent Lebanese history, most notably with regards to possibilities for a new Lebanese democracy, political reform, and expanding civil liberties. It was also seen by some as “a stimulus for deep change, something new- revolution instead of intifada” (Young 2011, 52). That is, some regarded this movement more as a revolution than an uprising. However, in the months and years to follow, what was initially thought of as an opening for new possibilities for Lebanese self-governance and independence, has been countered as a false perception of possibilities for deep change in Lebanon. Talking about LGBT rights and the possibilities for more civil liberties, former Helem coordinator Ghassan Makarem argues that:

the withdrawal of the Syrian army and the promise of democratic reform gave the false impression to many that some freedoms can be gained. But, not unlike other U.S.-sponsored revolutions, the Cedar Revolution consolidated a new sectarian leadership and led to increased dependence on the capitalist system and increased police repression (Makarem 2011, 106).

As stated by Makarem, the beliefs and promises of a new beginning and possibilities of the expansion of civil rights were countered by the stark reality of more state-led oppression targeting already marginalized groups in Lebanon.

I use the case of queer subjectivities and queer lives in Beirut to discuss the links between gender, sexuality and narratives of progress, specifically as they relate to hegemonic understandings of LGBT visibilities, communities and movements. I am

particularly interested in how multiple narratives of modernity and queerness that circulate in Beirut, constitute and are constitutive of each other, and thus, articulate new meanings and understandings of sexualities, that are informed by gender, race, class and religious sect. In addition, I explore how narratives of modernity and exceptionalism of Beirut circulate and are articulated by LGBT individuals in Lebanon. Finally, I show how these discourses of modernity and Beiruti exceptionalism come in the way of recognizing multiple exclusions that they are built on.

Distinctions between “global” and “local” knowledges have become blurred. What becomes central are how different types of knowledges, experiences and representations of sexualities (of both self and other) are articulated in multifaceted ways. Some discourses become and are treated as “subjugated knowledges” with regard to dominant and normative understandings of global queer and gayness (Foucault 1980). Rather than privileging one form of knowledge of sexualities over the other, I focus on and recognize the effects of the interactions and tensions between these different knowledges as they link to multiplicities of LGBTQ subjectivities, made possible by queer theoretical, women of color feminisms, and postcolonial deconstructions of the notions of identities. Moving away from conceptions of identities as stable and fixed categories, I use sociological, postcolonial feminist, queer theoretical and queer of color analysis to underscore how queer and gendered subjectivities are a by-product of intersectional lives, struggles and contexts (Lorde 1984, Anzaldua and Moraga 1981, Hill Collins 1990, Manalansan 2003, Ferguson 2004, Alexander 2006, Abdulhadi AlSutlany and Naber 2011, Kong 2011). Therefore, I explore how difference is produced, lived, and experienced, particularly as a product of social and historical context, intersectionality of

struggles, strategic uses of identity, and movements between different and multiple positionalities.

Such an analysis of gender and sexual subjectivities does not relegate “non-dominant” understandings of (homo)sexualities that do not rely on coming out and mainstream visibility to being “alternative” and “other” conceptions of sexuality, but rather sheds light on individual and collective meaning-making processes situated within a specific historical time and context: in this case, that of contemporary Beirut. Thus, my dissertation engages and builds on the fields of sociology of gender and sexualities, postcolonial feminist studies, queer of color analysis, queer theory, globalization studies, and Middle East studies.

Understanding queer subjectivities: boundaries, queer theory and intersectionality

I understand sexual subjectivities to be always in the making, constantly shifting, and always constituted by, and constitutive of, race, class, and gender. Therefore, I use a queer theoretical and queer of color critique to a sociological analysis of how queer individuals in Beirut construct, negotiate, and narrate their subjectivities across lines of gender, class, religious sect, and lived realities. I analyze gender and sexuality through social constructionist theories, developed and employed by the sociology of sexualities literature (most notably: Rubin 1984, Weeks 1985, Seidman 1996, 1998, Stein and Plummer 1996, Stein 1997, Vidal-Ortiz 2002, Moore 2006, 2012, Cantu 2009). In addition, my understanding of gender benefits from and builds on earlier sociological theorizations of gender as intersectional (Hill Collins 1980), gender as performance (West and Zimmerman 1987, West and Fenstermaker 1995), and gender as boundary-

making (Gerson and Peiss 1985). Following Gerson and Peiss (1985), Yural Davis and Anthias (1993), Joseph (1997), and Anzaldua (1987), I see boundaries as formative of unequal power dynamics, and constructed in order to maintain systems of hierarchy and inequality. As I show, boundaries (in this case, outness/closetedness, visible/invisible) are maintained in ways that exclude “others.” Therefore, the concept of boundaries as sites of negotiation and struggle better helps me understand how people make sense of and narrate their classed and gendered sexual subjectivities. Theoretically, boundaries suggest the policing of difference and maintenance of hierarchy; however, they do not necessarily suggest complete opposition. As Suad Joseph (1997) claims, “rarely is there consensus on the meanings of boundaries and categories. Rarely is there homogeneity on any side of a divide. Boundary making is about difference making for purposes of empowering or disempowering” (75).³ Joseph (1997) does not make a distinction between concepts of “categories” and “boundaries.” However, I see gender, race, and sexual categories as being maintained through and by boundaries. Distinctions between individuals based on gender, race, class, and religious sect are always employed in order to maintain a hierarchy.

First, my analysis employs poststructuralist and queer theoretical approaches that disrupt binaries between homo and heterosexualities, and do not conceive of sexuality in terms of fixed and static desires, identities, and/or practices. A queer theoretical approach centralizes the ways in which normative and non-normative understandings of sexuality create and form and are informed by systems of knowledge on gender and sexualities (Stein and Plummer 1996; Seidman 2006). Second, I understand gender and sexualities to always be produced and experienced through race, class and religious sect. I build on and

engage with women of color feminism and queer of color critique, understanding sexuality to always be intersectional and to be “constitutive and constituted by racialized gender and class formations” (Ferguson 2005; 88).⁴ Therefore, in discussing the production of difference in relation to gender and sexuality, I argue that difference is always produced and experienced through class, race, religious sect, and migration status.

Using a queer of color analysis in a non-US context, I argue that we must adjust what counts as an intersectional framework based on the particular historical period and place. Therefore, where class, race, and gender are the usual axes by which difference is produced in the US, for Lebanon, it becomes more about gender, class, and religious sect.⁵ In addition one’s access to and being part of queer networks (activist/non-activist), and refugee and migrant status are also important markers of the production of difference. Therefore, one’s experience of inclusion/exclusion is very contingent upon their class, gender, religious sect and sexuality.⁶

Queer theory, as defined by Stein and Plummer (1994), is a “conceptualization which sees sexual power as embedded in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binaries” (182). Therefore, queer theorization opens up the discussion of power and inequality by not limiting itself to the sexual arena but by looking at and exploring multiple arenas of social inequalities. In addition, it also problematizes notions of identity, including gender and sexual identities, whereby identities become understood as “always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing” (Stein and Plummer 1994,182). Within the realm of sexualities, both hetero and homosexualities get problematized and the systems

that render dominant and normative become questioned. Queer politics, as discussed by Haschemi Yekani, et al (2013), in the introduction to the book *Queer Futures*,

does not support any kind of minority, group or issue but, on the contrary, derives its political force from undermining any constellation that congeals into a stable structure. It is a cultural practice that dismantles heteronormativity and other norms and processes of normalization and directs our attention to the blank spaces, to that which is not culturally intelligible in any given order (7).

Queer politics centralize and help us understand issues that are not necessarily intelligible. Therefore, discussions of heteronormativity (Rubin 1984), and queer complicities and homonormativities (see Duggan 2003, Puar 2007, Kuntsman and Miyake 2008, Luibheid 2005, 2008, Benedicto 2013) become central in understanding the systems that privilege and highlight forms of homo- and heterosexuality that are seen and regarded as dominant in a society at a specific historical time. Homonormativity, according to Duggan, “is a politics that does not contest dominant hetero-normative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2003, 50). Therefore, homonormativity upholds heteronormative gay formations that are primarily based on depoliticization and consumption.

Queer theory, however, has been criticized for not always being attuned to the lived experiences and meaning making strategies of individuals (Hall 2009) and for privileging texts, literature and mass culture (Stein and Plummer 1994). In addition, Stein and Plummer (1994) contend “there is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore ‘real’ queer life as it is materially experienced across the world” (Stein and Plummer 1994, 184). Queer theory has also been criticized for not centralizing race and

class and being Eurocentric, and therefore assuming the universality of white queer subjects, while relegating experiences of non-Western and non-white individuals to the margins (Ferguson 2004, Haimés-Garcia 2011). However, by doing grounded sociological research and employing queer of color critique and queer theoretical approaches, which are still marginal in much sociological research (Ferguson 2004), I offer an analysis of sexual subjectivities as intersectional, multiple, contradictory, and complex.

In addition to the idea that sexualities are always in the making, a queer theoretical approach posits that “identities are always multiple and involve identity-components and categories of difference which intersect or combine with one another in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways” (Kong 2011, 29). Following Kong (2011), I seek to examine queer subjectivities through the lens of “politics of difference” and therefore take into account: gender race, class, sexuality, religious sect, the effects of war, etc.... in understanding the complexities of understandings of “queerness.” As Kong (2011) argues

identity cannot be separated from one’s categories of difference, such as one’s racial, ethnic, sexual, national or class position, one’s age or even one’s state of physical fitness. Through various forms and meanings, our identities embody multiple positioning and repositioning of the self (89).

That is, in order for one to understand and get at the complexities of “identity,” one needs to highlight an individual’s and groups’ multiple, intersecting, and sometimes contending positions that they employ and navigate their lives through. I also don’t seek to privilege male homosexualities, but will use the umbrella term “queer,” and will include diverse and multiple experiences of sexualities and gender expressions. Therefore, in understanding the lives of queer individuals in Beirut, I do not talk about queer

individuals as one group but, rather, I highlight how experiences of queerness are very much tied to race, class, religious sect, and migration status, to name a few.

Sociology of sexualities

The sociology of sexualities literature as discussed by Gamson and Moon (2004) employs a social constructionist approach to sexuality and centralizes context and history in uncovering the shifting and multiple understandings of “sexual meanings, categories and identities” (48). Moving away from an essentialist viewpoint that regards sexuality as an essential and predetermined state of being, social constructionist viewpoints, employed most notably by Rubin (1984), Weeks (1985, 2005), Seidman (1996), Stein and Plummer (1996), Stein (1997), and Gamson (2000), regard and centralize context and history in understanding the changing meanings of sexualities. As Joshua Gamson argues “sexuality was not a stable phenomenon of nature to be studied like plants or cell, but a set of meanings attached to bodies and desires by individuals, groups, and societies” (Gamson 2000, 352). Hence, by moving away from an essentialist approach, social constructionist approaches centralize meaning making in understanding sexual desires, practices, identities, and communities. Starting in the 1990s, the sociology of sexualities expanded to incorporate queer theoretical, intersectional and transnational approaches to sexuality studies (Gamson and Moon 2004). Studies have centralized the role of capitalism and capital in the formation of sexual identities (Altman 2001, D’Emilio, 1983, Cantu 2004; Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002). However, queer of color analysis, such as that introduced by Ferguson (2004), has been critical of the sociology of sexualities as historically being primarily interested in white racial formations.

I contribute to the field of sociology of sexualities by building on and engaging with works on globalization and sexuality, postcolonial, queer theory, and queer of color critique (Munoz 1999, Ferguson 2003). Echoing theorists such as Haimés-Garcia (2011), I recognize the centrality of women of color feminism and transnational feminisms in advancing intersectionality. As Haimés-Garcia (2011) demonstrates in his article “Queer Theory Revisited,” it is important to examine queer theory’s dominant genealogy and offer a different history, which considers black feminism and intersectionality as the starting point to contemporary queer theorizing. Hence, I engage in queer theorizing and analysis that privileges a transnational perspective and does not centralize white racial formations.

Queer theory, as Kong rightfully argues, considers multiplicities inhabited in sexuality and sexual identities, “by rethinking identity as a category containing conflicting and multiple meanings that interlocks with other categories such as those of gender, race and class” (Kong 2011, 19). In addition, applying a queer theoretical approach problematizes the binaries of homo/heterosexualities and makes it possible to understand and locate multiplicities within categories. My focus on subjectivities, rather than identities, is in line with queer and poststructuralist understandings of the self, where I see identity as signifying more stable and coherent understandings of the self. Framing the study in terms of subjectivities, I believe, better captures the fluidity by which people move in, out and through categories and denote a more fluid and unstable way of understanding the self. My understanding of subjectivity is informed by Manalansan’s (2000) definition of identity “not as a fixed and stable category, but rather as one that is highly processual, mobile, fluid, and contingent. Identities both collective and individual

are also ‘imagined,’ meaning that they are formulated and re-presented in particular cultural forms or expressions, such as rituals” (185). Therefore, queer subjectivities help me better capture the messiness inherent in how people fashion their identities by navigating the multiple positions they occupy and responding to specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. Finally, employing positionalities and subjectivities, rather than identities, reflects my own unease with using stable identity categorizations and the possibilities of imposing or reifying the existence of these categories and stable identities. This is, however, not to say that people’s lived experiences are not mediated and affected by the multiple categories in which they inhabit.

As previously mentioned, I situate my study within the sociology of sexualities that frames itself and uses queer theory and queer of color critique, intersectionality, and privileges a global perspective in the exploration of both knowledge production on sexuality and people’s lived everyday meaning making and construction of sexual lives and subjectivities. Works that take globalization seriously in understanding queer lives are particularly beneficial, especially in their usage of queer theoretical and intersectional approaches to sexualities.⁷

The coming out narrative and the closet

In an attempt to illustrate how “gay homosexuality,” has been and still is employed as a lens of explaining and misattributing contemporary “non-gay” homosexualities, Manolo Guzman claims that “one cannot exist outside the conditions of one’s existence” (Guzman 2005, 91). However, despite that, most research on homosexualities in Euro-American and non-Euro-American contexts have extensively

relied on dominant and hegemonic understandings of coming out, the closet, and mainstream gay visibility in order to make multiple experiences of sexualities fit into a dominant and intelligible narrative of “being gay.” Such an approach erases difference and flattens complexity, and portrays silences and the lack of public affirmations of gay identities as examples of “closetedness” and internalized homophobia. The closet narrative, or the “closet paradigm,” as Marlon Ross (2005) calls it, presents a compelling example, specifically because it has been extensively linked to assumptions of modernity and progress. In addition, in his examinations of the history of the study of sexualities and canonical sociology, Ferguson (2005) argues that coming out is represented “as the standard of liberation and modernity and racializes the closet as the symbol of pre-modern backwardness” (64). The binary of the coming out/closet narrative and its implications in discussions of modernity and progress has been contested by a number of theorists with regards to studying non-heterosexualities in African, Euro-American, Latin American, African American and Asian contexts (see Boellstroff 2005, Brown 2002, Currier 2012, Decena 2011, Ferguson 2004, Guzman 2006, Hoad 2000, Jackson 2011a, Kong 2011, Manalansan 2007, Martin 2003, 2009, Ross 2005, Tucker 2010, Wieringa 2007, Yue 2008). In addition, it has been explored and questioned in relation to non-Euro-American LGBTQ movements, specifically Latin American, African and South East Asian diasporic queer movements (see Das Gupta 2006, Jackson 2011b, Thayer 1997, Quiroga 2000, Currier 2012).

Without attempting to make generalizations or lay claims about a different mode or modes of “Arab homosexualities,” I am interested in how the concepts of the closet and visibilities are translated, altered, and/or employed in Lebanon. My aim is not to

render queer subjectivities intelligible or legible, but to centralize how queer subjectivities constitute and are constitutive of hegemonic discourses of modernity and progress. In addition, I centralize the exclusions inherent in the formations of normative queer subjectivities in Beirut.

In line with Travis Kong (2011), I use queer theory because it enables me “to question the coming-out model as privileged political act; and to challenge identity politics as the only sexual politics” (27). If I contend that the closet narrative, as described by Manalansan (2007), Decena (2011), Kong (2011), and Wieringa (2007), might be more constraining rather than helpful in such research, how can we escape the notion of coming out and the closet, and not think of it as the central trope in understanding these people’s lives? Is the imperative of the closet crucial for understandings of gay and lesbian lives everywhere?

Even though affirmative coming out narratives and the concept of the closet have been useful in documenting and illustrating particular individuals’ lives and experiences, they have been critiqued and questioned by poststructuralist theorists for “the privileged (white) gay, lesbian, and queer liberal subjects they inscribe and validate” (Puar 2007, 2). Queer theoretical approaches have criticized the coming out narrative and the concept of the closet for their reliance on and reproduction of the binary of closet/outness, which can arguably be considered an essentialist understanding of “being,” and the fact that these concepts do not always capture the lived realities of many people by not being attuned to intersectionality of race, class, and gender (Seidman 1994). The coming out narrative and the oppression of the closet have been central in understanding some US-based LGBT movements, especially in relation to rights claims and recognition (Seidman 2004).

Hence, coming out and claiming marginalized identities, even if strategically essentialist, has historically proven to help in gaining access to rights. However, using these constructs to structure knowledge about diverse non-heterosexualities can cause misrepresentation that aids in establishing and maintaining the hegemonic and dominant status of such narratives. In addition, the use of the coming out narratives in non-Western contexts has often been employed with undertones of developmental narratives of ‘modernity,’ which often positions queers of colors as being able “to step out of the shadows,” of their oppressive and oftentimes “immutable” cultures (Ahmed 2011,131).⁸

As previously mentioned, academic work on queer subjectivities in the Arab Middle East has been meager; however, published works by activists, especially in relation to issues of queer organizing and visibility, have been more prominent.⁹ In discussing the organizing strategies of Arab queer activism, Darwich and Maikey (2011) critique the polarizing discourse on LGBTQ activism, which relegates activism to being either pro- or anti-western, or feminist/LGBTQ. They claim that understanding Arab queer activism should entail a complex reading of the multiple geopolitical and intersectional issues at hand (Darwich and Maikey 2011). They also point to what they call “the hegemony of LGBT activism,” which represents issues of “coming out, visibility, and pride” to be a central lens for understanding LGBTQ activism and hence rejects “possibilities to explore alternative ways of addressing sexuality and gender in our societies” (2011, para 28). They present a way of understanding queer activism without necessarily promoting a reliance on binaries between the closet/coming out and visibility/invisibility.

Queer migrations

I benefit from work and theorizing in the queer migrations literature as it centralizes the role of discourses of modernity, progress and exceptionalism in understanding queer migrant sexualities. As El-Tayeb argues in her work on the European Union, while speaking about queer Muslims,

it is only when they can make the step into western modernity – a step that necessarily requires the break with, the coming out of the Muslim community – that they can claim an individualized identity as feminist or queer, usually by expressing gratitude for being saved by their ‘host society’ (El-Tayeb 2012, 80).

Therefore, as El-Tayeb (2012) argues, and as demonstrated in literatures on queer migrations and asylum-seeking cases, it has often been the case where, in order for an applicant to win asylum, she must convince the judge of the need for asylum, usually “painting” her country of origin, in a timeless, ahistorical, racist and colonialist terms (Randazzo 2000, Cantu 2009). By doing so, the asylum seeker is required to distance herself from her country of origin and reproduce narratives of being saved. In addition, asylum seekers must always “prove” their homosexuality as an immutable part of their identity (Cantu 2009). Therefore, in addition to proving that she has a well-founded fear of persecution, a queer asylum seeker must also still prove she is “gay” or “lesbian.” To prove one is gay or lesbian, asylum seekers must fit the stereotypical image of gays or lesbians in the US, as single, or living with a same-sex partner, “out,” and/or socially and politically active around issues of sexual orientation (Randazzo 2005).

A focus on the binary of the closet/outness, whether in asylum cases or other discussions on queer subjects, “normalizes one mode of same-sexual identity by marginalizing other experiences and representations of intragender affiliation” (Ross 2005, 183). Ross (2005) uses the example of racialized minorities to argue that

“racialized minorities may operate under different social protocols concerning what it means to be visible and invisible within normative sites like the family, the classroom, the workplace, the church, the street and the community more generally” (183). In addition, a focus on the closet also has the danger of “the assumption that practices that are not organized around visibility are “closeted” and the interpretation that lack of explicitly gay-identified people in the public arena signifies that a homophobic attitude” (Ferguson, 2005). Countering such narrow understandings of the closet/outness, Manalansan’s (1997) *Global Divas* illustrates how the closet and coming out are not similarly constituted within a Filipino male migrant community in NYC. In his ethnography, Manalansan’s interlocutors did not use coming out, but rather used the expression “ladladng kappa,” literally translating to “unfurling the cape” (434). This he argues “reveals gay identity to be something ‘worn’ and not necessarily ‘declared.’ And it is this act of ‘wearing’ identity that makes other public modes of gay identity articulation superfluous for many of my informants” (434). Therefore, Manalansan illustrates that “coming out” is not about necessary disclosures and declarations, rather the meaning of gay identities and embodiments shift based on contexts and subjects.

Cosmopolitanism

Dominant understandings of modernity, construct the emergence of gay rights in places as signs of cosmopolitanism and progress without taking into account exclusionary practices. In his essay “The Closet as a Raceless Paradigm,” Marlon Ross (2005) argues that “(white) queer theory and history,” have a tendency to focus and fixate on the closet as “the grounding principle for sexual experience, knowledge and politics”, which he

calls “claustrophilia” (162). Ross argues that this “clautrophilic fixation effectively diminished and disables the full engagement with potential insights from race theory and class analysis”(162). Ross shows how ideas about underdeveloped homo (sexual) subcultures have been explained and linked to assumptions of underdeveloped economy and underdeveloped culture. As Ross importantly asks, “what does it mean for a sexual subculture to be ‘relatively undeveloped’? Relative to what? Failing to develop toward what?” (163). Such questions guide my research, as I analyze the links between sexuality and linear narratives of progress and modernity. As previously mentioned, white Euro-American understandings of coming out, the closet, and LGBTQ visibility are often used as indicators of non-Western societies’ modernity and progress. My work complicates this stance, illustrating how queer lives in Beirut unsettle binaries of tradition/progress, visibility/invisibility, and East/West.

In addition, I show how dominant narratives of modernity construct the emergence of gay rights in the Middle East as a marker of progress, without taking into account exclusionary practices. Societies are thus considered cosmopolitan and exceptional based on “who” and “how” they tolerate. Therefore, certain types of gay subjects are celebrated and tolerated as opposed to and at the expense of other queer subjects (for example, gender non-normative, trans, and working class persons). These “appropriate” forms of gayness, also require that subjects which perform it partake in and represent a modern, cosmopolitan society where people are “free to be who they are” and where gender and sexual differences are tolerated. In addition, modern forms of gayness have been represented as partaking in a certain form of cosmopolitanism. As Binnie and Skeggs (2004) argue

cosmopolitanism is most commonly conceived of or represented as a particular attitude towards difference. To be cosmopolitan one has to have access to a particular form of knowledge, able to appropriate and know the other and generate authority from this knowing. In most definitions cosmopolitanism is not just about movement through culture with knowledge, but is an embodied subjectivity that relies on access to the requisite cultural capital to generate requisite dispositions (42).

Therefore, the “global gay” represents an example of a cosmopolitan subject, who has multiple forms of capital and who is able to consume both places and bodies through travel (Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Mobility, travel, and capital become central to the construction of this modern cosmopolitan subject. To unpack the exclusions inherent in contemporary understandings of cosmopolitanism and “tolerance,” I benefit from and engage with the works of Wendy Brown (2008) and Fatima El-Tayeb (2011).

Understanding the multiple exclusions that mainstream gay subjectivities are built on enables me to unpack the links between LGBTQ subjectivities, modernity, and progress. For that, I turn to intersectionality and studies of power and privilege, most notable in women of color and postcolonial feminisms.

Postcolonial feminisms and modernity

Most explanations and descriptions of LGBTQ lives often impose their own definitions of tolerance, sexual identities, and LGBTQ organizing and therefore simplify the complexities and priorities of LGBTQ-identified people’s lives in non Euro-American contexts. In order to understand the complexities of LGBTQ lives, I centralize context and the intersectionality of LGBTQ identified lives through the lens of “politics of difference” (Hill Collins 1980, Kong 2011). The politics of difference, introduced by black feminist thought and women of color feminism, and as described by Travis Kong, considers identities to be multiple and “involve identity-components and categories of

difference which intersect or combine with one another” (Kong 2011, 29). Countering an additive model of oppression, a politics of difference approach highlights how domination and subordination are best understood in terms of “interlocking hierarchies” (Kong 2011). In addition, as Patricia Hill Collins (1980) argues

intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice (Hill Collins 1980, 18).

Rather than imposing definitions of tolerance, cosmopolitanism and modernity, I am interested in people’s meaning-making processes and how they talk about and define “modern” subjects. I unpack the binary of modern/traditional and its uses by drawing on Saba Mahmood (2005), Lara Deeb (2006), and Zakia Salime’s (2011) works, especially how they complicate “agency” as it links to women’s movements and understandings of modernity in, respectively, the cases of an Islamic piety movement in Cairo, Shia women residing in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, and the contending and intersecting strategies of women’s movements in Morocco. First, the lives and narratives I have gathered cannot be understood simply as “resistance to power” to forms of “traditional” culture (Mahmood 2005). Second, individuals I talked to conceive of modernity and progress in multiple, often-contending and contradictory ways. As previously mentioned, their lives cannot be simply understood in relation to coming out/the closet and sexual identification but rather their lives must be situated along lines of multiple intersecting fields and lived experiences.

In her work on gender and public piety in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, Lara Deeb (2006) explores the meanings of modernity within a predominantly Shiite community in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Rather than attempting to reproduce a

binary of modern/traditional, she is interested in what the women she interviews define to be modern. Deeb argues against a singular understanding of progress and contests the concept of progress as having a linear developmental trajectory. In addition, she contests concepts of “alternative modernities” as reactionary concepts to the West (which almost always re-center Westerns conceptions of modernity). So, speaking against these alternative modernities and pluralizing modernities, she asserts, “I find it more useful to recognize the plurality of experience, interpretation, and understanding of this notion, however unwieldy, with which our informants grapple within fields of power, on a daily basis” (Deeb 2006, 15).

However, departing from Deeb, I do not attempt to illustrate how my interviewees fashion themselves as “modern;” instead, I am interested in how they invoke and talk about modernity as it applies to gender and sexuality in Beirut. Therefore, I do not intend to show how they claim or reject “modern subjectivities;” instead, I argue that this binary doesn’t capture the complexities since they locate the modernizing project of sexuality in neoliberal concepts of freedom. However, at the same time, they do not necessarily completely reject it. Therefore, I do not find the binary of modern/traditional to be a useful lens to help shed light on queer sexualities in Beirut.

From my analysis, I find that my interlocutors are not necessarily concerned with claiming to be modern or not, but rather situating their lives along different axes of experience, despite the fact that modernity is the dominant lens by which academics and journalists write about “gay life” in Lebanon. I find it more useful to understand and situate concepts of modernity and progress and unpack how they are “shaped by global discourses and regulatory regimes” (Salime 2011,135). These global discourses, I argue,

attempt to fit these lives and narratives into this modern/traditional binary and explains individuals' negotiations as struggles posited against traditional (Arab, sometimes Muslim) values, cultures, and homophobias.

Gay tourism studies and moving beyond the Self/Other binary

For further understanding of the links between travel and cosmopolitanism, I benefit from queer and gay tourism studies. Gay tourism studies, which is a fairly new topic to sociological and anthropological inquiry, has been largely advanced by a number of geographers whose work was central in challenging and questioning the heteronormativity and masculinist underpinnings of tourism and transnational mobility studies (Johnston 2001, Puar 2002, Waitt et al 2008). As well as challenging the heteronormativity in tourism studies, gay tourism scholars explore questions of gay and lesbian travel trends, the creation of gay tourist destinations, and marketing strategies used to attract gay and lesbian travelers in Western European and North American cities (Clift et al. 2002, Hughes 2006, Waitt and Markwell 2006, Waitt et al. 2008). A number of scholars have studied the ways in which the gay tourism industry has “created” certain destinations, outside the West “coded” as gay utopias, that enable Western gay tourists to live and project their fantasies onto foreign lands (Puar 2002, Waitt and Markwell 2006). Waitt and Markwell (2006) define gay tourism, as “a practice that may *enhance identities*, relies on *consumption practices* geared towards, *new, innovative, challenging experience*” (161). Further, they argue that gay tourism is premised on marketing campaigns and the opening up of liminal spaces “that offer escape from everyday social relationships through adventure, spectacle and encounters with difference” (Waitt and

Markwell 2006, 161). Gay tourism studies highlight the links between global mobility, sexuality and identity formation - as discussed by Altman (1996) - and the creation of “desirable” and promising gay touristic destination and utopias, where one can be anonymous and find a “home” away from home (Puar 2002, Perez 2005, Hughes 2006, Waitt and Markwell 2006).

Another body of research on tourism and travel centralizes postcolonial theory and looks at the links between the modes of travel and writing inherent in gay tourism and the colonial travel narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (see Boone 1995, Hoad 2000, Alexander 2001, Perez 2005). In these works researchers examine how gay tourist narratives and travels embody and replicate previous heteronormative colonial narratives of conquest, and discovery, where the gay tourist is presented as superior to the “natives” (Waitt et al. 2008).

Studies of queer and gay tourism have also attempted to understand how such an industry has contributed to the image of the “gay cosmopolitan tourist,” who is assumed to combine “travel, social progress and politics in new ways” (Giorgi 2002, 57). “He [sic],” it is argued, has become a “flag-bearer of a progressive, socially visible gay identity connected to enlightened democratic nation-states who is then used as a standard in evaluating the progress of ‘non-Western’ societies” (Murray 2007, 52).

Gay tour guides and international gay and lesbian tour agencies are primary ways by which these destinations are marketed. According to Alexander (2001), gay utopias are presented as “getaways” which are usually “located elsewhere, outside the West, envisioned as having something that can be used, however, temporarily” (295).

Interestingly, Alexander (2001) adds “this elsewhere, can be coveted for its use value, its serviceability (a strip of beach, a hotel, a club, a much-needed place for cruising)” (295).

Queering progress narratives

There is a tendency to represent LGBTQ individuals blaming repressive Arab “culture” and lauding the West and the possibilities for freedom [most notable in Whitaker (2006) and recently El-Fekki (2012)]. The lens of the repression/celebration hypothesis is the dominant view by which queer lives and organizing have been studied and situated.¹⁰ On the one hand, researchers argue that individuals are repressed, and on the other, there is a celebration of what is referred to as “nascent” LGBTQ life. The celebration of the possibilities for “queer life” usually takes on the form of linear progress narratives. These in turn get mapped on to places and people. For example, performances and identifications with “appropriate” forms of gayness also require that subjects who perform them to partake in and represent a modern and cosmopolitan society where people are “free to be who they are” and where gender and sexual differences are “tolerated.” Various scholars of queer and sexuality studies, however, have been critical of using the concepts of “modernity” to understand and assess sexual subjectivities, most notably Manalansan (1995, 2003), Ferguson (2004), Ross (2005), and Guzman (2006), and Quiroga (2001).

Several scholars have argued that, through the lens of Western modernity, homosexualities that do not take the form of Western “gay” sexuality appear as earlier stages of the “natural” evolution towards gay sexuality. For example, Manalansan (1995) in “The Shadows of Stonewall” illustrates how in the US “gay” becomes “synonymous

with capitalist expansion” (428). Analyzing discourses on the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, academic writing on modern homosexuality, and the conference at the International Lesbian and Gay Association, Manalansan illustrates that “all same-sex phenomena are placed within a developmental and teleological matrix that ends with Western ‘gay’ sexuality. Non-‘gay’ forms are seen as archeological artifacts to be reckoned with only when excavating the origins of pancultural/pan-global homosexuality” (428). That is, Manalansan shows how non-gay homosexualities only become intelligible in white Euro-American contexts, when they are framed in terms of progress narratives.

Queer of color critique and women of color feminisms

Dominant examinations of queer subjectivities have focused on issues of identity and culture. However, women of color feminisms, and queer of color approaches argue that studying sexualities should not solely centralize concepts of identity but should critically examine multiple positionalities, and question liberal conceptions of “agency” and “freedom.” Speaking about queer studies and its uses, I agree with Quiroga’s (2003) claim that:

as long as queer studies is presumed to be solely a question of identity, as long as it remains within the framework of identity, it will always be a collaborative enterprise with power. Queer studies erases questions of class and capitalism for the sake of an ethnicity predicated solely on culture. Identity softens the edges; it is the Trojan horse by means of which an insidious form of class identification enters different realms (134).

By employing intersectional analysis that draws on women of color feminism and queer of color analysis and critique, I centralize the role of class, normativity, power, and privilege in order to unpack the ways that queer individuals manage their everyday lives

in Beirut. To gain an understanding of the complex ways that these queer subjectivities are represented, negotiated, articulated, and performed, I take into account race, class, and religious sect, rather than just gender and sexuality. I employ a queer of color analysis, which as Roderick Ferguson (2004) defines it:

interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique (149).

That is, I do not assume or treat queer individuals all belong to “one community;” rather I understand that their positionalities and experiences are always gendered, and classed.

Therefore, I unpack concepts of privilege and focus on exclusions within “queer communities” in Beirut. Employing women of color feminism and queer of color critique opens up the possibility of examining power relations and privilege within marginalized communities. As Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson (2011) argue, they “reveal the ways in which racialized communities are not homogeneous but instead have always policed and preserved the difference between those who are able to conform to categories of normativity, respectability and value, and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories” (2). Other analysis of sexualities also takes class to be central, and centralize the political economy of sexuality (see Ferguson 2005, Cantu 2009, Stein 2013). ¹¹

To reiterate, moving away from conceptions of identities as fixed categories, I use postcolonial feminist and queer of color critique to underscore how queer and gendered subjectivities are a by-product of intersectional lives, struggles, and contexts. Therefore, I explore difference in relation to sexuality, as a product of social context, intersectionality of struggles, strategic uses of experience, and movements between different and multiple

positionalities. Such an analysis of sexual subjectivities does not relegate “non-dominant” understandings of homo (sexualities) that do not necessarily rely on coming out and a specific form of visibility to being “alternative” and “other” conceptions of sexuality, but rather sheds light on individual and collective meaning-making processes situated within a specific historical time and context, in this case, that of contemporary Beirut.

¹ For recent work on LGBTQ lives in the Arab Middle East, See Georgis (2013), Merabet (2014), and Naber and Zaatari (2014).

² More recently, there was a regained interest in the possibilities for change for LGBT activism in the Arab World sparked by the “Arab Spring.”

³ As with Omi and Winant’s (1986) racial formation theory, we can see how the state creates these binary distinctions and hierarchies as well.

⁴ Also see Hong and Ferguson (2011). “Women of color feminism,” as argued by Hong and Ferguson (2011) can be seen as “queer of color critique insofar as these texts consistently situate sexuality as constitutive of race and gender” (2).

⁵ This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, rather a suggested framework.

⁶ Similarly to how El-Tayeb uses queer of color analysis in a non-US context (El-Tayeb 2011).

⁷ Most notably, concepts developed by sociologist Manolo Guzman in *Gay Hegemonies/Latino Masculinities* (2005), Carlos Decena’s *Tacit Subjects* (2011), Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas* (2003), Andrew Tucker’s *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (2009), Tom Boellstroff’s *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (2005), Ashley Currier’s *Out in Africa* (2012), Jose Quiroga’s *Tropics of Desire* (2000), and Travis Kong’s *Chinese Male Homosexualities* (2011), Martin F (2003) *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*, and Audrey Yue’s (2008) “King Victoria: Asian drag kings, postcolonial female masculinity and hybrid sexuality in Australia.”

⁸ Also see Ross (2005), Perez (2005), Cantu (2009), and El-Tayeb (2012).

⁹ For academic work that takes into account LGBT activism and politics in Lebanon, see Naber and Zaatari (2014).

¹⁰ By the repression/celebration hypothesis, I am referring to the tendency to either celebrate what is assumed to be the “nascent” gay life or focus mostly on the repression that LGBTQ individuals face, without centralizing context or providing a lens that doesn’t rely on this binary.

¹¹ For critiques of gay marriage, see Stein (2013).

Chapter Three

Queering Beirut, the “Paris of the Middle East:” fractal Orientalism and essentialized masculinities in contemporary gay travelogues

In January 2009, the *New York Times* chose Beirut as the number one travel destination for that year, specifically for the luxury it promises and for the fact that it was “poised to reclaim its title as Paris of the Middle East” (Sherwood and Williams 2009). Titles such as “Paris of the Middle East,” “Switzerland of the Orient,” or even more recently “San Francisco of the Arab World,” “Amsterdam of the Middle East,” and “French Riviera of the Middle East,” are often bestowed upon Beirut, specifically for its more “liberal,” relaxed and open atmosphere and its thriving nightlife in relation to other neighboring Arab cities (Zoepf 2007). Beirut has also been described as the “sin city” of the Middle East and the Arab World, where tourists flock to take part in what is described as Lebanon’s “glamorous nightlife, glitzy shows, nudist beach parties and gay clubs”(Yazbeck 2009). In an article published in the *New York Times* in July 2009, Beirut was hailed as the “Provincetown of the Middle East,” where “gay men and women from other Arab countries and the West are increasingly vacationing.” Patrick Healy, author of the article, describes the choice of vacationing in Beirut as “all the more *sexy* and *thrilling* for some because they feel they are living on the *edge* and *discovering* a gay culture that is *freshly evolving*” (Healy 2009, 1 emphasis added).

The assassination of the Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri, which sparked the “Cedar Revolution” by major anti-Syrian political groups in the country, followed by Syrian troops withdrawal from Lebanon, is generally regarded by Western media as a new turning point in Lebanese democracy. These events brought about an upsurge in

Euro-American journalistic interest in Lebanon and specifically in “gay life” in Beirut (Zoepef 2007, Healy 2009, Teulings 2010). Journalistic accounts and travelogues (re) present a Beirut that is welcoming and accommodating to Western gay tourists to the extent that Beirut is described as “the chameleon city, catering to any desire,” where, anything one wants can be found in abundance (Masri 2009).

In this chapter, I analyze the discourses that circulate in a number of Euro-American journalistic publications, gay travelogues, and in the international gay tour guide *Spartacus*, since 2005.¹ I look at the ways in which these representations are central in “creating” and codifying Beirut as a new “gay friendly” destination, to be visited, “discovered” and experienced by affluent cosmopolitan Western gay male travelers. Since representations in gay travelogues often trade in imagined “sexual utopias” and promise encounters in unfamiliar and exotic settings with other men (Alexander 2011), I examine how both Beirut and the Lebanese are represented and made intelligible by and for Euro-American travelers, as evidenced by the publications in which they appear.² How does the “queer Other” and “Other” queer spaces become conveniently defined and represented in these travelogues? How do these articles situate and define Beirut in relation to other Arab cities? How are images of potential gay tourists and locals relationally constructed? How is sexuality (specifically gay homosexualities) deployed and used in ways that rely on linear narratives of progress?

First, I examine the ways in which “gay Beirut” is made visible and intelligible by exploring how notions of unfamiliarity are managed. Departing from Said (1978), I argue that even though these representations are engaged in Orientalist and nativizing

discourses, they do not simply rest on the binary of East/West and Lebanese/Euro-American. Liminality, hybridity, and relationality, become central concepts to look at, where Beirut's location in the Arab Middle East, its "special" political situation, and its "liberal" and "laissez-faire traditions" become juxtaposed to present it as an attractive new option for adventurous gay travelers (Khalaf 2012). These Orientalist depictions of both place and people are complicated by distinctions made within the Arab Middle East. These complex representations can be analyzed using what I call "fractal Orientalism." Fractals, or what Andrew Abbott (2001) calls "nested dichotomies," serve as a useful metaphor to understand the textual production of these Orientalisms within the Middle East. These distinctions are largely based on linear narratives of progress, where progress is primarily measured in terms of "tolerant" attitudes towards homosexuality and the presence of Western constituted understandings of gay identity, gay-friendly spaces and an LGBTQ organization.

Second, I examine the ways by which both tourists and locals are essentialized, gendered, sexualized and racialized in these representations. I illustrate the Orientalist undertones of these depictions by touching upon the discourses of discovery, exploration and adventure that circulate in these travelogues and that (re)present a certain notion of "gay identity" premised on "outness" (being openly gay), transnational mobility and masculinist assumptions of travel. Since the writing about "Other" places and people entails a process of self-making and self-definition, I want to underscore the ways that these texts are actively shaping and constructing relational images of the Western gay tourists and the "locals." I propose that the representations of these masculinities and sexual identities are best understood by looking at intersections of race, gender, sexuality,

class, physicality and transnational mobility. As such multiple masculinities can be recognized and understood via various racial, gendered and classed exclusions. Finally, I raise questions regarding how such gay tourism texts rely on and reproduce notions of essentialized masculinities and sexual identities rather than challenge them. Even though gay tourism is premised on disruptions of heteronormative spaces, these travelogues circulate and rely on essentialist and reductionist understandings of gender and sexuality both in the presumed East and West. Ultimately, these articles, while actively promoting and attempting to make “gay Beirut” intelligible, render class distinctions invisible, and heavily rely on culture to explain difference, which simplifies both tourists and locals’ conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Orientalism, desire and gay travel

The European fascination with the “mysteries” of the Orient has a longstanding tradition as Edward Said illustrates in *Orientalism*. The Orient, according to Said (1978) “was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, landscapes, and remarkable experiences”(1). By defining and locating an “assumed homogeneous Other,” Europeans were able to define themselves especially in terms of binary oppositional relationships between East/West, which mapped onto binaries of Self/Other, civilized/uncivilized, and progressive/ unprogressive. Said (1978) describes Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restricting and having authority over the Orient,” which renders “‘it’ both voiceless and with no authority over to its own representation”(3). The Other in Orientalist depictions is defined strategically and conveniently in order to fit “familiar” and intelligible imaginings of the “West.” The Orient is often described as unchanging and ahistorical

and always has a precedent, whereby “every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge about the Orient, to which he [*sic*] refers and on which he relies (Said 1978, 21). Hence, the citational nature of Orientalism becomes central where the representations and images described are often “located” within other texts (Said 1978).

Said (1978) argues that the Orient was historically depicted as a place where diverse sexualities existed, and where Europeans imagined they could obtain sexual experiences unobtainable in Europe. Other scholars have argued that the Orient has long served as a place on which the Orientalists projected both their heterosexual and homosexual fantasies (Aloulla 1987, Boone 1995, Grewal 1996, Massad 2007). They illustrate the ways in which the Orient has been historically represented as a place with perverse sexual practices and a place of projected sexual and erotic fantasies (Boone 1995, Massad 2007). Boone starts his article “Vacation Cruises; or the Homoerotics of Orientalism,” by claiming that “perhaps nowhere else are the sexual politics of colonial narrative so explicitly thematized as in those voyages to the Near East, recorded or imagined by Western men” (Boone 1995, 89). Boone (1995) rightfully claims that Said did not account for the links between these representations and the “homoerotic” elements found in these Orientalist pursuits. Said’s (1978) discussion of the “excess” found in this Otherness is implicitly heterosexual in nature. However, a close examination of writings and travelogues of European and Western travellers to the Near East reveals that “homoerotic” elements were imbued in the representations of the “Other” (Boone 1995). How do these articles gain authority and “truth” in these representations? Following Said (1978) and Butler (1990), and as already discussed,

representations become “naturalized” by the repetition and the citationary nature of their circulation. These articles do not circulate in a vacuum but repeatedly cite and recite each other. Further, they gain “authority” from eyewitness accounts and they rely on previously published material, which circulates in other Euro-American based newspapers, stories and accounts.

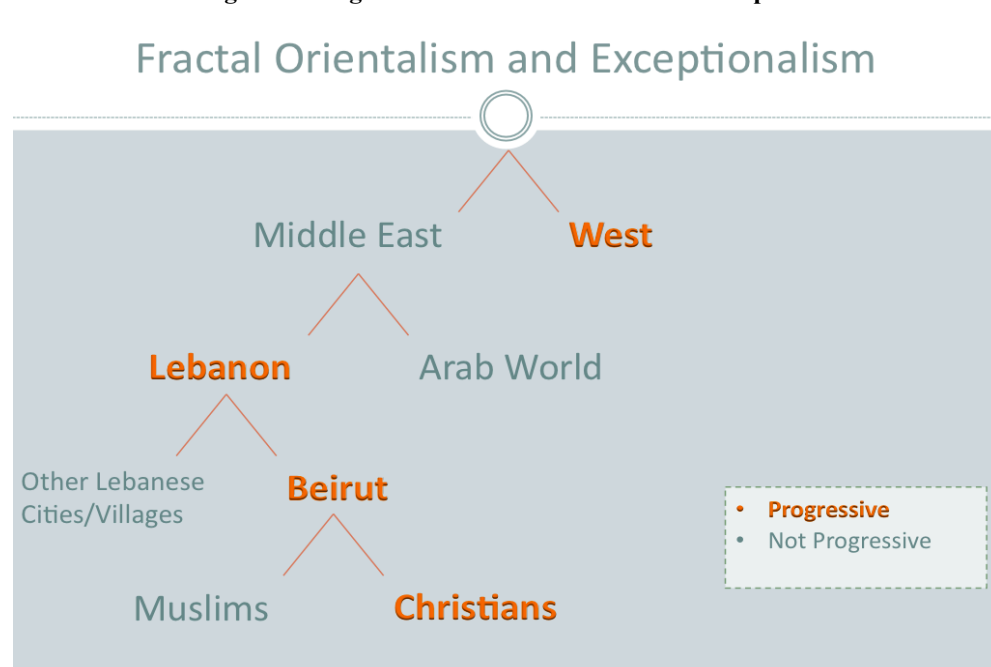
Fractal Orientalism: intelligibility and relationality

One of the primary ways in which these articles and travelogues promote Beirut and make it intelligible is by employing “similes” and “metaphors,” a device that is also very common in studies on sexualities in Beirut (Dann 1992, 59). Varied ways of naming the city construct a Beirut that can only be understood by situating it in relation to both European cities and cities in the Arab Middle East. However, rather than simply using binary categorizations of East/West, the articles blur such distinctions. Despite its location in the Arab Middle East, Beirut is distanced from other neighboring cities on a number of occasions. This creates Orientalism within the “Orient,” or what I call “fractal Orientalism.”

The notion of fractals, borrowed from Andrew Abbott (2001), refers to geometric patterns that repeat themselves in the forms of “nested dichotomies” (9). In his discussion of fractals in the social sciences, Abbott presents two characterizations of fractals, which are useful in understanding how these representation position Beirut. According to Abbott (2001) fractals rely on “nested dichotomies,” which function like “segmental kinship systems,” and “where people know their near kin very well”(11). In this case, the guides rely on fractal Orientalism, based on notions of “openness” and “tolerance” to

non-heterosexual sexualities, which makes it possible to market Beirut as a “gay friendly” destination in relation to other neighbouring Arab cities. For example, the West is produced/presented as more progressive, than the Middle East. Then fractal Orientalism produces Lebanon as more “progressive” than other Arab Middle Eastern countries, and Beirut becomes more “gay friendly” than the rest of Lebanon. This pattern extends to the descriptions within Beirut and between the Lebanese, where it is seen within a Christian/Muslim divide. Neighborhoods that are more predominantly Muslim are seen as less open than their Christian counterparts.³ This fractal Orientalism also creates distinction between “good” and “bad” Arabs and Muslims. These distinctions get taken up by the Lebanese in order to distance themselves from other Arabs and countries in the Middle East. This in turn, become one of the primary characterizations that narratives of Beirut’s exceptionalism are built on. In order to better visualize these fractals and distinctions I constructed a diagram, see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Diagram Fractal Orientalism and Exceptionalism



In some articles, Beirut becomes “the amazing and fascinating result of East meets West” (Smith 2006, *Spartacus* 2009, 2011). Beirut is hailed as the “the largest city and the *most liberal urban* centre in the country, the last big city in *European terms* before the *desert*” (*Spartacus* 2011, 578 emphasis added). This is striking primarily for the way in which Beirut is compared to a city (in “European” terms) with the addition that what comes after it is the “desert.” This distinction between Beirut and other Arab cities is made explicit in some articles, where it is claimed to “represent a different Middle East for some gay and lesbian Arabs” and is also considered as “the Arab World’s most gay friendly city” (Smith 2006, Healy 2009).

Comparing Beirut to different European and American cities, while still situating it as part of the Arab Middle East, is another example of how these guides rely on and create these fractal distinctions. Beirut’s exceptionalism then, seems to be made possible, only by situating it as engaging with both East and West. Titles such as “Paris of the Middle East,” “Switzerland of the Middle East,” “San Francisco of the Arab world,” and “Amsterdam of the Arab world,” and more recently “Christopher Street of the Middle East,” serve as a means of situating the city as both exotic and familiar (Sherwood and Williams 2009, Zoepf 2007). Beirut is interchangeably and conveniently placed within the Arab world, the Middle East and sometimes the Muslim World with few distinctions between these geographical concepts. In addition, situating Beirut as “a Mediterranean capital of night life” illustrates the ways in which it becomes conveniently placed in order to become intelligible to the audiences (Healy 2009). Such shifting localizations of Beirut point out to the fluidity of its representations in attempts to make it comprehensible.

However, despite the fact that Beirut is compared to major Euro-American cities, it is still distanced from them. It is represented as “European” and “Western,” in its “glitzy nightlife” and façade, but not European, due to its lack of cultural life. This becomes very apparent, when Healy claims that “the cultural life here is still in a stage of post war development, with few museums or typical tourist destinations” (Healy 2009, 2). What remains Orientalist in these accounts is the fact that Beirut is represented as having little “cultural life,” but it is not Orientalist in the sense that it is presented as “progressing” and not timeless.

Exceptional status of homosexuality

One of the central ways by which the articles distance Beirut from other Arab cities is by the presentation of the “exceptional status of homosexuality.” Even though homosexuality is technically illegal in Lebanon (since it can be considered “unnatural” by the Lebanese penal code 534), and is punishable for up to one year in prison, all the articles examined claim that Beirut is still safe for gay western tourists. The articles claim that the Lebanese state has not been actively enforcing article 534, nor detaining people who are perceived to engage or who do engage in same-sex acts (Whitaker 2006, Spartacus 2011). However, as discussed by Makarem (2011) the application of 534 remains highly discriminatory where it is often used against already marginalized groups in Lebanese society.

Perceptions of Beirut’s openness to sexual diversity is primarily explained by the presence of the somewhat open gay and lesbian events, bars, clubs and an LGBTQ travel agency. In the past few years, two local gay and lesbian rights organizations (Helem and

Meem) have been working on LGBTQ community building and calling for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights in Lebanon. Despite the fact that the diverse make-up of Lebanese society is assumed to make it easier for groups to “tolerate” and accept difference, some argue that it is specifically “the sectarian makeup of its society, which provides a breeding ground for divisions and intolerance” (M, Nadine n.d., 1). Rampant racism, most notably against Palestinian refugees, migrant domestic workers from East Africa and South East Asia, and more recently, Syrian refugees, provides a very strong case, against perceptions of “openness and acceptance,” to all foreigners as described in the articles.

In addition to representing Beirut as a playground, it is also presented as a “safe” haven for other queer Arabs (Zoepf 2006). For example, as Healy (2009) claims, “But even more than the partying, Beirut represents a different Middle East for some gay and lesbian Arabs: the only place in the region where they can openly enjoy a social life denied them at home” (3 emphasis added).

Healy (2009) includes accounts of a number of gay Arab men whom he met in Beirut, one of which is Mohammad, a gay Iraqi, who claims that: “Beirut is freedom. I can be every part of Mohammad here” (4). This furthers the distinction of Beirut from other Arab cities, but at the same time contextualizing it in the Arab Middle East makes it seem like it is “as best as it gets” for gay-identified Arab men. However, at the same time, Lebanon is presented as “leading the way for other Arab nations,” where diversity is much more pronounced than in other Arab countries (Smith 2006, 3). For example, in the article “Beirut, Unexpected,” Smith (2006) distances Lebanon and the Lebanese from other Arab countries and Arabs by claiming that Muslims and Christians coexist and live

side by side, and that “the Lebanese are descendants of the Phoenicians, a seafaring society that became one of the world’s greatest civilizations precisely because they were open to new things” (3). Despite the fact that Beirut is “more open,” than its Arab counterparts, the presentation of Beirut as exceptional relies on the assumptions of linear narratives of progress.

Linear narratives of progress and discourses of discovery

The second most prevalent theme in the articles is the presentation of gay life in Beirut in terms of linear narratives of progress, and discourses of discovery. As previously stated by Alexander (2001), Puar (2001) and Waitt and Markwell (2006), gay travelogues and journalistic articles, are both “embedded in and re-circulate a Euro-American colonial geography that relies upon evolutionary narratives about non-Euro-American people, places and times” (Waitt and Markwell 2006, 78). These evolutionary narratives incorporate notions of progress, homophobia and a human rights discourse that positions countries that are more gay-friendly as more “modern”, and where the “presence of Western-constituted gayness” is used as a marker of social progress and openness (Hoad 2000, Waitt and Markwell 2006, 88). Therefore, in the case of Beirut, having “nascent” LGBTQ movements and the presence of open gay and lesbian friendly bars, clubs makes it marked as more “progressive” and “progressed” in relation to other Arab cities.

The elements of surprise and “newness” are also central in these articles, whereby there is always an element of surprise expressed with regards to the fact that Beirut is

becoming a “new” gay friendly city in the Arab Middle East, albeit, one that needs to be discovered. Claims such as the following, are quite explicit and indicative in this regard,

Gay life in this city is still inching out of the shadows, to be sure but it seems to have developed a steady forward momentum since the end of Lebanon’s 15 year civil war in 1990 and especially in the calm that has followed the brief 2006 war between Hezbollah forces and Israel. (Healy 2009, 2 emphasis added).

Almost all the articles analyzed, including *Spartacus*’s section on Beirut, are premised on the notion of “surprise,” where Beirut is represented as a city that is constantly changing and where “even gay life is booming” (Teulings 2010, 102). Furthermore, the articles mention that the situation of gay men in the country has gotten better in the recent years, whereby “gay bars and clubs operate freely and an LGBTQ centre has been created to cater to all needs of the [gay] community” (*Spartacus* 2011, 578).

Orientalist depictions and representations are not limited to gay travelogues but are also heavily employed in a number of studies, most recently Shereen El-Feki’s *Sex and the Citadel* (2013). In her book, El-Feki documents the changing nature of attitudes on sexuality in both Egypt and Lebanon, while focusing on the “possibilities for change” in the Arab World. In her introduction, using very direct Orientalist tropes, she invokes “One Thousand and One Nights” in describing her research, she states “It took more than a thousand days to assemble these stories, and, like One Thousand and One Nights, these tales lead into each other in often unexpected ways” (xviii).

In attempting to explain the changing sexual lives and the possibility for “progress” in the Arab World, El-Feki states that it is “like the West,” albeit located at a different historical juncture (locating the Arab World at an “older historical period”):

In broad strokes, this sexual climate looks a lot like *the West on the brink of the sexual revolution*. And many of the same underlying forces that drove change in Europe and America are present in the modern Arab” (xvii, my emphasis).

The explanations provided by El-Feki, who was a journalist herself, offer very similar descriptions of Beirut included in the gay travelogues that I discuss. In addition, it reproduces the linear progress narrative, which posits that Arab societies are on a linear Western liberal trajectory for women's and LGBTQ rights, however, locating them as lagging behind but "working to catch up."

In addition, despite her argument that societies have their own trajectories for change, the author still positions the West and the Arab World in opposition to each other and points to the fact that "development is a journey," which "Arab" societies are on, but are taking more time to arrive at:

Development is a journey, not a race, and different societies take different paths. Some destinations are, however, more desirable than others. I believe that a society that allows people to make their own choices and to realize their sexual potential, that provides them with the education, tools, and opportunities to do so, and that respects the rights of others in the process is a better place for it. I do not believe this is fundamentally incompatible with social values in the Arab world, *which was once more open to the full spectrum of human sexuality and could be so again*. Nor need this irremediably clash with the region's dominant faith: it is through their interpretations of Islam that many Muslims are boxing themselves and their religion in (El Feki 2013, xvii-xviii).

El-Feki explicitly describes development in terms of a linear journey that different societies are on. In this quote she makes a distinction between Islam and Muslims' interpretation of Islam, which, she claims, stands in the Muslims' way of progress, instead of the religion itself. That is, El-Feki does not blame Islam for what she describes as "lack of openness" to the "full spectrum of human sexuality," rather she claims that it is Muslims' interpretation of Islam that is at the root of this "lack of openness." El-Feki's analysis does not take into account diverse interpretations of Islam in the region, nor does it situate the region, or take into account differences between Lebanon or Egypt.

Rather, she makes generalizations about Arabs and Muslims, while emphasizing that there are possibilities for change in the Arab world, despite what she describes as their “falling behind.”

Exclusions in the representations of the gay tourist

Since these representations are written by Euro-American journalists and circulate in Western media, the consumers of the newspaper, magazines and guides are assumed to be located in the West. The invisibility of women as travelers and as locals emphasizes the masculinist assumptions of this mode of travel and highlights the ways in which these representations are restricted to men. In addition, there is a complete erasure and invisibility of trans bodies and experiences both in terms of the tourist and the “locals.” The image of the tourist also assumes other exclusions.

Even though *Spartacus* claims to be international, and promises to identify the gay “promised lands” to everyone who belongs to the global gay community, it is not as inclusive as it claims to be (Alexander 2001; Waitt and Markwell 2006). According to Alexander (2001) the quintessential homosexual consumer in the US is “invented and imagined as white and male” (88). Waitt and Markwell (2006) echo Alexander’s claims that the tourists to whom this guide is directed to are usually positioned as “white, increasingly ‘macho,’ upwardly mobile, fashion and body conscious and sexually adventurous men” (88). In addition, Alexander (2001) argues that the third world gay man is excluded as a gay traveler, when she claims that “he”

is not expected to journey from home simply in search of sexual pleasure in the First World; he is to be encountered in the authentic local geography, imagined back into the “native” context in order to conform to and complete the terms of this colonialist fantasy (300).

However, as previously noted, it is not only the third world gay men that are excluded, but women are excluded all together.

I want to touch upon the advertisement of the 2010 international Gay Bear Arabia event co-organized by IGLTA (International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association) and Lebtour. The “bear,” simplified by Healy’s definition as “a term used the world over for heavysset, hairy guys usually older than 30”, is often invoked in these articles most notably while discussing the above-mentioned pageant (Healy 2009, 2). The “bear” phenomenon, which associates gay men with hypermasculinity, may disrupt the links between male homosexuality and gender non-conformity, specifically by “rejecting strict body norms (washboard abs and hairless torsos) that the broader gay community tends to value” (Slevin and Linneman 2009, 504, McCormick 2011). “Bears” reject body norms such as abs and “hairless torsos” and embody what they consider “more masculine” traits (for example, body hair), as opposed to embodying more gender-fluid or gender non-normative attributes. Hence, their rejection is not a rejection of gender norms, rather a rejection of “mainstream gay body norms,” and hence they embody a hyper-masculinity. The focus on the image of the bear, its complexities, and the ways by which it is appropriated and negotiated in a Lebanese and Syrian context, both by self-identifying bears and as a marketing tool by Lebtour is thoroughly explored by McCormick (2011). However, the image of the bear, assumed to be hyper-masculine and “closer to nature,” is often de-contextualized in these articles and advertisements and employed in ways that confirm Orientalist stereotypes of hairy, and seemingly hyper masculine Arab men (McCormick 2011).

The title of the promotional trip “On the steps of Lawrence of Arabia,” posted on the IGLTA’s website promoting the IGLTA symposium and FAM trip to Beirut is followed by:

Can you hear the Bears of Arabia roar? They are calling you to Beirut, Baalbeck, Byblos, Jeita Grottos, Damascus, Amman & Surely the magnificent Petra. Don’t miss out on discovering Lebanon, Syria & Jordan’s hottest men! (2010).

The description on the IGLTA website goes on to assert that the countries which “captivated Lawrence of Arabia and Indiana Jones” are now for the tourist to explore. It also gives the presumed tourist the option of “reliving Lawrence of Arabia’s adventure” by visiting the three destinations of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, with the gay bear Arabia group, Mister Gay Bear Arabia and Mister Cub Arabia, as they hit the road from Beirut to Damascus, while promising to let “the refreshing breeze lift [their] hangover” (2010).

“Lawrence of Arabia,” or the “Blond Bedouin,” was “a British intelligence officer who lived among Bedouin Arabs and became the commander of their guerrilla army and led them to freedom during the latter part of the First World War” (Dawson 1991, 131). His figure and image has been described by many theorists to epitomize “the enduring myths of military manhood in twentieth century Western culture” (Dawson 1991, 113, see also Connell 2001). However, at the same time, Lawrence of Arabia, whose homosexuality was hinted at, was not simply represented as always “conventionally masculine,” but rather as engaging with both masculine and non-masculine traits (Caton 1999). In the article “The Blond Bedouin,” Dawson (1991) argues that the image of Lawrence of Arabia in the media, interestingly juxtaposes the image of the “soldier” (considered to be the most masculine of men), and a man “elaborately arrayed in flowing skirts,” which she describes as a “transgression of gender fixity”(113). Invoking the

image of Lawrence of Arabia is highly linked to notions of discovery, adventure, conquest and individualism, all associated with and similar to the notions that circulate in the representations of the gay tourist. However, his engagement with both conventional and unconventional masculine traits, where, despite being a soldier, he was soft spoken and displayed feminine mannerisms at times, illustrates more fluidity in masculine gender performances (Caton 1999). Whereas one can see that there is more “gender play” in the representation of “Lawrence of Arabia,” the circulated images of the gay male tourist presumes gender and sexual fixity, and relies on an “out” gay man who is gender normative.

The traveler in most of the travelogues is presented as an “out” gay man, living in the West, looking for a vacation “outside the West,” and capitalizes on the sense of adventure and discovery, and on how brave one is by going to a dangerous, albeit thrilling, place such as Lebanon. However, this traveler is “not any gay man,” since the invocations of Beirut as Paris, San Francisco, Amsterdam, and Provincetown assume that the presumed traveler has a knowledge and appreciation of these places. Hence, having cultural and economic capital becomes central in embodying this traveler, where others who don’t possess such capital are excluded.

Being “out” and “gay identified” become explicit, when the travelogues attempt to explain and uncover the ways in which Arab and Lebanese men are not necessarily “out” or gay identified in ways that the out traveler might be familiar with. Therefore the binary/trope of outness/closetedness is a means by which they mark different “engagements” with gayness. In addition, there is an essentialization of “locals,” where only a few activists, singers, and travel agency are presented as out and other locals are

not. It is true that these articles present different “gay friendly” (but never “gay”) venues found in Beirut, however they still attempt to mark difference. Given that Beirut does not have a “gay neighborhood” the tourist is called upon to visit and experience the number of gay friendly spots, sites and cruising areas (Healy 2009). This becomes evident when the articles focus on the notion of “discretion” that the tourists should abide by. For example, Healy (2009) describes homosexual activity and nightlife in Lebanon,

While homosexual activity (technically, sexual relations that officials deem “unnatural”) is illegal in Lebanon, as in most of the Arab world, Beirut’s vitality as a Mediterranean capital of night life has fuelled *a flourishing gay scene — albeit one where men can be nervous about public displays of affection and where security guards at clubs can intercede if the good times turn too frisky on the dance floor* (emphasis added, 2).

The marketing of these places in international venues often affects locals since they become more expensive, and therefore, less accessible to lower income locals. Owners often benefit from the “pink dollar” and hence raise the prices of the food and services. Therefore, representation has material effects on people’s lives, where the marketing of “gay friendly” coffee shops and bars, has a direct effect making these place more expensive and less affordable for many lower-income locals.

These articles are also structured upon notions of discovery and adventure. The assumed “tourist” in the articles is invited to “discover” Beirut and be part of the nascent, emerging and flourishing gay life. Given that Beirut has experienced a “boom” in gay life, the tourist is encouraged to visit before it becomes filled with mass tourists.⁴ The notion of discovery in these articles becomes linked to notions of individual(ized) travel, where the tourist is presented as a “traveler” rather than part of a mass tourist culture. For example, in the German article “Beirut hotbed of vice of the middle east,” translated to English and posted on a flyer talk forum by the user Jimmy67 on June 8 2005, the

tourists are encouraged to “check out Lebanon. A country –still- free of Western mass tourists” (2005, par. 14). Michael Luongo echoes this in his “Lebanon Write up” for the IGLTA familiarization trip to Lebanon, where he claims,

there are about 2 million tourists who came to this country of 4 million during 2009, yet it never felt over-touristy. I think that is part of the magic – it’s always good to visit places just before they become overwhelmed by those pouring in (Luongo 2010).

In an opening paragraph to the article “Bounce Back, Beirut,” by Jurriaan Teulings which was posted on the website Global Gayz, the website provide a summary of the article, where they describe Teulings, as an “intrepid Dutch reporter,” who:

ventures into the mixed-message country of Lebanon to experience *the glitter and fears* of gay life in Beirut. During his visit he *discovers* the fashionable avenues of Gemmayzeh and the tense streets of Dahiyeh (controlled by Hezbollah) yet finding gay life in both (GlobalGayz, emphasis added).

Not only is the gay tourist constructed as an adventurous traveler, he is also represented as a “cultural persona” bringing in progress and openness to the country by nature of “his” lifestyle (Giorgi 2002). In the article “Beirut, Unexpected,” by Lee Smith the gay tourist is explained to have “empowered the country’s gay and lesbian community has made it the most liberal place in the Arab world” (Smith 2006). Hence, the tourist’s visit is also explained in terms of being helpful to the gay and lesbian communities in the country.

To summarize, the image of the gay tourists rests on notions of transnational mobility, possession of cultural and economic capital, whiteness, and physical ability. He is described an adventurous traveler (not necessarily tourist) who seeks to discover and introduce “progress” to the countries visited. Unlike the ways in which Beirut is

described as being both part of East and West, and is not simply presented in binaries, the description of the Lebanese clearly adopts a more nativizing and Orientalist discourse.

Essentializing Lebanese and Arab masculinities

The Lebanese are made intelligible by both being racialized and sexualized whereby they are represented as sexually available, repressed, “closeted” and “discreet.” By attempting to make homosexuality and “gayness” in Lebanon intelligible to Western gay audience, these articles and journalists rely on essentializing and homogenizing accounts of both the gay tourist and gay locals, rendering invisible complexities of the “sexual, class and national identities” (Kim-Puri 2005, 151). These articles rely on reductionist definitions of culture, which becomes a primary tool in “understanding,” and representing the Other, without incorporating material realities or socio-economic explanations (Cantu 2002). Rather than explaining Lebanese men’s negotiations and understandings of their sexualities, and the ways by which they are mediated by gender and class, such reductionist depictions flattens queer Lebanese men’s experiences and renders them voiceless. It should be noted that even though most of the texts focus on Lebanese, they include other Arab men who are usually “encountered” in the gay spaces of Beirut, especially men from the Arab Gulf, Egypt, Jordan and other neighboring countries.

The travelogues and gay guide also racialize the Lebanese men and present them as ethnically mixed and “hybrid.” For example, *Spartacus* asserts “because of the historical ethnic mix between European, Mediterranean, Middle East groups and the

whole spectrum in between, Lebanese men offer an appealing variety” (*Spartacus* 2011, 578).

Despite the fact that the image of the bear is heavily used in the Lebtour and ILGTA advertisements of the gay Beirut tours, it is important to note that, the invocation of the bear in these articles is mostly used in reference to the Gay Bear Arabia event, rather than as a totalizing description of Lebanese men nor a description of a specific bear subculture, as previously noted. Unlike the Lebtour advertisements, which rely on the “bear” as a marketing tool to attract tourists, these articles present a more diverse image, even though they excessively focus on facial and bodily hair, in attempts to racialize and physically describe Lebanese men. In the article “Beirut, hotbed of vice of the Middle East,” it is asserted that Lebanese men are “very hairy in general,” and that their “well trimmed beards, complete the picture of the macho man,” that they are ‘*at least* trying to be” (Jimmy67 2005, par. 11, emphasis added). Questioning the concepts of masculinity used in such depictions is central to understanding the ways in which the Lebanese men are ultimately and always “feminized,” despite their attempts of a “masculine” self-presentation, as described by the author.

The same article continues to inform the potential traveler that if he is into “hairy and bearded men, then you found your paradise, though other types are also there.... we crusaders left our traces also in Lebanon” (Jimmy67 2005, par. 11). This racialized statement of conquest can be linked to examples of previous gay French tourists travelling to Morocco seeking “sexual self-discovery” by contact with others, in this case, previous colonial subjects (Cervulle and Rees-Roberts 2008, 198). The undertones of the consumption of people are explicitly present in these articles.

What becomes central in these articles is how they attempt to explain non-heterosexual Lebanese men's dispositions and sexual identifications (as it relates to their adoption of a gay identity or not), where they are described as both discreet in public but sexually open, in private. Similarly to other travelogues and tourism guides, the Lebanese people, like other "natives" in the articles are described as "very hospitable and friendly" (Jimmy67 2005, par. 10). "Any tourist in Lebanon, especially the Western ones," as the article says, "will experience an incredible level of hospitality and help. The Lebanese will do everything possible that you enjoy you stay there, does not matter what kind of activity you are up to" (Jimmy67 2005, par. 10). This is explained by the fact that hospitality is an old Arab tradition that Lebanese people stick to, to the extent that it is described as "a national duty" for the Lebanese that the tourists enjoy their time. The articles go on to describe Lebanese men's sexual behaviors and identification, where the men are mainly described as "sexually available," and sexually open but at the same time, "closeted," and not gay identified. This duality is central in an Orientalist discourse on sexuality, where as Puar (2004) claims "underneath the veils of repression can be found a sizzling indecency waiting to be unleashed"(525).

Discretion becomes a recurring aspect of describing the men's behaviors and actions. These articles circulate the narrative that non-heterosexual Arabs tend to lead a double life, whereby they are closeted to their families and at their workplaces but "open," in queer circles.⁵ In addition, non-heterosexual men are illustrated as maintaining "gender conforming" and "straight acting" fronts in order not to be harassed by police officers or publicly ridiculed and possibly shamed (Moussawi 2008). However, whereas, the 2009 edition of *Spartacus* explicitly mentioned discretion by asserting, "gay people

tend to be discreet, which minimizes police entrapment or prosecution,” the 2011/12 edition does not (*Spartacus* 2009, 593). The newest edition omitted the statement on discretion and instead claimed that “legally homosexuality is prosecutable under article 534, however, this penal law is not implemented since decades, however [*sic*], affectionate behavior in public places is not advised” (*Spartacus* 2011, 578). However, *Spartacus* also adds that: “the situation for gay men in Lebanon has improved significantly in the past few years. Gay bars and clubs operate freely and an LGBTQ centre has been created to cater to all the needs of the community.” Hence, tourists are reminded of the presence of the penal code, despite the fact that it is not readily applied.

The articles indicate that because the law, which was introduced during the French mandate, Lebanese, unlike other Arabs who were not mandated by the French, are more “familiar with homosexuality.” This is explicitly expressed in Healy’s article, in an interview with Michael Luongo, the editor of the book *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*:

What’s interesting is that the Arab areas that were once controlled by the French, like Lebanon, are the ones with laws against homosexuality, because the French felt comfortable talking about sex, Mr. Luongo said, while the areas controlled by the British didn’t have those laws because they didn’t talk about sex. As a result, flowing from that French history is a *relative familiarity with homosexuality* in places like Lebanon. You have more *gay life where the laws exist against it* (Healy 2009, 2 emphasis added).

Even though, in the preface to the edited book *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*, (which was mistranslated in Arabic to “Travels of a Deviant”) Luongo takes into account the complexity of “homosexualities,” in the “Muslim world,” whereby he argues that a “Western identity model” cannot simply be applied, this is not reflected in the gay travelogues analysed (Luongo 2007). However, despite his careful distinction of possible misrepresentations of “Muslim homosexualities,” and his argument of the inapplicability

of a gay identity model, his argument still relies on an essentialist understanding of culture, sexuality and place where he argues that:

within many of these cultures, to do is not to be, though clearly there are men who would be gay in every sense of the Western world. Homosexuality is something natural, something men do and enjoy with each other, yet it is not the basis of an identity as it is in the West (Luongo 2007, xxiv).

Such an argument still engages with essentialist and fixed understandings of sexuality in both the “West,” and the “Muslim World,” without taking into account, intersections of race, gender, and class.

Luongo explains the “relative familiarity” of the Lebanese with “homosexuality,” by arguing that it is a result of French influence and laws, specifically the penal code 534, derived from the French mandate. However, it is important to note that Luongo’s explanation clearly contradicts previous writings on the Arab World as presented by a number of theorists including Said (1978), Massad (2002) and Waitt and Markwell (2006), where the Arab World has historically been seen as a place with uninhibited sexual experiences. Again, Lebanese men’s “familiarity” with homosexuality and seeming familiarity with gay identities is posited as a marker of difference between them and the gay tourist.

While describing the gay venues and clubs Teulings mentioned that it is almost similar to the clubs in Europe, despite the fact that Arab men are still mostly closeted:

At the city’s two main gay clubs, Milk and Acid, a mix of Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Kuwaiti and even some Iraqi men disprove any remaining theory of cultural relativism. That is to say, once inside people don’t behave differently from any other gay club in the world – with the possible exception of the occasional male belly dance. *But this being the Middle East, most of the men are closeted* (Teulings 2010, 103 emphasis added).

In the article “Beirut, hotbed of vice,” the author goes so far as to explain why Lebanese men are closeted. He attributes their “not being out,” to the fact that many have “internalized homophobia,” whereby they try hard to be “straight acting and discriminatory.” This is not really explained in more detail; however, the tourist is reminded that he needs to inform gay Lebanese men that coming out and being gay in Germany is not as easy as they might think.

Smith (2006) also claims that despite the fact that people might seem to be “traditional”, this does not necessarily translate into their actions.

Both Lebanon’s Muslims and Christians are still ostensibly very traditional in their sexual mores, but there’s more than an undercurrent of roiling passions. Sure, there are plenty of 30-year-old virgins, but Beirut is where the Arab world goes to let its hair down, party hard, and to be frank, have really good sex (1).

Hence, in such statements, the travelogues seem to counter people’s perceptions of the traditional mores of the Middle East, by employing an Orientalist discourse of “hidden roiling passions,” and using the duality and “paradoxical view that the Orient is both the space of illicit and dangerous sex and the site of carefully suppressed animalistic sexual instincts” (Puar 2004, 526). A number of articles assert that the men whether in clubs or in public are “readily available for sex” (Jimmy67 2005, Teulings 2010). Therefore, Lebanese and Arab men are presented as willing to engage in same-sex sexual acts, even though they do not identify with a “gay identity.”

In the article “Beirut hotbed of vice,” the author claims that “having sex in Beirut, despite the fact that it is illegal, is very very *[sic]* easy” (2005). In the article “Bounce Back Beirut,” Teulings (2010) makes the point more explicit, by quoting Bertho Makso, the owner of Lebtour, who claims that men come on his tours primarily for

having sex with Arab men. “Come on,” he said, “What do you think? They’re not here for the food or the architecture; they’re here to have sex with Arab men. You can just call out at them from your balcony and they will come,” he added (Teulings 2010, 103).

Teulings (2010) who was first suspicious of this Orientalist depiction of Lebanese and Arab men, later asserts that his suspicions were challenged, when he experienced that for himself. He claims:

But a few days later my cynicism was challenged when I was left rosy cheeked and dizzy with hormones after a wildly attractive construction worker – *a real one*, not the faux type that is actually a florist – chatted me up at Beirut’s ocean front promenade and whispered a *very indecent proposal in my ear*. After him came another one. And another one. So maybe Mr Makso had a point. For one thing, there is certainly no shortage of lonely construction workers in Beirut. Still, I was loath to accept such a one-dimensional image of gay life in Lebanon. (Teulings 2010, 103 emphasis added).

Whether true or not, this account plays on the imaginary and fantasy of travellers having local men available for them, in numbers, without having to actively seek them. This serves to illustrate the “ease” by which the presumed gay traveler can obtain sex with locals in abundance. Painting such an image serves to highlight the fantasies of “pre-modern” licentious sexualities.

The invocation of the image of the “real authentic construction worker,” read as “working class,” and “real masculinity,” contradicts the image previously presented where men in clubs are described as “trying to act masculine,” despite their appearance as such. Orientalist notions of sexual abundance and “illicit” sexual activities (“the indecent proposal”) become very central. Even though class is invoked in these representations; class differences are never really explained. However, a closer analysis signifies that these articles promise the tourist interaction with men from diverse classes, whereby

party and nightclub goers are assumed to be from middle to upper classes, and a “real authentic” construction worker, assumed to be presenting a working class Arab masculinity.

Conclusion

Contemporary discourses of Euro American gay travelogues “situate” Beirut, making it intelligible to potential gay Western travelers as a new gay friendly destination. These representations are premised on what I call “fractal Orientalism,” or “Orientalisms within the Middle East,” and an essentialized understanding of both “tourist” and “local.” The liminality, and blurriness of the situation is very explicit in the articles where Beirut is presented as safe but dangerous, glamorous but war-torn, and the Lebanese are represented as sexually available but closeted, and discreet (in public) but sexually available in private.

These articles and guidebook attempt to “uncover” “gay life” in Other places, by using a Western constituted understanding of gay male sexuality. That is, as Waitt et al (2008) claim, such articles and guidebooks usually follow “homonormative assumptions of the white, Anglo-American, young, single, sexually-adventurous, and middle-class male subject or traveler,” in their explanation, creation and “assessment” of the “Other” (785). These representations are not simply reproductions of “Western cultural imperialism.” These representations rest on erasures of differences along lines of class, gender and race, within gay communities both in the West and in Other places, specifically Lebanon in this case. Since these gay travelogues rely on essentialist and monolithic representations of non-heterosexual men’s sexualities and thus rely on fixity

and an essential understanding of gay identities and culture, the queer potential of gay tourism to destabilize identities and disrupt heteronormative spaces needs further consideration.

As I previously mentioned, these discourses circulate and are articulated in a number of ways in Lebanon. In the following chapters, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to look at how these discourses circulate and are articulated by Lebanese LGBTQ individuals, particularly with regard to how they conceive of issues of visibility, LGBT rights, gay and queer spaces, and Lebanese exceptionalism.

¹ I examined the *Spartacus* editions of 2009/10 and 2011/12; the entry on Lebanon was almost exactly the same, except for one change that I discuss later in the chapter.

² Even though the Lebanese gay tour agency Lebtour promotes gay tours to the region, this chapter focuses on the narratives of progress and essentialized masculinities that are circulated in the Euro-American travelogues. I discuss Lebtour only when it appears in the travelogues that I analyze. For an ethnographic study on Lebtour's gay tours and marketing strategies see McCormick (2011).

³ Although implicitly implied in the articles, this becomes more evident in Teulings's article (2010), which is later discussed.

⁴ The article "Beirut hot bed of vice of the Middle East" was posted by the user "Jimmy67" as an entry on a forum on a travel website (flyertalk.com), under a subsection of GLBT travel, on June, 8 2005. The author of the article whose name is not mentioned, except for his username, claims that this article was published in German and Dutch magazines but was translated by him for the forum. I use Jimmy67 since his name is never revealed and since the entire article is posted as one entry I was unable to retrieve page numbers, hence paragraph numbers are used.

⁵ This notion is circulated in a number of other articles and books on gay life in the Middle East, most notably Brian Whitaker's *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (2006).

Chapter Four

Troubling “coming out:” gender, disclosure, and strategic uses of identity

Rabab and I were sitting at a coffee shop in Gemayze on a June morning, where we had previously decided to meet to conduct an interview. I had met her a few weeks before, when I was directed to her as a key person involved in queer organizing in Beirut. In addition to our conversations about research, we talked about the multiple ways that we manage our lives in Beirut. Rabab who was in her mid-twenties at the time, identified as double-gendered or bi-gendered, and described herself as a “paid activist” in gender and sexuality politics in Lebanon. Rabab had recently stopped wearing the hijab, following “top” (chest masculinization) surgery, which she had undergone a few months before we met.

Having recently moved from a predominately Shiite to now a Christian neighborhood in Beirut, she describes people’s reactions to her taking the hijab off: “Many people were congratulating me when I took off the hijab, both in my [new] neighborhood and within queer circles.” Rabab told me that people assumed that she had now become “liberated,” secular, and in a sense “more legitimately queer.” In a way, by removing the hijab, Rabab had become more intelligible to people around her. Being queer while wearing a hijab, did not seem to fit together for some individuals in her LGBT circles, and might have seemed antithetical. Particularly during the “global war on terror,” LGBTs have been constructed in opposition to racialized Others, in this case Muslims. Intelligibility and particularly the limits of intelligibility, as Rabab’s story illustrates, is highly linked to normative understandings of queerness (Ferguson 2004, Rodriguez

2003). These normative and hegemonic understandings assume a gay and lesbian subject, who is either out or closeted, and who aspires to a certain form of visibility. Rabab, like many of my interlocutors, is aware of these dominant understandings and resists them in multiple ways in her everyday life.

Rabab's decision to stop wearing the hijab was informed by her not wanting to be identified as a woman at all times. "I only took the hijab off because I did not want to be viewed as a man or a woman," she explains, "for me, it depends on the context." Rabab rejects the idea, held by many in her new neighborhood, and in queer circles, that the hijab is oppressive; she argues that it saved her in many instances, particularly in navigating parts of the city. She regards it as something that that she might want to strategically use, whenever she wants or finds fit, particularly when she visits her family. However, she recounted multiple incidents of harassment that she had experienced from wearing the hijab beforehand, presumably from secularists.

She has become more comfortable, now that her gender attribution is more ambiguous, and more contingent on the context of interaction. Rabab claims that for her, gender is about how she wants to be treated. In some instances, she feels that she wants to be perceived as a woman, particularly when she does not want to be treated as a man by other men. For example, she disliked male homosocial touching, and vulgar talk that occurs between men. "I would like to be perceived either as a woman or a man. I have a flat chest, but I have a feminine voice and I don't have a beard but most people assume I am a woman." However, she continues to say that she doesn't identify as genderqueer and prefers to present herself as one of the two genders, hence her identifying as "double-

gendered.”

In line with her preference to be identified as one of the two genders, Rabab told me that she did not like clothing that was unisex, but preferred to wear either men or women’s clothing. When I asked her whether she wanted to be perceived as a normative guy in some instances, she claims that she did. However, she noted that what is considered normative shifts based on context as well. For example, she was planning on getting a tattoo on her forearm, which according to her is a sign of working class masculinity. In talking about her performance of masculinity, she situated it in terms of working-class masculinity as opposed to talking about a general concept of masculinity. Coming from a working-class background, class was central to how Rabab framed her experiences both within and in non-queer circles. She repeatedly expressed that she is different from the “other queers,” as she did not attend private schools, nor one of the private universities in Beirut. Also, unlike other individuals I talked to, Rabab had less access to Beirut growing up, since she was born and raised outside of Beirut and then moved to Beirut in her early teenage years.

Rabab felt that the harassment she got from wearing the hijab in Beirut, particularly among secularists, whom she would encounter in both queer and non-queer circles to be particularly bad. She found the harassment to be worst in private establishments, restaurants, cafes and bars, and more particularly in what she called “posh places,” where sometimes as she stated, even if she forgot she was wearing a hijab, people reminded often her by the uninviting looks they gave her. Interestingly, Rabab felt that she was more discriminated against pre-surgery when she used to wear the hijab:

“I found out at the end, that nothing tops the harassment that I got from the hijab, but then I found myself happy that people don’t know whether I am a women or a man... people don’t assume my gender and I like that.” Rabab’s story is very significant for understanding queer subjectivities in Beirut because she is resisting and working through dominant/hegemonic understandings of LGBT visibilities. In addition, unlike most of my interlocutors Rabab did not have access to Beirut growing up and she provides an account that troubles narratives of Beirut’s inclusion and exceptionalism.

In this chapter, I analyze queer visibilities and the strategic uses of identity in everyday life in Beirut. Drawing on my fieldwork and interviews with my interlocutors, I illustrate the limits of the hegemonic coming out narrative in explaining queer subjectivities and visibilities in Beirut. Unlike analyses that foreground the closet, coming out, and visibility as linear experiences and constructs, I show how queer subjects in Beirut unsettle, trouble and disrupt the dominant coming out narrative and dominant understanding of visibility. Building on Carlos Decena’s (2011) work on “tacit subjects,” and Jose Munoz’s (1999) disidentifications, I argue against the assumption that a lack of visibility is a sign of being “closeted” or having an “underdeveloped” LGBTQ identity. By moving away from dominant understandings of “the closet” and “coming out” as central organizing concepts, I highlight other strategies employed in negotiating sexual subjectivities in Beirut. In addition, I problematize the tendency to focus on either gay activism *or* coming out, which presumes a desire for certain types of queer visibility.

By analyzing the strategic uses of identity among my interlocutors, I illustrate that queer individuals in Beirut use three different yet, interrelated, strategies in negotiating

queer subjectivities and visibilities. First, my interlocutors refuse to frame their experiences in terms of “narratives of reconciliation.”¹ That is, they do not present their lives or stories as reconciling seemingly oppositional aspects of themselves. For example, they argue against the dominant framework that posits Arabs, Muslims and queerness as being “incompatible.” In addition, they embrace and make use of contradictions in their lives. They understand that “seeming contradictions” are in part due to the multiple positions that they occupy and the possibilities for individuals to occupy more than one position in different settings (even if the positions are regarded as contradictory by others). For my interlocutors, these positions are not experienced as oppositional, rather they are created as oppositional by society, usually along lines of normativity, especially reflecting gender binaries (man/woman), sexuality (straight/gay), and religious/secular.

Second, they do not adhere to a dominant gay or lesbian coming out narrative; instead their decisions about “coming out,” are more about gender identity, gender performances and class. Here, gender nonnormativity confounds the coming out model, which is focused on sexuality and not gender; hence it becomes about the strategic and contextual nature of identities. Therefore, I argue for the centrality of gender and class to the ways we understand and define sexuality.² Third, even though they are tacit about their sexualities, many individuals choose to be vocal and more direct about other aspects of their lives that highlight their non-conformity or non-normativity. I build on Carlos Decena’s (2011) concept of the “tacit subjects,” and illustrate that despite the unspoken knowledge that structures many individuals’ relationships with their families, they were very clear about how they highlight multiple other political aspects of their lived

experiences. Therefore, I show that moments of not verbally sharing are not to be understood as moments of concealing. In addition, queer Beirutis do employ other gendered strategies to imply and highlight their non-normativity.

In this chapter, I focus on and analyze the narratives of six of my interlocutors, whom I consider to be representative of my larger sample, particularly in terms of diverse gender identifications, their degrees of involvement with LGBTQ activism in Lebanon, and the extent to which they are “out” to family members. My sample consists of a cisgendered man, two genderqueer women, a transgendered individual, and two cisgendered women. Four of these six individuals have been involved in LGBTQ organizing in Lebanon. Three out of the six are “out” to their parents. I consider these six cases to be representative of the larger sample of individuals I interviewed and met during my fieldwork.

Negotiating queer subjectivities in Beirut happens in complex, non-linear, often contradictory ways. Questions around whether individuals are “out,” “visible,” or whether they identify as LGBT are often less central. However, the multiple and often contending ways by which they negotiate and experience sexuality, is always constituted and constitutive of gender, and class. By examining the strategic negotiations of queer subjectivities and (in) visibilities, I raise the following questions: How are we better able to understand strategies of visibility/invisibility without simplified explanations that resort to culture and the closet? Why is visibility so central to understanding queer subjectivities? Since queer visibility is often linked to assumptions about open and

“modern” gay subjects, how does this affect our understanding of queer subjectivities that do not rely on mainstream strategies of coming out and visibility?

Against narratives of reconciliation

One of the primary ways that my interlocutors negotiated queer subjectivities is by rejecting “narratives of reconciliation:” the claim that queer individuals, mostly from the global south, must reconcile their “culture” with their sexuality.³ Such narratives rely on essentialist understandings of culture and identity, and assume that the Arab Middle East and Muslims are inherently “homophobic” and that Muslim and queer and/or feminist identifications are antithetical that they must be reconciled. My interlocutors reject such narratives and instead adopt a more complex approach to identity, understanding and making use of seeming contradictions in their lives. Therefore, they explained that they occupy multiple positions that inform their experiences of their sexuality.

Rabab told me on more than one occasion that she does not like this approach which assumes that Muslim queers and queers from the Middle East must always reconcile their sexual identification with their religion and culture, as if being queer and Muslim are experienced as mutually exclusive categories. “I do not like this idea of reconciliation” Rabab told me, as we are having a conversation about research on gender, sexuality and queer lives in Beirut. Since our initial meeting at a coffee shop in Hamra, a few weeks prior to this interview I conducted with her, we had numerous conversations on the politics of research and some of the popular representations of LGBTQ lives in the

Arab Middle East. Rabab, like many of my interlocutors, claimed that identity is much more complicated and almost always messier than a matter of reconciliation. Rather than framing her life in terms of closetedness and outness, she talked about strategic uses of identity and the centrality of context, which becomes much less about reconciliation and more about a fashioning of the self that is both strategic in its response to context and issues of safety.

Rabab was unhappy about how some might tell her story in terms of “unlikely combinations,” Muslim, queer, and bi-gendered, as this misrepresented how she viewed herself. For her, her multiple positions were not contradictory nor were in need for reconciliation. As she believes, her experiences get lost when people attempt to make them intelligible by describing her story in terms of moving from “oppressive” to “modern.” Such a linear narrative, which attempts to make individual queer lives in Beirut intelligible, is built around assumptions about queerness, visibility and personal identification.

Instead of reconciliation, Rabab embraced and used what she referred to as contradictions in her life: “There is nothing wrong with being contradictory...the hijab helps me fit somewhere and being gay helps me belonging in a certain place, they both help me in different aspects.” Even though she was telling me that others might see her life as contradictory, she explained that these seeming “contradictions” are highly contextual. Being contradictory in this instance, shifts based on context. Throughout our discussion she did not refer to or talk about her top surgery as much as the hijab, which raises questions about how others around her understood the symbolic nature of the hijab

and queerness. I do not wish to use Orientalist tropes of veiling/unveiling in the Arab world as signs of modernity and secularism; rather I use this example to illustrate how they become taken up and used in a queer context, particularly around constructing stories about queer visibilities, intelligibility and queer normativity in Beirut. A number of the themes Rabab raised recurred in my other discussions and interview with queer individuals in Beirut, including the managing and negotiating visibility, the uses of “contradictions,” and refusing a lens of reconciliation. In addition, multiple individuals made it clear that their individual stories are best understood if their experiences were situated along lines of gender, class and religious sect.

Despite the fact that people understand their own complexities and the role of context and the multiple positions that they occupy, many of my interlocutors felt that their lives and experiences were still simplified and essentialized by other people, particularly academics and Euro-American journalists. Popular representations of Beirut, as discussed in chapter three, often treat different aspects of people’s lives as independent, rather than interrelated. For example, people’s experiences of religious sect get treated as independent of gender, gender as independent of class, and sexuality as independent of class and gender. Rabab said that many feminist and queer activists are more wary about talking to researchers, particularly those who might approach queer issues in Lebanon from that lens of reconciliation. It was apparent that there were fine lines being drawn between activists and researchers, as some activists feel like researchers come into a field, conduct their research and leave, often misrepresenting activists’ lived realities, as I was told by many.⁴ Perhaps, Rabab’s unease with academics

was also a reflection of her class position and her discomfort with what she associated with positions of privilege.

One of the issues we talked about on numerous occasions, and that I felt I had prove to many of the individuals that I met in that trip to Beirut, is that my research is “not like many other researchers.” For one, there had been many European and North American MA and PhD students conducting research on queer sexualities in Beirut. Oftentimes individuals felt that many researchers were using the informants to gain access into private lives that seem “exotic to them.” In addition, there was awareness that studying sexuality in the Arab world was a “sexy” topic. Also, given the war in neighboring Syria, Beirut became one of the few safer options for students of Arabic and researchers. Whereas Cairo and Damascus had once been the safer options for journalists and researchers, it was increasingly becoming Beirut and Amman. Therefore, this large influx of researchers, and more recently journalists covering the war in Syria, makes Beirut particularly prone to Euro-American academic and journalistic interest and representations of life in the Arab Middle East.

Finally, even though many of my interlocutors objected to essentialized representations of Lebanon and the Arab Middle East, this did not necessarily translate to understanding the multiple positionalities and possible experiences of others. So even though the individuals understand the complexities in their lives, they often don’t take it into account in relation to others.

The limits of coming out: visibility and safety

Many of my interlocutors did not readily employ dominant understandings of “coming out” and “the closet.” That is, the definition of coming out that is based on the existence of “the closet,” the binary of the closet/outness, and which presumes that coming out means telling one’s family and friends that one is gay or lesbian and living a public life where one discloses one’s sexuality, was not common. Individuals defined coming out and disclosure differently. In an attempt not to force a closet/coming out narrative and to get at the meanings that my interlocutors attached to their experiences, I did not explicitly ask about “coming out.” Rather, I asked my interlocutors to describe what they consider to be central about who they are. In some cases, some individuals brought up coming out during the interviews, but at other times it wasn’t mentioned. When discussing their experiences of coming to terms and accepting their sexualities many discussed it in non-linear and in non-oppositional manners.⁵ That is, they did not regard “coming out” and “the closet” to be oppositional experiences, or linked to particular forms of concealment and visibility. The major patterns of difference in “coming out” and “closet” narratives were based on gender and class. Here, I focus on how queer individuals described processes of “coming out,” as a way to get at the meaning making processes involved in understanding one’s experience. That is rather than using my definitions of such constructs, I privilege my interlocutors’ understandings, experiences, and ways that they make their lives intelligible to themselves and others.⁶

When talking the politics of disclosure, for many of my interviewees, if not most,

disclosure was almost always subtle and tacit. Many individuals felt most comfortable to tell their family members, in cases where they were partnered with someone long-term, whereas others never concealed or talked about their sexuality but chose to position themselves or explained to their families that they are “feminists,” or simply working on women’s rights, which seemed like a safer option. Claiming one is a feminist or working on women’s rights provided a way to express that one is not “typical,” without addressing sexuality.

Therefore, individuals were tacit about their sexualities but, at the same time, made clear statements about their non-normative gender presentations and performances and political views. That is, even though people did not talk openly or did not explicitly say that they identified as LGBT, they did openly talk about other aspects of themselves that were non-conforming. For example, many discussed their “gender non-normative” presentations and performances, without necessarily talking about their sexuality. This was a form of contestation of normative understanding of gender and sexuality. In this case, I argue that gender presentation and performances became more central than sexuality, as in many instances it became the aspect of one’s self that individuals needed to stand up for the most and negotiate the most. However, at the same time, individuals talked about their gender and coming out in manners similar to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentifications. That is, they drew upon and engaged with dominant understandings of coming out, queer visibility and gender transgression, and worked through them, rather than simply rejecting or adopting them, and therefore produced new understandings and experiences. As Muñoz claims:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance (Muñoz 1999, 11–12).

Similarly to Fatima El-Tayeb’s (2011) understanding of disidentifications, I show how my interlocutors’ engagement with coming out and queer visibility disrupts dominant narratives and is best thought of as a “‘failure of identification,’ that potentially opens a moment of disruption and reorientation (xxxiv).” Therefore the coming out and visibility strategies that my interlocutors manage in Beirut can be best understood as examples of working through and not against dominant models of gay and lesbian visibility. That is, even though most do not employ affirmative coming out and visibility narratives, they do not necessarily position themselves in opposition to these narratives, but rather they proceed through a “third mode” of dealing with these dominant middle class white Euro-American concepts: working within these concepts of visibility and seeking to transform them through reference to local contexts.⁷ To add another dimension, a number of my interlocutors understood dominant “coming out narratives,” as “Western constructs” that do not necessarily apply to their lives. In those cases, they saw an active resistance to coming out narratives, as an active resistance to Western constructs. However, despite this resistance, many used queer and feminist theory to make sense of their experiences, which illustrates they are not necessarily assimilating or rejecting, but disidentifying.

On many occasions, disclosure was linked to some form of visibility, where

people discussed coming out as an act of disclosure of one's sexuality, where aspects of oneself are made visible, whether verbal or not. When discussing coming out/the closet, Tarek a 27-year-old, gay-identified, Sunni Muslim, Lebanese medical doctor, made an interesting distinction between "Western" and "non Western" understandings. Tarek was raised in Beirut and lived there with his parents all his life, until moving out alone for two years for his studies. He had been living in Canada for the past two years, to pursue his post-graduate studies. Prior to that, he attended private American schools and one of the American universities of Beirut. Even after his move, he still spent significant time in Beirut visiting family and friends. Tarek felt that his life was much more restricted in Beirut, particularly because he was afraid of his parents finding out about his sexuality, through other people who might see him and then tell them. For example, in Beirut he had to conceal that he was dating men to most of his social circles, and he told people that he was dating women. He recounted how in Canada he felt less anxious about his parents finding out. In Canada, however, he felt that his understanding of 'coming out' was not shared by many of the men he met and dated. Even though he considered himself "out" in Beirut, he felt it was different in Canada:

I am not out in the Western definition, you know, out to your parents, everyone in society can know, mainly if you're not out to your parents you are not considered out. I know that from people I have dated- they probably never said it directly, but they take a step back, [when they find that I am not out to my parents] they say he isn't out yet. My definition is more derived from "Arabic culture,"- coming out in Lebanon does not mean telling parents, people who go out to the places don't tell their parents, so they are not hiding it, but closeted. I am not closeted.

Given his interactions and dating experiences with predominately white men in the US and Canada, Tarek felt he needed to make a distinction between his conception of

“coming out,” contrasting it to what he called a “Western” definition, which implied that one comes out to “everyone” one knows, including one’s parents. Coming out in Beirut, however, does not imply disclosure to everyone; rather, one is out in certain contexts. Tarek explained that his understanding of coming out is “cultural,” which is a common discourse that posits “culture,” as the central aspect in explaining difference in LGBTQ experiences. Therefore, Tarek feels that the differences between his experiences and those of others are primarily based on culture, which can be either restrictive or permissive.

As previously mentioned, Tarek brought up his parents as a main reason why he doesn’t tell people in Beirut: “I don’t tell people who might tell other people and then tell my parents... If my parents know then I don’t care. I would tell a straight person who is homophobic, but I don’t only because of my parents.” Tarek’s parents are his primary concern when he thinks of openly talking about his sexuality. When I asked him to explain more what he meant about coming out, he said, “coming out is not necessarily adopting a western level of comfort, it is a different level of comfort. With time the definition might change if people become more open-minded, developmentally, we improve.”

As demonstrated in the above quote, Tarek situated his definition of coming out as neither “Western” nor “Lebanese.” In addition, he used a linear narrative of progress, which assumed that, with time, Arabs, like their Western counterparts, will be able to “accept and tolerate,” or, in his own words, become “more open-minded and [improve] developmentally.” In order to make sense of the differences in his life in Beirut and

where he lives in North America, Tarek had to essentialize culture and frame it in terms of being “progressive” and “open-minded.” During our discussions, Tarek mentioned how other Americans and Canadians assumed he was not “out” since his immediate family didn’t know. However, otherwise, he felt that his status as a gay Arab Muslim man played no role in his interactions with other gay men. For Tarek, family, security, and selective disclosure were central.

Like Tarek, Rabab mentioned the fear of backlash on her family as a major source of anxiety. She compared the act of removing the hijab to the process of coming out, where she conceived of both as processes that involve a great deal of caution, especially with regards to possible backlash on her immediate family. However, she explained that the process of coming out differs from one person to another, based on one’s support networks and positions. “My mother is scared of people,” she explained, “so she didn’t want me to take off the hijab.”

Others refused to identify in terms of LGBTQ categories, and understood these identifications as Western imports that don’t necessarily work for them. Mays, who was in her late twenties and was involved in feminist and queer activist in Beirut, openly resisted these identifications, both in her activism and her personal life. Mays, who was working on her MA in the Arts in Beirut and has been involved in international feminist and queer networks and activism, told me:

The problem is how these categories of identification are used. The problem is importing discourses, when they are not the only categories you fit in. [The problem is] when it becomes your only identity, there are other aspects that are as central.

Despite being active and involved in local and international queer activism, Mays was not “out” to her parents and explained to me that there is much more to her than being “a queer woman.” She expressed that she felt uneasy to speak from the position of “a lesbian,” as she felt it obscures the multiple positions that she occupies. For her, context is very central and queerness is not identification. She used context rather than culture, which reflected a more nuanced approach than the linear evolutionary model that oftentimes, culture is used in. She continued to tell me that she “tried” coming out and it didn’t make her feel better nor safe:

I tried it and it made me feel vulnerable and I needed somebody else’s acceptance. It is as though the validity of my feelings felt like it was coming from someone else, and I felt like it was imposed and not organic. I wasn’t comfortable at all. There are situations when I might talk about my sexuality where I would want to reveal, however, I do it in a much more subtle way I do it in a way that doesn’t require anyone’s approval.

Mays felt that, by coming out, she was seeking someone else’s approval, which made it less validating for herself. She explained that she prefers selective and subtle disclosure, which makes her feel safer. For example, Mays talked about how she had subtly brought up her sexuality with acquaintances. She recounted a story where once when she was with a group of heterosexual women who were talking about men, she told them “if you think men are difficult, wait to try women.” For her, this was an example of how she could subtly bring up sexuality. “You test the waters, in a way,” she said, “also it is much more intimate.” For Mays, being subtle meant that she could test the waters, feel safer, and anticipate people’s reactions. Mays rejected LGBTQ categorizations, however, relied on queer and feminist theory to explain and talk about her unease with categories.

Hence, Mays is not “rejecting” or “resisting” Western conceptions of queer identities, rather working through them.

Yasmine, who was in her mid-thirties during the time of our interview in July 2014, was currently living in the US, but visited Beirut twice a year. She has been living in the US for ten years, when she moved at the age of 24 to pursue her graduate studies. Yasmine comes from an upper-middle class background and was educated in private American schools in Beirut. She considers herself quite gender-conforming. When I asked her about how she identifies, she claimed

I see my identity as that of a woman who likes comfortable clothing. Sexuality-wise, I know that I am gay, but I don't present myself as gay, I feel like the way I am I can fit in everywhere without people knowing. I like the fact that my sexuality is not obvious.

Yasmine felt more comfortable with the fact that her “sexuality is not obvious,” which made her feel safe and gave her the chance of being able to fit everywhere. When talking more about what “obvious” meant, Yasmine referred to gender non-normativity as a major way of marking one's sexuality. Coming out for her was about “consolidating” multiple parts of herself, which she felt she previously had to hide. She described coming out as moving from one box to another box, which she felt was equally oppressive as not being able to talk about it in the first place. When talking about her life in Beirut, she described it as inhabiting a “non-box.” Yasmine's description of the “non-box” can also be seen as an instance of the strategy of using contradictions, I described above. She described the non-box as enabling her or giving her space to express her different preferences:

In Lebanon, when I say I don't want to get married, which is what many queer

women say, or even if a straight woman didn't find the appropriate person to marry, these things are still shut down. [They tell you] "don't say this," there is this "don't talk about it" you can't express this type of preference. Coming out is similar, in the sense that you can't directly say.

Therefore, she saw "coming out" as almost always tacit in the context of Lebanon. In addition to it being tacit, Yasmine highlights the fact that she is "somebody who doesn't want to get married," which she claims is an indirect way of stating one's non-normativity. This strategy, which I described earlier, is a way by which individuals can claim and assert non-normativity without talking directly about sexuality.

When comparing her experiences in Lebanon to the US, she said that being in Lebanon is not necessarily better or worse than in the US, but just different:

I don't know if its better, its just different, I feel more comfortable in Lebanon, because I didn't go into another box, I feel better because I am in a box that I had revolted against. People know that I am outside the box, however, they don't know where I am. So my family says: "this is the one who isn't married, she studied too much, maybe she is overqualified" so they wonder and try to find what box I am in, but I am in the non-box. Even for my family who doesn't know. So I am somewhere where they might reject, but its not rejected like being gay. For example they might say: "she should have married, wouldn't it have been better than this PhD? Whatever, but I am in a non-box.

Yasmine felt that being in this "non-box," made it safer for her, as she was able to be "whatever she wanted," without necessarily fixing herself. Fixing oneself felt more unsafe. She felt a deep affinity and connection to members of the queer community in Beirut that she had met through Meem. Even though she wasn't quite active in the activist community, meeting activists who also resisted these "boxes," she talked about, made her feel that she had a community of like-minded people, which she found lacking in her life in the US:

I feel more similar to members of the queer community in Beirut, I didn't move into any box, I am comfortable in Lebanon with my identity, because I am not in a different box. I am in the box of queer with my queer friends, which is very broad, because most of them are activists and being in this similar space; people think of these topics, think of boxes, they rejected the same box that I did, so they wouldn't put me in boxes. I was very happy in this community because I connect better with it than I do with LGBT people here [US]. They created new boxes here; they put themselves in this box. Even the lesbians don't like bisexuals, there is still discrimination against trans individuals, the boxes are very clear. The difference here is that I can have a girlfriend, walk on the streets and hold her hand maybe kiss her, maybe people would look at us funny, there is no danger, no fear, there isn't this type of experience. I can't say one is better than the other, but there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Here, I feel more boxed in.

As apparent in the above, Yasmine tried to resist being categorized or boxed in, as it makes her feel restricted, less comfortable, and in many ways less safe. She felt safer in the "non-box," which based on her description, was much more open. Despite feeling safer in the US, especially with regards to public displays of affection, she felt that all these identifications make her feel more "boxed in." Yasmine, like Tarek and Mays was not "out" to her parents and was only out to one of her sisters, yet, she considered herself "out."

The narratives presented above illustrate that selective disclosure in Beirut is always negotiated based on the level of safety and context. In addition, whereas all these individuals described themselves, as "out," they were not "out" to their parents in the dominant understanding of outness, as in they haven't directly talked to their parents about their sexualities. In the following sections, I build on this idea more and show that not being "out" to one's parents is very contextual and show that how many of my interlocutors managed their relationship with their families.

(Un) necessary outings: family matters

The majority of my interlocutors did not describe a linear “coming out narrative,” rather, they talked about strategies of selective disclosure. Other individuals described “being dragged out of the closet” as a metaphor to explain how their families came to know about their sexuality. Selective disclosure, as I describe, was also highly gendered and contextual. Coming out to mothers and female relatives was much more common than coming out to father or male relatives. Concealment and disclosure played important roles in reproducing and resisting normative understandings of queer visibility. However, one of the central ways that people talked about coming out is similar to Carlos Decena’s (2011) conception of “tacit knowledge.” In this case, the majority of my interlocutors stressed that verbalizing is neither necessary nor important, because parents can assume and accept without verbalizing one’s sexuality or verbalizing acknowledgment. In addition, many saw talking about one’s sexuality as possibly causing more harm than good. Being tacit about one’s sexuality felt like the safer option.

Sirine, a 29-year-old Lebanese-Armenian genderqueer individual, talked about telling her mother and openly discussing her sexuality with her. However, at the same time, she claimed that, from her point of view, coming out to one’s family is not necessary. She said that her family matters a lot to her, and she felt that, just as it was hard for her to accept herself and understand her sexuality, it would probably take her family a long time as well:

My family matters a lot and just as much as it is hard for me to understand what I am going through as queer, whatever, I just don’t believe these people who need to come out... it took you seven years to accept yourself, you expect your mother to accept you in a second when she has been building all these expectations? *Inno* snap out of it,

have a little bit of empathy. I am not talking about the case where people come out and their parents beat them, but a bit of drama is okay.

Here, Sirine framed the decision not to tell one's family in terms of having empathy towards family members who would not be able to understand or would need more time to "accept" their daughter's sexuality. Despite minimizing the importance of verbalizing and talking about one's sexuality, Sirine recounted how she told her mother about her sexuality, and how she and her mother maintain their relationship:

Not everything needs to be verbalized. However, I verbalize everything to my mother; this is how I came out to my mother...drama...crying, I was crying more than her. She said "oh everybody is bisexual," I said no you don't understand. She then said: "the only thing I am worried about is your safety, I have known for the longest time, I have known." I then spent two hours crying and she was laughing at me and now it's a running joke. For example, when my aunt is trying to set me up with the next hunk, she [my mother] gets a kick out of it, when there is a cute girl she makes a gesture to me to check her out, and two weeks ago she asked me how is it on the heart front, so I said it is dry, she said we should set you up and I am like do you have anyone in mind. It is funny. This is the relationship I have with my mom.

As noted by a number of other individuals, parents primarily worried about the safety of their children. In addition to talking about her experience of disclosing to her mother, Sirine contrasted the relationship with her mother to that with her father, where she felt she did not need to verbalize everything. In addition, she claimed that she never told her father about her sexuality; however, she had a feeling that he assumed and knew:

Now with my dad, I never really came and told him (whispers): "you know dad I like girls," but there are several occasions like we would be watching TV, me and my dad we talk a lot about the world, about politics we argue a lot, we are a family when once a week I visit we sit and talk for hours and hours about everything except our personal lives. So my dad understands what I like, he has seen me grow up, he has seen what I wear, etc... and he has never objected. There were these little moments when we were growing up and I was going to a baptism and I was wearing this skirt, because I felt like wearing a skirt, it wasn't forced at all, I was going for the secretary look and then he was like: oh my god I have a daughter, and I was like: no you have a daughter and

a son and something in between, and he laughed and I didn't feel I needed to say something more than that, I was 16 or something like that.

Interestingly, Sirine claimed that even though she and her family talk about "everything," they do not talk about their personal lives. In addition, she described and pointed to specific incidents where she had said something to point out to her gender and sexual non-normativity to her father:

A few years back, we were watching TV and there was something about civil marriage and he was like what do you think about that? And I said I don't believe in marriage, I had just come back from work and I was tired and he was like "come, what do you think of what's happening on the civil marriage front." And I said "dad, I don't give a shit about marriage, I don't find it to be an interesting institution," and then he said is that it or is it because you like girls and then I said I am going to go take a shower, I am not going to talk about this.

Rather than directly addressing her sexuality, Sirine told her father that she did not care about marriage. Interestingly, her father jokingly responded by asking her if she liked girls. Describing this discomfort, she relates her discussion with her father:

My relationship with you [my father] is one where I am not comfortable about talking about anything that has to do with sex. Just because you are my dad, with my brother and sister I do. There is this relationship with my dad, not because its prudish, its because of the context I grew up in I don't feel comfortable talking to my father about my sex life. However, at the same time, my girlfriend would come home and he would sit with her and I never needed to tell my dad, "you know what: I am gay." And sometimes when he watches gay pride on TV, and he says that he doesn't really why they need to be so flamboyant, etc... and he says it in front of me, he said: sometimes I do question about whether this is the natural order of things. He says it in front of me, he questions all of these things but then he knows, come on, it shows that I am this person and he doesn't ask me about my ex anymore... she doesn't live with us anymore...it is obvious that he knows there was a breakup.

Tarek recounted a similar incident to the one told by Sirine. Even though Tarek told me on more than occasion that his parents didn't know about his sexuality, he told me that his father could possibly know. He recounted a time when he was watching TV

with his father and when two gay characters appeared on the a Lebanese satire show, his father looked at him and said “look, it’s your friends.” Tarek laughed and said that he thinks this might mean that his father knew and that was a tacit way of letting him know.

Sirine, like many others, claimed that one of the reasons why she doesn’t discuss her sexuality is because she simply doesn’t discuss her intimate and sexual life with her father. Many individuals claimed that children do not often discuss their sex lives with their parents, whether heterosexual or not, which makes discussing sexuality with parents harder to do. In addition, Sirine pointed to the tacit knowledge around her sexuality, where she made it clear that, even though she would never talk to her dad explicitly about her girlfriend or her sexuality, she assumed that he knew and understood from his actions. Even though her dad had asked her briefly while they were watching TV, whether she liked women, she felt uncomfortable. However, she recounted these moments to illustrate how her father might know and assume, and seems to be fine with it. Sirine also gave the example of the interactions she has with her grandmother:

When I go visit my grandma and my girlfriend is with me, I don’t go like: hey grandma this is my girlfriend, I go like: this is Tania. I love the interaction that they have, my grandma loves her. She probably assumes, she probably knows, but whatever, I am not going to do that: yes I am gay and I am proud and we are going to have so many babies and whatever, no. I am just glad you have welcomed her into your house, you are both having a meal together, having fun together, you both love each other...

Another example of resisting or *disidentifying* with, and eventually disrupting, the coming out narrative, is that of Yara, a 29-year-old Lebanese woman who was pursuing her graduate degree at the time of the interview. Yara said she used to consider herself an

activist when she was actively involved in a number of LGBT activist groups and initiatives in Lebanon; however, she claimed that she had suffered some traumas and said she could not be an activist anymore. Speaking about coming out, Yara used the metaphor of being “dragged out of the closet;” however, she also described her disillusionment with the process:

I came out to my family, of course, I actually got *dragged out of the closet*, -my mom saw my girlfriend who is more obvious, but she had her doubts but *inno ça va*, it worked, eventually. But we [activists] had that dream of coming out, if we all come out of the closet, society will change. We will all be kicked out of our jobs, we will all take up fights that we can't handle. Because coming out... now when my friends tell me I am going to come out to my family, I feel like okay, is there something so important and pressing that they need to know about you? First, are you hurting your family? Sometimes, not all the time, some people would have a better relationship with their family because there is something stuck and its no longer stuck and it becomes more transparent. But some people don't need to. If your parents are 70 years old, why do you want to give them a heart attack, why just to come out? What is coming out really?

Having been active in LGBT rights groups and activism in Lebanon; Yara had previously imagined that coming out would have collective positive impacts and that it would “change society.” Currently, however, Yara questions the process of coming out and, similarly to Sirine, the necessity of telling one's family. She claims that sometimes it is not useful to tell the family, especially in cases where they are not able to understand it in the first place. However, she continued to say that coming out to one's family should be done with caution.

The centrality of gender

Gender played an important role in the processes of disclosure and in many instances was centralized more than sexuality. Many of interlocutors focused more on

gender than they did on sexuality, and how gender non-normativity is often linked to sexual non-normativity. For some, gender non-normativity and transgression was central for carving out space and feeling a sense of empowerment. However, for others, gender normativity gave them a sense of security.

Randa, who was in her early thirties and was born and raised in Beirut, identified as genderqueer and positioned herself in relation and opposition to typical Lebanese femininity. She worked full-time as the manager of a Lebanese NGO dealing with sexual health and LGBT health awareness. She had been active in the activist LGBTQ community in Lebanon since it started as an underground “movement” in the nineties. Randa lived in Beirut and rarely left it, even on the weekends.⁸ She told me that she loves Beirut, especially Hamra, and feels that is her space. However, she hates the fact that there is no respect for personal freedoms, where she feels that people don’t give others personal space. In positioning herself and situating her gender presentation, Randa said

I look different than the typical Lebanese woman, and I have always looked this way since I was young. Since I am different, the way that I dress is different and my hair is different and the piercings I have are different, these things allow people to make fun of me, find the way that I look strange, allow themselves the freedom to tell me words, or laugh at me, or tell me vulgar words... that part really annoys me and this butting in- you start with a look to the fact that a person comes up to you and talks to you and ask you: “why did you do this to yourself?” to which I reply: “it’s none of your business.”

Randa describes her gender non-normative presentation and looks as inviting strangers to notice her, sometimes ridiculing her, and in other instances asking her why she has done this to herself. This in a way, functions as involuntary visibility. Randa uses this as an example to show how personal spaces are not respected in Beirut, which is the part she

hates the most about the city.

For Randa, her gender identity was of primary importance to her and has shaped who she is and her experiences in Beirut:

Even before I was a teenager I didn't feel like I am a girl but I would rather be a boy. That shaped my personality, the way I had to defend why I dress that way or cut my hair that way, from that sense it shaped my personality. Maybe if I like women or even if I felt like a boy, or even when you are taught this is what men do and women do, etc...even if I felt like I wasn't a girl but I had no problem with wearing a dress and having long hair, I don't think my gender identity would have been that important for me while I was growing up. I didn't have a choice. I was either going to be destroyed or I had to stand up for myself and defend the choices that I make, the way I live my life...

Randa's gender identity felt like the aspect of herself that she needed to stand up for the most, as it was the most visible. She claimed that it made her stronger and more prepared, as she has had to stand up for herself ever since she was growing up. In addition, she said that it gave her a sense of sarcastic humor that she said she had to develop in order to stay strong. Unlike Yasmine who felt safest and most comfortable being gender normative, Randa's gender identity empowered her, making it possible for her to confidently navigate the city.

In addition to being bullied for her gender presentation, Randa talked about bullying that occurs in feminist circles in Beirut, particularly around feminist political opinions. Because of her so-called "liberal politics," she felt many queer and radical feminist activists have tried to bully or talk to her in a condescending manner, since they saw themselves as "more radical." However, her previous experiences of being bullied made her stronger:

Now, because I had to stand up for myself before, I feel that I became stronger to be able to voice and defend my opinion. It also made me accepting of other

people, if you reflect on yourself and take a step back, you would see that it made me more open to other people's differences. From that perspective I can say that my gender identity influenced my personality or shaped it a lot.

Randa's gender non-normativity was a source of personal empowerment, however, at the same time, being a woman provided her with a safety net as she describes in the following narrative. Randa recounted how she was "pushed out of the closet," by her mother who suspected that she was dating a woman. Her mother asked her while they were on a train, on a trip outside of Lebanon, whether she prefers men or women, to which Randa responded that she liked women. In recounting the story, Randa said:

What do you want me to say? Lie to her? I won't I don't like lying. So *khallas*, I am like that, I won't change. She said: yeah okay I know but I just want to check. This reaction was okay but then we passed through a lot.

However, in that instance Randa claimed that "patriarchy saved her," since her mother told her that if she had been a man she would have kicked her out of the house. With this seemingly contradictory statement, Randa illustrates how patriarchy gave her the sense of security, where her mother would not have kicked her out of the house since she is a woman. Randa's claim that patriarchy saved her is one example of the contradictions that my interlocutors expressed, which can only make sense if properly situated.

Following that, Randa recounted how her mother pressured her to get married, especially after her sister got married and had a baby. Her mother, Randa described, had suggested that she marry a man, have children and then divorce. She wanted her to have kids so that her sister's child could have cousins: "She wanted me no matter how to just get children. So then I bought her a dog. Now she's happy with the dog," Randa told me while she was laughing. However, given the pressures she was facing from her mother,

Randa had seriously entertained the idea of possibly marrying her gay best friend in order to have children:

For a short period of time, I was considering marrying my gay best friend and making a family with him. However, no matter how you turn it around you will eat shit. Then I was 28 and I felt pressured when I was thinking of it, him and I were friends. He started pressuring me and my mother pressured me, I used to tell her everything about my life, now I don't do that anymore. So I got pressured from him and from my mother, like now you are 30 and when will you get kids. He doesn't claim to be a feminist but he claims to be cultured which is worse than claiming to be a feminist.

Randa said that she has been “out” since she was seven, and was critical of people particularly in queer circles who were making fun of the coming out process, claiming that they tend to forget what they have been through:

we were all there, we all went through it, now because it was ten years ago and we read so much about it and now we forget it. It is important; because at that time it was very central to us and it shaped the way we are today. So, I am against biting the hand that fed us

Randa drew a line between queer and gay politics in Beirut. By referring to people who “have read so much about it,” she is referencing people who reject the coming out/closet narrative, and according to her forget about their own “coming out” experiences.

Similarly to Rabab and Randa, many women, men, and genderqueer individuals made it clear that they feel comfortable making a statement to mark their difference, whether it is through clothing, self-presentation, or referring to oneself as “not typical,” without necessarily being explicit about their sexuality. This pattern was common in some individuals’ relationships with members of their families, where they tell their family that they are not a “typical woman or man,” which in many cases was a tacit way of discussing sexuality.

Cisgendered women and genderqueer individuals, such as Randa and Rabab,

were more likely to point out their gender non-normativity; however, cisgendered men, like Tarek, sought to maintain their privileged status and hence, defined themselves in opposition to gender non-normative men. In addition, cisgendered men were less likely to bring up “gender issues” or gender discrimination.⁹ The majority of the cisgendered men I interviewed were concerned with maintaining gender-normative fronts, even though they did not explicitly frame it as such. The majority of men distanced themselves from feminine masculinities and thought of themselves as gender-normative men. In addition, many men felt they *are* inherently masculine, as opposed to the fact that they *act* masculine. Cisgendered men were less likely to see their gender behaviors as performances that they enact; rather, they talked about it as something that is indicative of who they are. So having gender-normative or masculine behavior was not regarded as a performance; rather for many it meant that they are “real men.” In addition to distancing themselves from gender non-normative, they distanced themselves from straight masculine men. However, as we will see in chapter seven, they enacted and performed normative masculinities in order to hold onto their privileged status as men in Lebanon.

Cisgendered men’s discussions of sexual non-normativity was mostly concerned with same-sex desire and relations between men. In some cases this was very evident and explicit, for example, Tarek, who considered himself “naturally masculine,” perceived that it is easier for women to have same-sex sexual relations in Lebanon than men. “Women are more likely to be accepted,” he said: “Not many people accept gay men or lesbians. Maybe lesbians not as much as men. Lesbians are more accepted in the world in

general.” When I asked him about the reasons behind his claim, he argued that:

One, you see them in movies, they refer to lesbians more. Any movie production: lesbians are more represented. Straight men accept lesbians more than gay men. Why? Because they find it attractive, they are not threatened by it. They are afraid a gay man might be attracted to them and want to do something to them. I don’t want to generalize, but you can see a lesbian couple in Lebanon holding hands no one says anything.

I continued to ask him if he had actually seen that, to which he replied that he has. “Yes I have in Hamra, more than once.” I continued to ask him how he “knew” they were “lesbians,” to which he answered, “I just assumed, based on the fact that they were holding hands and walking or hugging.” Tarek felt that female homosocial (or even public romantic) behavior was more accepted than between males. In talking about his views on different experiences that men and women face, Tarek suggested that it is easier for lesbians than gay men. In his explanations, Tarek did not account for multiple gender presentations, context, nor class. However, he made a generalization that it is harder for gay men in Lebanon, as he feels he is personally more policed, especially in public.

Tarek’s claims and viewpoints were not shared by any of the women or genderqueer individuals I talked to who pointed to the prevalence of lesbian invisibility. Cisgendered men, however, were not as vocal about the role of gender, as they perceived homophobia to be more directly related to sexuality than to gender performances, independent of class, ethnicity, migrant status, or religious sect. However, despite the fact that the majority of men did not mention the importance of gender, they still relied on the concepts of masculinity to distance themselves from gender non-normative men.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyze strategic uses of identity among queer individuals in Beirut. I show the limits of the hegemonic coming out/closet narrative and illustrated that identity is both always shifting and highly contextual. I suggest that queer visibility and strategic uses of identity by queer individuals in Beirut is done by three major strategies. First, individuals reject narratives of reconciliation and embrace contradiction. Second, they centralize gender and gender non-normativity. Third, visibility becomes highly contextual and linked to safety. I find that queer individuals' experiences and negotiations of gender, class, and religious sect inform their strategies of coming out and visibility.

In this chapter, I also illustrate how my interlocutors strategically make use of contradictions in their lives. For example, for Rabab, the hijab did not feel contradictory to her being a queer activist, as opposed to what others around her in her queer networks and otherwise, might have assumed. It was the hijab as a signifier of womanhood that was what made her uncomfortable, as she did not feel comfortable to present herself or be seen as a woman in all situations. In another instance in my discussions with Randa, a Lebanese feminist and LGBTQ activist, she claimed that "patriarchy saved her," in reference to the fact that her mother told her she would have kicked her out of the house for being gay, if she hadn't been a woman. A feminist activist stating that patriarchy saved her, is another example of strategic use of paradoxes. A third example is that of Yasmine who revealed that she felt more comfortable in Lebanon because she didn't necessarily have to, as she put it, "leave a box and enter another." She said that, in

Lebanon, she is in the “non-box,” and this non-box can mean many things (she is not married, doesn’t have kids, and is not religious) but this ambiguity provides her with the security necessary for her to feel comfortable. These examples illustrate the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities in the strategies that inform experiences of “coming out” and visibilities.

The six narratives I discussed above, illustrate that “coming out” and “the closet” were not experienced in terms of oppositions or binaries, nor were they experienced in a linear fashion. However, these narratives show that people experienced selective disclosures in a number of ways that depend on context, safety, gender, and the intersectionality of multiple positions. This understanding of disclosure centralizes gender, class and context and does not consider disclosure and concealment to be mutually exclusive. One comes out, and hence one does not conceal. My interlocutors do not reject these concepts entirely, nor do they identify with them, however, they *disidentify*, working within and through them and using them instrumentally.

By *disidentifying*, I argue that my interlocutors are resisting and troubling a narrative of modernity, which upholds binaries in understanding the self. They are providing different stories than the dominant story of queer sexualities and modernity. However, in order to understand the strategies of intelligibility employed in these cases, I unpack and deconstruct the binary of the closet/coming out, and point to the necessity of context in shaping how we present ourselves and think of ourselves. The recurring theme of intelligibility and reconciliation illustrates the awareness of, and the individuals’ needs to narrate and situate their lives along lines of a different story. Rabab’s story is very

significant especially in her assertion that her life is not a story of the reconciliation of Islam and queerness. Rather, it is a story that resists certain modes of intelligibility by embracing what seems to look like contradictions or paradoxes. It also illustrates strategies of visibility that are both selective and shifting.¹⁰

¹ Here I borrow the term reconciliation from post-conflict societies and use it to refer to the act of resolving/ harmonizing/uniting, multiple parts of oneself that might seem oppositional.

² Gender, race and class as central.

³ Narratives of reconciliation are not only directed at the Arab Middle East, however, they are common in talking about sexuality and religious and ethnic minorities and in the Global South. Such narratives assume that one needs to “reconcile” multiple parts of oneself in order to “be queer.”

⁴ There is also a growing rift between LGBTQ activists in Beirut as I will show in chapter six.

⁵ I use the terms “coming out” and “closet” as they are defined by my interlocutors.

⁶ I define and understand meaning making to be part of processes of embodiment, as opposed to something separate, and not as strictly cognitive practices.

⁷ I do not mean to imply that it is homogeneous in “Western” contexts, nor in “local” contexts, however, there are multiple local contexts and multiple productions of local understandings.

⁸ This is considered unusual in Lebanon, where individuals tend to leave Beirut on the weekends, especially in the summer to either go to the mountains or to the beach in the north or south of the city.

⁹ In many other cases they refused to talk about harassment against women as is evident in the harassment issues in Helem (See <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21786>).

¹⁰ Our subject positions, which are informed by larger social contexts, can seem paradoxical, and are always shifting. Therefore, the shifting nature of how we inhabit multiple positions, make it harder for us to fit people’s lives within intelligible narratives. In my discussion of strategies and shifting subject positions, I don’t mean to privilege rationality, or claim that these strategic moves are a byproduct of individuals’ rational thinking, but they point to the negotiation of subject positions, social context and in many cases, individuals’ experiences and understanding of safety.

Chapter Five

Queering visibilities: gendered performances in navigating the city

“Here in Lebanon you have to be strong to assert yourself, you have to! Otherwise you won’t have space. You don’t have the concept of respect [here], if you are not strong they will eat you up” (Randa, genderqueer, 33)

In order to safely navigate various parts of Beirut, individuals rely on a number of strategies including negotiating visibility and maneuvering various parts of the city differently based on gender, class and religious sect. Visibilities, like gender performances, are about self-presentation, performances, as well as reception and audience (West and Zimmerman 1987). Even though one might choose to present or mark oneself in a particular manner whether it is by clothing, performances, or even references to oneself, others still assess, racialize, and gender individuals. So it is not entirely about one’s personal decision and self-presentation, but also about the local contexts, audiences and reception, as well. For example, in Lebanon, one can present oneself as “secular,” but one will always be placed in a religious sectarian category based on one’s family genealogy or family name. I turn to an example of the rituals of greeting and border crossing, to illustrate how the strategies of visibility and passing can be employed differently in Beirut. I take a simple example of the rituals of greeting in Beirut, which shift based on the neighborhood one is in. For one, if I am in the predominantly Christian neighborhood of Achrafieh I am more likely to use the French *bonjour* as a form of greeting to be accepted (this is given that I am aware of my position as a non-Achrafieh resident); however, in Hamra I might say the Arabic “*marahaba*.” In addition, these greetings, rituals and performances are often accompanied by certain

bodily performances, which are at once gendered and classed. For example, a masculine form of greeting, is never only about masculinity, but is also always about class; working class masculinity functions very differently than upper-class masculinity. These distinctions are also important when thinking of the homosocial nature of masculinity, men greet other men very differently than they would greet women, however, that also differs based on whether they are kin or not. In having to cross multiple neighborhoods of Beirut, I am faced with having to situate myself in multiple and shifting ways that would ensure my safety and also make me pass as an “insider” or “from the neighborhood” (*ibn il mantiqa*). Therefore, I have to code-switch in order to pass as an insider. The politics of insider/outsider and who belongs and doesn’t, have always occupied central importance in civil war and post war-Beirut. Crossing neighborhoods has a particular history with the Lebanese civil war, where crossing from East to West Beirut (or vice-versa) one had to pass as either Muslim or Christian. In addition, to do that, one had to gain permission from and also be “from the neighborhood.” Border crossings, such as at the Green Line, that divided East and West Beirut, in the Lebanese civil war, and multiple other checkpoints (whether Lebanese militia checkpoints, Lebanese army, or Syrian army checkpoints), were a place where so many were killed for being either Muslim or Christian. Today, these positions are complicated by the war in Syria and thinking of the Lebanese positions towards Syrian refugees and migrants. Syrian migrants have always been discriminated against, most notably in the 2005 “independence intifada” post Hariri’s assassination, Lebanese people physically attacked Syrian migrant workers, particularly construction workers and Ka’ak vendors who took the brunt of the racism. This happened due to the fact that the Syrian regime was accused of being involved in the

assassination of Hariri. Similarly, today, people are burning Syrian refugees' tents, and asking Syrian refugees to leave specific towns and even more formally: there is the new visa requirement for Syrian refugees, which was never previously required for Syrians entering Lebanon. Who becomes an inside/outsider and how? Given the historical and the growing suspicion of the "other," in Beirut, this sense gets heightened when one is present in a part of the city where one is "not from" (*ibn/bint il mantiqa*).

Strategies of concealment, passing, disclosure(s) are not structured along a necessary binary, nor are these performances oppositional. So, if one wants to pass as a woman in a certain context, and pass as a man or as androgynous in other contexts, it doesn't imply oppositional thinking, but rather strategies of maneuvering situations, similar to Ann Swidler's concept of the "toolkit" (1986). Edward Said's *Out of Place*, is a good example, particularly his discussion of the various ways he presented himself in the US versus the Arab World. In his memoir, Said recounts how he would tend to stress his first name Edward and not his family name Said in the former, but he does the opposite in the latter. In the first chapter to his memoir *Out of Place*, Said (1999) writes about this strategic focus:

"For years, and depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past 'Edward' and emphasize 'Said;' at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear. The one thing I could not tolerate, but very often would have to endure, was the disbelieving, and hence undermining, reaction: Edward? Said?" (3-4)

Similarly to Said's claim and how people react to his full name as "impossible," contradictory, or in need of some "necessary reconciliation," my life and those of my interlocutors appear to have similar experiences. We have had to conceal, fashion and

refashion multiple positionalities particularly as we cross everyday boundaries in Beirut. These strategies become central for navigating and surviving different areas of the city.

Understanding visibilities

Gender non-normativity is heavily policed in the streets and private establishments of Beirut, as well as Lebanese media, where gender non-normative individuals are ridiculed, harassed and excluded. When talking about navigating Beirut and gay spaces in Beirut, Randa recounted multiple incidents of harassment of gender non-normative individuals. Randa, who identifies as genderqueer, recounted how she had to become stronger in order to face the harassment, unsolicited attention and comments from people that she had received for her gender non-normative presentation. Many of my interlocutors talked about the central role that normative masculinities and femininities play in people's understandings of gay, lesbian and trans visibility. However, at the same time, many claimed that visibility in the city is negotiated in relation to a number of factors, including but not limited to gender. Despite the presence of "gay-friendly" establishments and organizations, access to these places in Beirut is restricted to particular bodies and people: those who can afford to pay, those who are somewhat gender conforming, and those who are seemingly "secular."¹

In this chapter, I examine queer visibilities in Beirut by considering both individual and collective visibilities. I complicate the binary visibility/invisibility and illustrate that queer visibilities in Beirut are best understood by centralizing context and considering the multiple positionalities and visibilities individuals enact. I understand these shifting gendered performances to be a form of "code-switching" that my

interlocutors rely on to maneuver various parts of the city differently and hence, highlight different aspects of themselves, whether it is gender, class or religious sect.² When asked about visibility, many of my interlocutors stressed the importance of gender, class and context, in navigating the city. In addition, many talked about multiple forms of intentional and unintentional visibilities, disclosures, and passing strategies that were not necessarily about sexuality. For example, many discussed how they have had to hide/conceal certain political viewpoints, which were not always considered “popular.” However, in almost all cases my interlocutors pointed out to the contextual nature of visibility and its links to safety. In addition, I touch upon the role of LGBT visibility on the Lebanese media.

Following that, I consider the central role that visibility has played in the development of activist queer communities in Beirut during the past ten years, drawing on the narratives of two of my interlocutors: Samira, who is in her early twenties and relatively new to queer organizing in Beirut, and Randa, who is in her thirties and has been active in LGBT organizing in Beirut for 11 years. The community’s relationship to visibility changed with time; as it got bigger and more diverse, different strategies of visibility and invisibility were employed.³

In this chapter, my aim is to broaden how we define and conceive of queer visibilities. Shifting the focus from representations, I examine individuals’ practices and understandings of visibility. I move away from an agential understanding of visibility towards visibility as it is experienced. For example, I am not discussing someone who deliberately chooses to be visibly queer in response to oppressive invisibility, rather, I am looking at people who become or find themselves visible or invisible depending on social

circumstances or contexts. Visibility, similarly to the “coming out narratives” discussed in the previous chapter, is rooted in local contexts, identifications, and struggles. We must understand strategies of visibility/invisibility not as manifestations of closeting or lack of freedoms, but as complex strategies maneuvering the city. Talking about a mainstream gay, lesbian or queer visibility in Beirut privileges certain types of subjects, particularly, normative gendered identifications and performances, and assumes that all LGBT identified subjects desire a certain form of visibility. I problematize this mainstream understanding of queer visibility, by considering visibility to be shifting and contextual, and by centralizing my interlocutors’ experiences of gender, class and sectarian visibilities.

I consider the experience of visibility to be about three issues: knowledge (something is assumed or known), intelligibility and vulnerability. First, visibility is not always about a person’s choice or intention. As I illustrate in this chapter, one doesn’t always choose to be visible or not (or what aspects of one’s self are visible). In many instances, visibility is not intentional in the sense that people who are visible are often considered “marked” in society. Hence, even if they don’t want to be visible, they are often regarded as such by others. For example language, skin color, or gender performances, can make one visible. However, visibility can and does sometimes involve a choice and intention of making aspects of oneself known to others (Tucker, 2009). Visibility, whether intentional or not, is about both vulnerability and empowerment.

Second, visibility also involves processes of intelligibility. What is or what becomes visible has to have shared meaning to people around you. For example, two men holding hands in some parts of the Arab Middle East is a sign of homosociality and not

homosexuality. Therefore, the act of holding hands or other particular forms of intimacy, have to be intelligible as homosocial or sexual in order for them to have a particular meaning. Third, visibility is about vulnerability. Visible aspects of one's self, particularly, with regard to non-normativities, makes a person more vulnerable to possible harassment, micro-aggressions, acts of symbolic violence, or outright exclusion and violence.

In line with queer of color analyses, I show that queer visibility is constituted and constitutive of race, class, gender and religious sect. It is very contextual and is almost always about safety. Safety is a key issue, since many individuals attempt to highlight parts of themselves or experiences that might be considered “safer” to express. Analyzing the role that visibility plays in LGBTQ subjectivities in Beirut, I raise the following questions: What does and doesn't count as queer visibility? How do we understand queer subjectivities that are not about coming out? How can we better understand queer visibilities by considering gender, class and religious sect in Lebanon?

Queer (in)visibilities

Queer visibilities, like queer subjectivities, involve strategic choices regarding gender performances and normativity, particularly in relation to the shifting and contextual nature of safety. When I asked about LGBTQ visibilities, many of my interlocutors distinguished between two types of visibilities, the first relating to personal or individual visibility, in terms of whether they are “visible” as queer, the ways by which they perform “queerness,” and whether others could “tell” that they are queer. The

second understanding was linked to collective queer visibility, including LGBTQ organizing, gay and lesbian spaces and media representations of LGBTQ communities.

In terms of individual visibility, respondents focused mostly on the role of gender normativity and non-normativity in self-presentation and gender performances. In addition, they described what they conceived of as “typical” Lebanese women and “typical” Lebanese men. The majority of individuals defined typical Lebanese masculinities and femininities in ways that were distant to them. That is, they claimed that their own gender identifications and performances were different than what is considered normative. For the most part, they referred to values, dress, hairstyles, and gender comportment as points of difference. Shorter hair for women, for example, was a point of difference. They also distinguished between intentional and unintentional visibility and the fact that visibility is not always about choice. One has the ability to present oneself in certain ways; however, others have to make sense of one’s presentations and perceive one in ways that is intelligible to them. Therefore, visibilities like gender performances are about self-presentation, performances, and also about reception and audience (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Many individuals understood gender non-normativity to be a signifier of one’s sexual non-normativity. Not all of my respondents considered themselves non-normative. A few women considered themselves to enact normative femininity and a few men considered themselves masculine; however, they considered these roles/performances to be different than what they perceived to be heterosexual femininities and masculinities. (I expand on this more when I go into detail about how men and women conceived of normative gender performances and how they are linked to sexual identities.)

Most interestingly, the majority of my interlocutors linked gender performances to possible passing strategies, and instances where sexuality can be assumed or “known.” However, visibility meant much more than gender and sexuality alone. When talking about queer visibilities, a number of individuals situated themselves and the ways that they are read in terms of gender, class, and religious sect. That is, they did not only talk about themselves as queer but rather as enacting or representing classed and gendered queerness. In addition, they all situated themselves in terms of the urban space of Beirut and also pointed out to reception by others. That is, gender became defined as performances, which gained meaning in certain contexts with necessary “accountability” to specific audiences (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Finally, people also chose to talk about visibility with regards to their class, political commitments, standpoints, and values. Therefore, many did not talk about visibility solely in terms of their sexualities; rather, they discussed their negotiations around multiple aspects of their subjectivities such as political opinion and religious sect. For instance, some individuals talked about the expectations to hold certain political views based on their religious sect, others focused on religiosity, and many talked about their gendered performances. By focusing on other aspects of their lived experiences, they reframed and troubled the question of queer visibilities and illustrated that queer visibilities are highly contextual and are almost always about a number of multiple and intersecting factors. In addition, by centralizing their experiences as gendered and classed queer subjects, they were also contesting and re-inscribing boundaries.

“Other” visibilities

Yara was born, raised and lived in Lebanon all her life, except for living for a year abroad, to pursue her graduate education. She considers herself a “fulltime atheist.” When I asked her about her religious background, she paused and told me jokingly “I am sorry, I am Maronite Christian, I apologize,” and then laughed but continued to say “you have to acknowledge your history.” Yara felt the need to both situate and distance herself from what is considered to be a historically privileged position in Lebanon, that of a Maronite Christian. Yara is of middle class background, and had lived and grew up with her family in a predominately Christian neighborhood of Beirut and then moved to another city north of Beirut that was also predominantly Christian. However, when she was in her early twenties, she moved back to Beirut, where she lived on her own.

Yara’s political views, especially her commitment to, and solidarity with, the Palestinian cause were of primary importance to her. Interestingly, Yara told me that it was somewhat easier for her family to accept her as queer rather than accept her political views with regard to supporting the Palestinian cause.

Sometimes people can accept you more if you are queer than if you support the Palestinian cause. Let’s consider a context of Maronite very “cultivated” educated (*muthakkaf*), you might be accepted as a queer person and they will clap for you and they will tell you they love you, and they will say look at France...but the moment you say you support the Palestinian cause you have a problem, the fight will start. So yeah visibility about what? Outness regarding what? Sometimes, I feel I need to be out to my family that I support the Palestinian cause more than the fact that I am gay. Because there are whole different levels of reactions.

Yara recounted the fact that her family seemed to be more okay with her being gay than with supporting the Palestinian cause. In saying that they are accepting her and using France as an example, her family reproduces narratives of progress, locating being “modern” in the “West,” and in the former colonizer of Lebanon, France. This is an

emulation and a reproduction of racist narratives, which posit refugees, and Palestinians more particularly, as undesirable. So, in a way this illustrates that Lebanese racism against Palestinians “trumps” “homophobia.”

She continued to say that her family was not always accepting of her sexuality, and that they had a few fights about it; however, she says that now, they are able to talk about queer issues. Interestingly, Yara feels that visibility and coming out for her are a lot about voicing support for Palestinians as much as they are about sexuality:

My family and I, we had a problem, a fight, now when we talk about queer issues, we have a small argument, they make fun a bit, they're a bit scared of me, so they shut up. But when we talk about Palestinians, the fight starts, and Syrians now...I feel like I need to come out and be visible as supportive of the Palestinian cause and support the revolution in Syria. Also, within the leftist circles some people are coming out as supporters of the Syrian revolution and they are being bullied and vice versa. So visibility regarding the gay identity, we are talking in general. Of course, I am talking from my own perspective.

When asked about visibility, Yara claimed that she feels that visibility is not only about sexuality. She talked about the need to be visible in terms of what is considered unfavorable political opinions, within her family circles and some of what she referred to as the “leftist circles.” She echoed a recurring and salient pattern regarding visibility, where visibility is assumed to be about the need to talk about or make something public that might be potentially unfavorable or considered non-normative.

Yara also believed that individuals in the queer circle that she belongs to must share multiple viewpoints and political perspectives that are not only about LGBT issues. She described the queer circle that she is part of as one that is primarily feminist, inclusive and that shares values beyond LGBT rights:

If you want to talk about a queer circle, how I define my queer circle, I define it as one that is inclusive of everything... I am queer and you're queer and that's the only thing that we have in common...this is not the queer circle I belong to. [The

one I belong to] cares about the Palestinian cause, cares about class issues, migrant workers, cares about queer issues, feminist issues as a first obsession this is the queer circle I belong to. Not only I am a woman you are a woman we are both gay, we get together, no, this stopped a long time ago.

Yara described the queer circle she belongs to as a feminist inclusive queer circle. She explained that shared non-normative sexualities are not the only issue that holds the circle together, rather, for her it is other issues such as the Palestinian cause, queer, feminist and class issues that bring individuals in circle together. Yara described how initially the first commonality within her queer circle was about sharing certain visions regarding LGBT rights. However, with time, she claimed that cliques formed within the larger queer circle and that people were more likely to hang out and work together if they shared political views beyond and not limited to LGBT politics. She said:

First, the meeting point was a lesbian community that includes transgender people, then, the cliques happened accordingly, if you are a lesbian and you support the Phalangist party, you and I can't sit in the same place and talk, there is this history where you have killed thousands of people. Not just because you sleep with women I am going to accept to talk to you and debate with you politically and accept that...it's not that I want to kill you and get rid of you, but if you are not open to accepting my point of view and I am not open to accept why your history allowed, or how you are also brought up...people are also a package that they come with.

Yara specifically used the example of the Maronite Phalangist party in Lebanon to illustrate that she cannot organize with someone who holds political views that are incompatible with hers. For her, queer organizing is about changing society and she did not feel it was possible if she had to organize with individuals who do not acknowledge their history and who would hold different views on issues fundamental to her, such as the Palestinian cause.

In our discussions on queer visibilities, and gender non-normativities, Yara regarded context to be of particular importance to understanding issues of safety and visibility in Beirut:

visibility in terms of being queer: sometimes it's easy sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it poses a danger and threat to your life and sometimes it's okay... When you are talking politics, and you are taking a political side, there are a lot of "coming outs" to do. But in general, coming out as a gay person might make you lose your job, lose your family, go to jail. If we want to dig deeper, there are political fights you can come out to, or even coming out as an atheist and these can cause you a lot of trouble.

In the statement above, Yara claims that visibility and danger are very contextual. She compared the dangers of being visibly queer in certain areas in Beirut to expressing undesirable political viewpoints. Visibility then becomes highly linked to considerations of safety. She claimed that, in Lebanon as elsewhere, there are always issues to be wary about whether it is sexuality or political opinion and that people often have to go through processes of concealment and *talking* as a form of "coming out." Yara understood the experiences of coming out as queer to be less exceptional by considering other forms of coming out such as political opinion or religiosity (such as atheism). In addition, Yara claimed that the context, particularly certain areas of Beirut, is always very central. So *where* people choose to say or share their political opinion is important.

Another instance is that of Sirine and her relationship to the Armenian language, her paternal language. Given that her mother is not Armenian and that she had graduated from and hence, does not currently attend an Armenian school, Sirine does not have as many opportunities to interact and talk in Armenian. However, she described how she enjoyed speaking Armenian to one friend in the queer community. She described how

speaking Armenian for her is a political act, given the Armenian genocide, and particularly in queer spaces, which are already considered to be a political space:

this space became a place where I am rediscovering that I am making a point of speaking because it's a re-appropriation of this space by speaking this paternal tongue. It has been the issue another race tried to annihilate you and this mother tongue, so speaking it becomes a political act and you telling me to shut up is you silencing me. Maybe another place or context you might want me to be a bit more respectful because you don't understand the language. If I was with my grandma and she tells me not to speak the language because not everyone understands it and it's rude, then yes I get it. In another context [such as a queer space] you trying to tell me not to speak is you silencing me because you don't understand that historically this language was supposed to be dead. And me speaking it is a political act, it took me 10 years to understand that, before that I would silence myself and would refuse to speak it.

For Sirine, speaking Armenian and marking herself is an example of one of the ways that she made herself visible in queer communities, and, in this sense, her visibility is not about gender or sexuality, but here it is about ethnicity and language. That is, she described how one form of visibility (speaking Armenian, in this case) is a political act, which can be also thought of as an act of survival (speaking a language). This becomes central, because she claims the Armenian language was supposed to become dead (in reference to the Armenian genocide). Interestingly, she made the distinction between queer and non-queer spaces, where she would feel more silenced in queer spaces, since she feels it is political. However, Sirine explained that she is at the point where she feels that ethnic identity is as socially constructed as her sexuality, so whenever she wants to identify herself she goes back to cultural traits, things that she loves, her upbringing, and her language.

Gender performances as shifting and contextual

Yara, like many people I talked to, discussed the shifting gender performances as key to safety and security in certain areas:

How important is my performance? It is really important actually, my gender performance. Definitely. In certain areas, if you were going somewhere and you are performing your gender as a woman sometimes it complicates stuff, but sometimes its easier because you can get what you want easier, sometimes being a woman and performing a gender as a feminine woman, it makes things more complicated because you get harassed so it depends really what you want to get out of this performance.

Yara makes a very interesting point about gender attribution and performances, echoed in the previous chapter by Rabab. Both Rabab and Yara claimed that it is easier to be regarded as a woman or a man in certain contexts than in others. However, one major point of difference is that, even though Yara talks about selective gendered performances, she does not give the “audience” a central role. That is, even though she assumes that people can enact any gendered performance they desire, she does not talk about how reactions from other people depend on their own perceptions as much as it does on the performance itself. So even if one chooses to perform normative femininity, it is not always received as such, because people process, read and interprets performances, rather than take them at face value. However, Yara understood gender performances to be shifting based on context. She continued to say that one could play with gender:

You play with it, its just a game, it's a theatre where I want to be a woman today I want to be a normative woman today, I go to a company, I don't know, sometimes they greet you better, or something like that, or while if you were a dyke with a shirt and going to a company they would look at you like: why did she do this to herself?

Yara regarded gender as something that one can play with, and likened it to a “game;” however, Yara is a cisgendered woman and her definition of gender does not take into

account the experiences of transgendered individuals. Similarly to Tarek, who was introduced in the previous chapter, many of the cisgendered men I talked to emphasized the importance of normative gender presentations as a key for safety in navigating the city, however, they went further to claim that even being seen or associated with gender non-conforming men in public made them more visible, and hence was riskier, as people might assume that they themselves are non-normative. Yara saw gender as something that one performs whereas Tarek and other cisgendered men I talked to saw gender as indicating something internal to a person. That is, Tarek felt that he does not perform being a man; rather he is a man by virtue of his actions.

Yara, however, argues that thinking about visibility and non-normativity can be quite tricky as definitions of normativity are always changing. In addition, she points out to normative gendered presentations to give example of how one becomes “visible”:

What is normative to be thin or to have long hair or why are you wearing the torn t-shirt, or to be in this box of I am a girl I walk and I sway and I put 10 kilograms of makeup and I wear things that women wear, what do I know? These are things that are very shallow in gender identifications for women, if you want to go deeper, even in sexual practices, things get complicated, you know this gay international identity of the butch/femme, etc...all these enter in the gender identity, if you are this then you are like that, etc... you know everything else disappears of all the spectrum, of all the shades of what you can be, and what you want to be now and what you wear

Yara questions categories of normativity and what goes “inside” categorizations of gender. In addition, she claims that the categories and boxes that are already present do not capture the diversity of gender performances. This is most clear when she says, “you know everything else disappears of all the spectrum, of all the shades of what you can be, and what you want to be now and what you wear.” This echoes Yasmine’s discussion of the box and the “non-box.”

As another example of questioning the categories of gender normativity and expanding the ideas of the diversity of gender performances, Mays, a 27-year-old woman, who has been involved in both feminist and queer activism in Beirut, questioned categories of normativity and gender, using the example of her father. Her father has a “very feminine masculinity,” she told me. Mays asserted that people in Beirut can detect that; however, that does not make him read or seen as sexually non-normative. She claimed that, even though he is married to a woman, he still is not considered gender conforming. She attributes it to Lebanese society, which accepts a range of gender expressions that are non-normative:

In our society, non-normative gender expressions are not so outside the ordinary, what we make of these expressions are where the points of tension are. When you say I identify as a gay person, what is contested is this taking it up as an identity. Growing up we had gay men in my life, people were hush hush about it, everyone knew but the idea is that people acknowledge that there are gay people living among us, but the idea is that when you make it about who you are...this is when people would say “what the hell.”

Mays claims that non-normative gender experiences are not so uncommon in Lebanon, suggesting that gender non normativity is more accepted than people identifying as gay. However, many men that I interviewed would not agree this claim. Talking about visibility, the majority of the men mentioned gender normativity and feeling unsafe as primary in their understanding of visibility. Gender normativity played a very central role in feeling vulnerable and being harassed; nine out of the twelve of the cisgendered men claimed that they feel less safe when they are in the presence of gender non-normative men. For the majority, being associated with feminine-acting men meant that one could be assumed to gay or queer.

Sirine also talked about gender presentation and gender non-normativity when she thought about visibility. She claimed that since she grew up as a “tomboy,” she had gotten used to being made fun of and being the “odd one out.” However, she claimed that decisions about visibility are also contextual and are also about compromises that she makes. Sirine told me that she does not like to wear a dress or put on makeup, and that given the choice, she would have wanted to go to her cousin’s wedding in drag. However, in instances that involve her parents, such as a cousin’s wedding, she would refrain from going in drag, to safeguard her parents from potential harassment from the family. “I don’t want them to go through that crap so I compromise,” she said, “and its okay for that matter.”

For Sirine, visibility was not always about the individual’s personal choice; she claimed that it is largely based on people’s perception of what counts as gender normative:

What is visibility? When I walk in the street I don’t make an effort to say hey look at me I am queer, but automatically people assume that because I don’t have the characteristic that they stamp on a straight person.

Sirine considers her queer visibility as highlighted in opposition to the fact that she is not “straight,” and that people identify her as queer, since she doesn’t have characteristics associated with straight women, which she claims are gender conformity and femininity. Therefore, in highlighting visibility, the narratives presented above illustrate that they are various and multiple queer visibilities and that in most cases they are linked to what people consider to be normative gender performances. In addition, the meaning of visibility, and what is considered visible and not, is shifting and is quite contingent on space and context.

Collective queer visibilities in the city

The other major form of queer visibilities that came up in my discussions with my interlocutors was about collective queer visibilities in Beirut. Our conversations consisted of discussions of community, gay and queer spaces, and representations of queerness in Lebanese media. While talking about collective queer visibilities, people distinguished multiple forms of visibility (gay, lesbian, and trans visibility) and how visibility functions differently based on gender and class.

Mays claimed that visibility is never about one aspect of an individual, even though mainstream gay organizing tend to make it solely about “gay visibility”; gender, class, and race always plays a role, and the visibility of some people happens at the expense of others. She also argued that visibility is very tied to context. That is, what aspect of one’s presentations *becomes* visible can only be understood in a particular context. Giving the example of masculinity and femininity, she claimed that they do not just exist without context and are always read with context in mind:

It always comes at the expense of others, the more racialized, homonormative, these are the visible. It is a conscious choice, I think that it is, if you are visible in your workspace, everybody accepts you and its great, and if not then you change jobs? What are you going to do? It is something you negotiate with all the time. I think people can detect whatever isn’t normative.

Here, Mays pointed out to the possible “consequences” of visibility: for example in the workplace, where one might be discriminated against and possibly being kicked out of their jobs, for being non-normative. Given her organizing experiences in queer movements, Mays believes that visibility should never be the goal of the gay community, particularly because, certain bodies are more marked and hence, more visible, and not

everyone is able to “pass,” even if they wanted to. Mays claimed that people can “detect whatever isn’t normative,” which is a point Randa insists on in the following instance.

Similarly, Randa distinguished between gay, lesbian, and trans visibility; for her it was very important not to lump people together in order to better understand the experiences of each group:

Gay visibility is different from lesbian visibility from a trans visibility- so typically the clothes, the gym (gay men), the brands, expensive clothing. However, lesbian visibility: she has short hair, she walks like a man, talks like a man, even though this is a very old stereotype and now the picture is changing in Lebanon. For example, if people see two women together all the time without men, they would start understanding that they are not simply best friends, these are a couple, they are always together.

Randa claimed that times are changing and that are people are more able to pick up on lesbian and gay couples if they see a same-sex couple spending a lot of time together. She claimed that, where once people would mostly rely on gender non-conformity, now people can now “guess” people’s sexuality by relying more than just gender conformity. Here visibility gets defined differently, where Randa claims, it is not only associated with gender non-normativity. She continues to say: “This visibility is changing not only for women, for men too. People are more clever now, so now they know if someone is gay even if he is not typically gay.” Randa thinks that the concept of visibility is also changing, where gay and lesbian visibility is not only about gender.

Visibility and the Lebanese media

Despite the fact that people are “more clever,” as Randa says, since they understand that gays and lesbians can be gender normative, she points out to how the Lebanese media still uses exaggerated portrayals based on gender non-conformity (most

notably gay femininities) to represent gay characters. Speaking about the importance of collective LGBTQ visibilities, Randa said:

It is very important. For people, it is like a strange looking thing that you get used to with time, this is how important it is. I want to give you the example of *Majdi W Wajdi*,⁴ they offer gay visibility but they do it in the nastiest ways. I still think its good. If you look at all the comedy shows they all have a gay character, but represented as repressed sexually, obsessed with penis.

Despite the fact that Randa sees these representations to be overly exaggerated portrayals, she still thinks they are better than no portrayals at all. Randa made a very interesting distinction between who is and isn't visible in Lebanese mainstream media. She claimed that people who are most visible in the media are the most gender non-normative men:

What's nasty is that there a large part of the community that is like that, and it is these people who have the highest visibility that's what changes the formula, because when you are that gay and really like *Majdi w' Wajdi*, some people you can't help but notice that the way they act is different [overly feminine for example] their sense of difference translates to the way they act but if people see it more on TV it will make them get used to it more. For some they just become secluded, others become extroverts. If you are an extrovert you become empowered, being gay or trans makes you stronger, makes you speak out... You know what I mean?

She continues to say that some people (in reference to gender non-normative gay men) have suffered so much that having an outspoken, overly feminine gay character on Lebanese TV is good, as it helps some people feel less alone. In addition, according to her, it helps give an image or a representation that is not necessarily only about the suffering that they had to go through in their lives. In addition, Randa argued that having gender non-normative gay men in TV shows makes people get used to the idea more. For her, even though the representations focus mostly on gender non-normative men, she thinks it's still better than the lack of any representations:

I don't think it is bad; you are exposing people to homosexuality and the fact that there are homosexuals in this community. These examples are entering homes that watch TV, the fact that almost every TV station is having that character and that every TV has its own sectarian audience, then there are all exposed...it is mostly good because they have this gay character on every TV station and every home and the kids are exposed to it, however, it is bad because it shows that all the gays act like Majdi and Wajdi and they only care about the penis. Now, they're not really lying about this, but still... you have the thinkers, the people who want to change, the people who are harassed, made fun of, the prisoners, there are many factors that they don't include.

Randa thinks that it's good exposure to have gay characters on TV, even if the representations are mostly stereotypical and exaggerated. She does assert that many men get excluded in these representations; however, she considers exposure and visibility to be helpful. Randa claimed that there are no lesbians or queer women present in these shows, which she referred to as "the eternal lesbian invisibility," which according to her is a global phenomenon.

She went on to describe a Lebanese soap opera that is about a rich father who refuses to give his son inheritance because he is romantically involved with another man:

There is another show I forgot its name also it is exposing, a family with money, sitting on the terrace, the son his boyfriend lives with him, a bit of a *tante*, his father comes in and the boyfriend says I am going to go get stuff from the shop (pouting lips), it's good that they show this action, that they show a gay character like that. The gay man is chubby, he talks in a feminine way. Now you still cant show a mechanic who's very masculine and gay, even though you should, but people don't accept that yet. So no one has shown this.

Randa claimed that Lebanese TV is more likely to present images of gay men which highlight gender non-normativity. In addition, viewers, alike, are more likely to accept such images, as opposed to representations of gay men who "embody" working class masculinities.

Here, it is important to note how local representations of gay male characters are always centered on gender non-normativity, hyper-sexuality, and the image of the *tante*.⁵

In addition, it is very interesting to think about the various ways by which Lebanese gay men are represented and how the representations shift based on venue and audience.

Whereas the gay travelogues I analyzed in chapter three represent “gay men” in Lebanon as buff, muscular, and hyper-masculine, local Lebanese TV represents gay men as overly feminized and sexualized, albeit in a very different manner. The gay travelogues show the men as “discreet,” whereas Lebanese TV depicts them and marks them as gay with an emphasis on their overly feminine self-presentations and obsession with sex.

In addition to the increasing visibility of gay characters on soap operas, the other major venue for the representation of homosexuality on Lebanese TV is on talk shows tackling the topic of homosexuality in Lebanon and the Arab World. These shows invite guest speakers who present their personal testimonies and life stories, as well as “experts” (usually psychologists and/or religious authorities) who comment on the stories and the issue at hand. Even though some aspects of these representations have shifted, particularly with adopting more neutral language in discussions of homosexuality, these TV shows almost always conflate gender non-normativity with sexual non-normativity, and conflate homosexuality with trans issues. In addition, the invited informants are often made anonymous by blurring their faces and distorting their voices, even though more guests have been appearing without distortion more recently. The questions usually revolve around gender identity, desire and society.

An episode of the Lebanese talk show “*Ahmar Bil Khat Al Areed*,” (Red in Bold Font), on homosexuality in the Arab World, aired on January 28th 2009, on the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC). Malek Maktabi, the TV host questions one of his

guests, Alfred a Lebanese man in his late thirties, who doesn't identify as either homo or heterosexual:

Maktabi: Did you decide to come here as a woman or a man?

Alfred: I come as Alfred, who is different

Maktabi: I am asking you about your *sexual identity*, are you a man or a woman?
(emphasis added)

Alfred: I am a man

Maktabi: Alfred, I have a question, you have an earring on...

Alfred: This is an accessory

Maktabi: Does a man wear accessories?

A: If he wants to, why not?

M: Doesn't that negate the concept of manhood?

A: For some people yes

M: No, not for some people, for most people

A: Maybe

M: It's the great majority. With your behavior, aren't you creating more revulsion against another category of people, more specifically of homosexuals?

A: Maybe. If they care about the way I look.

Maktabi directly asks Alfred about his sexual identity by asking him if he identifies as a man or a woman, and focuses on Alfred's gender identification and presentation in order to talk to his audiences about homosexuality. This conflation, as previously mentioned is very common. Maktabi, like many of other Lebanese TV shows hosts enacts a "trial-like" spectacle; questioning and interrupting invited guests, while medical and religious expertise to support poorly researched arguments and moral judgments. He clearly does not listen to the informants and just continues to ask his questions, which contradict any democratic attempt at letting people freely express their ideas or conceptions of the topic. In addition, homosexuality is treated without any complexity and with no consideration to the fact that individuals have multiple positions and standpoints that complicate their experiences. Similarly to Joshua Gamson's (1998) discussion of US talk shows, I find that the representations of gender and sexual non-normativity in Lebanon rely on conflating gender and sexuality. In *Freaks Talk Back*,

Gamson (1998) argues that representations of gender and sexual non-normativity on popular talk shows in the US create a “paradoxical visibility” (19). These classed and raced representations, have the unintended consequence of blurring yet redrawing the lines between what they consider to be “normal” and “abnormal” gender and sexual practices (Gamson 1998). Lebanese talk shows, like *Matakbi*’s, also attempt to reinforce values of respectability by distinguishing between normative and non-normative desires, practices, and sexualities; however, they do so differently. Similarly to the case of Alfred described above, Lebanese talk shows take the form of interrogations and rely on “experts” (usually lawyers, psychologists and/or religious authorities) who comment on the stories and the issue at hand. The shows always end by focusing on how law, mental health and religion define and construct acceptable gender and sexual norms. Even though these representations provide some form of visibility for gender and sexual non-normative individuals, the stories are presented in ways that reproduce conflation between gender and sexuality and that police the line between what is considered moral and acceptable, and what isn’t.

Visibility and political standpoint

Other individuals talked about their own visibility as queer, and as having certain political standpoints. Similarly to Yara, Souraya, a 23-year-old woman who had also been active in LGBT, queer and feminist movements in Lebanon, started that visibility is important for any person giving a political position (even more so with a marginalized standpoint, though). She claimed that this could be applied to whether someone is wearing the Palestinian keffiyeh, a rainbow flag, or a cross. For her, people gain visibility

when they use these symbols in an attempt to convey a political identity about themselves. However, at the same time, she claimed that visibility is not necessarily a conscious choice. Similar to the questions raised by Yara, she made a very interesting distinction between how people define normativity and queer visibility:

I don't think visibility is a choice, why would we call this form of expression visibility, and the women who wear heels and walk in a very normative way, we call it normativity. They are both visible on the street. Why do we call one but not the other? If you mean political visibility, I think everyone is making a political statement when they walk. Even the woman who doesn't think in her opinion that she is giving a political identity when she is being very normative, she is still making a political statement of normativity in how society understands her. For me it's not a major issue, I would personally not put a rainbow or something, but there are guys from Helem who I see wearing a rainbow bracelet and for them it is a political statement, for me the keffiyeh is a political statement, I wear all it all the time [in Beirut and other cities in Europe]. Sometimes I feel I am overdoing it but I feel safe.

Souraya claimed that everyone is making a political statement and is performing certain forms of visibility even without consciously intending to. In a sense, she argues that normative presentations and categories that are considered “unmarked” are almost always a way by which people are visible. So for her everyone is visible, albeit differently. Claiming that everyone is visible even though differently, does not take into account the different positions of power that people occupy and the ways that certain forms of visibility can be safer, based on the context one is in. However, Souraya argued that everyone is making a political statement, even if unintentional. She also brought up issues of safety, particularly when talked about wearing the keffiyeh in a Western European capital, where she had previously lived.

In addition, Souraya made a distinction between how visibility is conceived by LGBT and queer groups. Despite being involved in feminist and queer organizing in Lebanon, unlike Mays, she did not give that much importance to a politics of invisibility:

[visibility] is not a choice, we are all visible bodies on the streets, we are all making political statements, we are all presenting ourselves, some people focus and choose to make visibility a political statement, like the LGBT movement, so that symbols of a certain type of visibility tell you something about the politics of a person and it is more purposeful. In Lebanon they do a big thing about it, the queers, that's why the LGBTs are visible and why are they celebrating it, as if the queers are not visible?

Souraya brings up the tension around visibility, between LGBT and queer politics, and claims that “queers” are as visible as LGBT-identified individuals, despite queer politics in Lebanon relying on strategies of invisibility. Souraya feels that queer politics and organizing in Beirut, which try not to be visible and distance themselves from mainstream LGBT visibility, are also implicated in politics of visibility. For her, “we are all visible bodies” that are seen, and we all present ourselves in ways that make us visible, whether we present ourselves as gender conforming or not. She expressed frustration with queer politics of invisibility, since, according to her, everyone is visible. However, she does not consider how visibility is also always highly gendered, racialized and classed, and how these visibilities affect different people in multiple and different ways.

Visibility and safety

For my interlocutors, visibility was linked to safety. Yasmine made distinctions between visibility in Lebanon and the US and also focused on the notion of safety:

Visibility doesn't have to be important. In Lebanon, it is less important than the [US], just because of the nature of the culture, I feel in Lebanon you are safer when you are not visible. In Lebanon it is a lot about safety. Safety takes a priority over visibility for me, when I was with my ex in Lebanon for years, we weren't visible, but our relationship went well. Our relationship wasn't affected by the visibility. We acted like straight people. In Lebanon it's okay for a woman not to date men, so that helped a lot. That's why visibility is not important; you can say that “I don't date, I want to get married.” You can go with this virtuous image. There are many heterosexuals who go out with guys in secret, because they can't go out with them. Even the straight

couples are not visible. So for us, it wasn't that "oh because we are gay we can't be visible," it's because you can't be visible in relationships in Lebanon to start with. Everyone has sex but no one talks about it. So visibility that just wasn't part of the culture of being in a relationship, even when I dated a guy.

Visibility for Yasmine became an issue of personal safety, where she feels safer when she is not visible, or perhaps not identified, as queer in Lebanon. However, she felt that visibility, or being able to tell others about your sexuality, is important in setting boundaries for other people. "Whether I am in straight or a gay relationship, visibility is important just for being able to set the boundaries of other people," she said.

Yasmine felt that one of the major reasons that visibility becomes less important in Lebanon is that people have to hide their relationships. When I asked her about what she thinks about visibility and social change, she agreed that they are important, however, only if they're done in a particular manner:

The visibility in terms of your presence as a person, I think it is important but it is very limited in Lebanon, some people will pay the price. That's why people are visible, present physically in certain spaces that are safer. Being able to be yourself and be trans there, being present and treated with respect is important. Visibility in saying we are gay- that I think is important but I think it has to start in a marketing way, I think like feminist movements...they distanced themselves from lesbians in order to grow. There is discrimination that I don't support. To have someone famous to come out is more important than me coming out. Someone who is respected, who is a thinker, who is educated, to come out is more important. I feel that even here if you see...the people who don't go to protests are the people who should be going. The people who are there are people who are more out. Others will say "look at them these are freaks." I think part of it is to show them that people are similar to them. Its like you put a spokesperson to speak to people. I know it's very mean but its what works best. It breaks the stereotypes of gay people but adds the stereotypes of expected gender identity. It's not straightforward answer, but as a marketing tactic it would work more in our favor.

Yasmine preferred a strategy that was more in line with politics of assimilation - "we are like you, just gay." She viewed this to be the most effective from what she considered a "marketing perspective." She felt that queer visibility was almost always linked to issues

of safety, therefore, using an approach that highlights similarities to the norm, felt safer for her.

Since Yasmine linked visibility to fears about physical safety she recounted how she feels and has felt in Beirut, particularly with regards to harassment and safety on the streets:

Physical presence is important, however, I think of it as secondary compared to women's presence. All women: gay, straight, trans, because their physical presence is attacked. I don't feel safe walking in shorts in Hamra, so I don't feel this is my physical space. At the University, I only used to feel safe when I entered campus and I felt unsafe when I went out. It's like a different world, a gated community.

Here [in the US], I feel safer physically, I can wear whatever I want and run, but I feel much safer, like not politically safer. In Lebanon, there is no single time when I walked on the streets that I wasn't catcalled. There is this threat they have the right, they have the power, I always felt weaker. I love Beirut, but all my life I had this constant background fear, fear of a lot of things, people know, I was afraid of visibility, if I was smoking or drinking or wearing a short skirt. There is always a fear of someone saying something to me, of someone to rape me, someone to say something to my parents. People learn to ignore it, but I felt it all my life. Because I was against everything my parents want me to do in so many ways. I had so many experiences that I was always afraid.

Yasmine explained that she had always felt less physically safe in Beirut, and was anxious about possibilities of harassment on the street; this makes Beirut feel less as "her space." In Beirut, she felt safer in gated communities of one of the two major American Universities in Beirut. In the US, she feels physically safer, even though she does not feel that she belongs. In addition, Yasmine's anxieties, like those of Tarek, Rabab and many others, in Beirut were often linked to her fear that her parents would know about her sexuality. Many of my interlocutors brought up issues of safety and visibility as they talked about the history and the present of LGBT organizing in Lebanon.

History of LGBT community: networks and visibility

Visibility has a very important role in LGBT organizing in Beirut, particularly with regards to the different organizing strategies of the two LGBT organizations: Helem and Meem.⁶ Turning to the short history of the gay community in Beirut, I contrast the stories presented by two individuals, Randa—who was in her early thirties and had been involved with the community for over 10 years—and Samira who at 21, while newer to the activist community in Lebanon, has been very active.

The presence of gay communities in Beirut has been problematized by some academics who are skeptical of the very notion of a gay community in Beirut. Sofian Merabet clearly asserts this point when he says:

one might contend that there is no such thing as a “gay community” in Lebanon at all, providing, of course, one defines a community as a coherent and encompassing group of people sharing similar, even if competing, positions, and aspirations and where the sexual preference becomes a cardinal point of identity construction (Merabet 2004, 4).

However, many individuals I talked to would disagree with this assertion. A number of my interlocutors recounted the history of what they consider to be the “LGBT community” in Beirut, either through personal experiences or through stories that have been passed down. In recounting the history of the lesbian and gay activist community in Beirut, Randa started by telling me about how she first went about searching for other gay people in the city on the internet. She first found about “the community” online, when she joined the “gayLebanon” mailing list that she found online back in 2000. After subscribing, she started receiving emails from people who called for meetings in various coffee shops, every now and then. Individuals on the group asked for permission to bring one of their friends to different meetings, who later became part of the group. This,

Randa describes, is how the community started. In addition, if someone is new to the group they would send out an email introducing the new person, followed by a meeting. The other major gay outlet to meet other lesbians and queers was a channel on the chatting software, *MIRC*, called #gaylebanon. Randa had started chatting to a woman on there:

I met her online, we both liked Melissa Etheridge and Alanis Morissette. No one knew them in Lebanon at the time. I met her the next time. It was the first lesbian I met officially, she took me to *Jounieh*, she introduced me to another woman and then she took me back home. This was my first outing when I met someone from the community.

Randa went to her first meeting back in 2000, after meeting a guy from the mailing list who later took her there. Describing the first meeting, Randa says:

There was a table full of people like 24, and he introduced me by my nickname and everyone was cheering. The coffee shop was closed for us. It was private. I met many people; you put a face to a nickname. I met someone with me in university. Most of the people I met back then are still my friends today.

The first meetings as Randa described took place in private coffee shops rented by the group. These spaces served as a meeting spaces, since there weren't any. Randa describes that time as a time when "there really was a community." What made it a "really a community," for Randa, was the fact that "people liked each other, they used to help each other and offer support if someone was kicked out of the house they would offer a place for her/him to stay." However, with time the community got bigger and this group of people started an underground support group called Club Free, which I discuss in more detail in the upcoming chapter. Randa recounted multiple stories about several places where gays and lesbians would hang out and meet, including *Sheikh Mankoush* (Merabet, 2014). She referred to how some places became "occupied" by the community at the time, however, many of the original places were closed down: "This is how you occupy

spaces, but then you get kicked out. Yes, at the end you get kicked out. I didn't use to go, but yes then *Sheikh Mankoush* got nasty they got rude to you." At that time they created a separate *MIRC* chat channel for women, and members of the community started forming separate groups. She recounted how the community got bigger and it developed from Club Free to the more visible Helem.

Samira, on the other hand, was much newer to the LGBT community in Beirut, as she was 21 and had moved to Beirut from the Arab Gulf States where she grew up.

Talking about the "older generations," and the community in the past, Samira says:

From what I hear from the old generations that it was all organized but underground in a scary way, they were scared for their own well-being and safety, they still needed their parents [for financial support]. Now, one has a fight with one's parents, packs her bags and leaves, she has her friends, she finds a job. Back then, they were terrified. The sense of independence didn't exist. Now it does, now there are more connections...

For Samira, the earlier LGBT community was much less visible and was much more underground as people were not independent and needed their parents. However, she claims that people now are not as scared particularly since they have built connections and support networks. Building an LGBT support network, as described by Samira, gave people the courage to be more visible:

Back then, people didn't mix as much, you couldn't have found lots of Christians and Druze, Muslims and Christians, the connections you found and the networks you built, if you can't find something in your domain you now can rely on people outside the family, you know what? I do have a choice, I do take it and I will leave.

Now, Samira claims, people have a choice in whether to be visible or not, as a byproduct of having a strong support network. Interestingly, Samira mapped on religious and sectarian relations and networks to further explain how things are much better now. For her, even people from different religious didn't mix as much, she claimed that now it is

different. Samira describes people as having been scared back then, however, she claims that they are not anymore:

Yes, people were scared, now they are not. We have something here in Lebanon; everyone is scared to lead, because they don't want to be left out on their own because they will be screwed. We are brought up on the concept of family, without family you are nothing, we are seen as a collective not as an individual. The individual has no identity; one is seen as a group. So any individual couldn't or wouldn't risk being individualized and criminalized alone because they would be left with nothing. They have to stick with the collective until they found someone else like them (in this case another collective, but queer). When they found it they tried to lead underground, with time, the media, sense of freedom, economy started to flourish, people started to slowly open new holes, new passageways until they surfaced in society, where you could organize on a much more efficient way and this couldn't have been done until Internet was properly used and grasped and people found each other.

Samira claims that people were more fearful a few years ago. People were particularly scared to lead a group or movement, as they feared potential backlash from their families. Samira described Lebanese society as “collectivist” whereby she claimed, “without family you are nothing.” She mentioned the importance of finding and relying on queer circles as networks, which represented another type of collective. Things have changed, however, particularly since people can rely on queer networks, which according to Samira, affords individuals more freedom. Many individuals echoed Samira's claims about the importance of queer circles and safety.

Both Samira and Randa suggested that networks and the Internet are central. While Randa felt that there was more sense of a community back in the early 2000s, Samira felt that there is a stronger sense of an LGBT community today. Even though they both defined the community similarly: networks and connections and helping each other, for Samira the “underground” nature and the lack of visibility of a community was not very appealing. Samira expressed on more than one occasion the need for visibility and

the need for individuals in the community to know that there are multiple other queers. This is something that Randa agreed with, however, she did reminisce about the older community. Samira paints the older community as “very afraid,” which is something she claims is not the case anymore. Of course in such a statement, she is not taking into account the diverse experiences of individuals, the contexts, and individual’s gender and class. Even though they both talked about the history and the present of the gay and lesbian community, they did not mention the experiences of transgendered individuals in the community. Randa talked more about trans exclusion and invisibility; however, Samira considered life to be safer for gays and lesbians now. Samira never got the chance to go to any of the older gay spaces and nightclubs like Acid, which she hears people refer to nostalgically as “those times.” Also, in talking about these spaces, the exclusions that they were built on were not mentioned. “There aren’t as many gay clubs as there was,” she says. Samira mentions a lesbian club and says: “no one goes there anyone when a place gets a bad reputation, when you get into a place and everyone is hungry and they look at you as if you are a piece of meat no one wants to go there anymore.” In the past few years, the numbers of gay and lesbian bars did indeed decrease as Samira mentions. However, since Samira was relatively new to Beirut, as she had moved from the Gulf a few years prior, her experience of Beirut was always in relation to her experiences in the Gulf. Randa, however, had been part of the gay community in Beirut for a longer time and had a longing to the earlier times where she claims “it felt more like a community.” I discuss gay networks, spaces and access to places in more detail in chapter seven.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I started with a discussion of the multiple ways that individuals maneuver various parts of Beirut and how that shifts based on gender, class and religious sect. Following that, I used the example of gender performances, as a kind of “code-switching” or maneuvering that queer individuals in particular must perform. I illustrated how visibility is about knowledge, intelligibility and vulnerability. A majority of my interlocutors asserted that visibility is not necessarily intentional. That is, individuals have the ability to present themselves in certain ways; however, others have to make sense of their presentations and perceive them in ways that they understand. In addition, safety plays a central role in visibility and in negotiating sexual subjectivities, political standpoints and gender.

Understanding queer visibilities as constantly being negotiated at the intersections of multiple (and often shifting and contending) sites of presentation and recognition helps us understand the slippery nature of “visibilities.” For example, after removing the hijab, Rabab was read in a particular manner that did not match up with the ways that she perceived herself. Dominant understandings of coming out assume it to be an integral aspect of LGBT visibility; since it is assumed that when people come out they are choosing the only way to take “ownership” or feel that they are presenting themselves as “authentic” gay and lesbian subjects. However, such accounts do not help us understand strategies of queer visibility in Lebanon such the ones I describe in this chapter, which are informed by the experiences of gender, class and sect. Experiences of managing and negotiating various and multiple visibilities were mainly tied to individuals’ gendered and classed positions, as opposed to Lebanese or Arab culture.

In this chapter, I also discussed queer visibility and the media in Lebanon and illustrated how Lebanese TV shows and talk shows conflate gender and sexuality. Finally, I presented the role of visibility within LGBT organizing by considering the history of LGBT organizing in Lebanon from the perspectives of two of my interlocutors. I examine the role of visibility in LGBTQ organizing strategies in more detail in the upcoming chapter.

¹ These are not necessarily overlapping groups or categories.

² Here, I use the term “code-switching” to refer to strategies and performances that help individuals negotiate visibility and safely navigate certain parts of Beirut. In this instance, I do not use it linguistically. For more on code-switching, see Minning (2004) and Decena (2011).

³ The Internet is still very central, particularly with Grindr, Tinder, Manjam, and other online dating websites.

⁴ TV characters who regularly appear in a comedy skits show.

⁵ Tante, the French term for auntie, is used among many Lebanese to refer to non-heterosexual men who are both feminine acting and who are generally interested in gossip (as explained to me by one of my interlocutors).

⁶ I discuss the history of LGBT and queer organizing in Lebanon and the different organizing strategies in more detail in chapter six.

Chapter Six

(Un) critically queer organizing: collective identity deployment and strategies of visibility in LGBTQ organizing in Lebanon

The “Gay International” and the “International Gay”

Amidst growing visibility and research on LGBTQ social movements in both the Global North and South and rising discussion of global LGBTQ rights and politics, a number of theorists problematize notions such as global gay identities, global LGBTQ rights and the effects that they have on people’s lived experiences in the Global South (Amar 2013, Hoad 2007, Long 2009, Currier 2012).¹ Scott Long, former director of the LGBTQ rights program for Human Rights Watch (HRW), wrote a number of articles on how global LGBTQ rights discourses have the potential to cause a backlash on the well-being of the subjects that they aim to defend. In an article titled “Unbearable witness: How Western activists (mis)recognize sexuality in Iran,” Long argues that uncritically applying Western understandings of sexual identities and homophobia in non-Western contexts creates the unintended risk of a backlash against sexual minorities rather than helping them (Long 2009). Using the example of the Iranian state’s execution of Makwan Mouloudzadeh in 2007 for a rape crime, Long explores how Western gay rights activists misinterpreted and reduced the context by framing the case in terms of a lack of gay rights and rampant institutionalized homophobia. In addition, he illustrates how direct application of “the terms of Western gay politics can erase voices and political agency in describing other cultural situations, through a pursuit of sameness and a strategic misrecognition of otherness that enables domestic political action but posits misleading universals” (Long 2009, 119). That is, he argues that, by attempting to explain sexual

diversity, an application of “universal” conceptions of LGBTQ identities is not useful in all contexts. Hence, even though global LGBTQ rights discourses and groups can be useful for political action in the Global South, using them without being attuned to specificities of local contexts risks producing a homogenization that obscures the complexities of lived realities.

LGBT organizing in Lebanon

Since dominant LGBTQ organizing discourses emanate from Western conceptions of sexuality and sexual identities,² LGBTQ groups in the Global South have to translate and redefine these concepts so that they can be intelligible and useful in their local contexts (Thayer, 2010). However, there is a tension in the literature on LGBTQ social movement organizations (SMOs) in the Global South regarding the ways they translate, adopt and/or resist these dominant LGBTQ organizing discourses. On the one hand, some theorists argue that LGBTQ organizations in the Global South uncritically apply Western concepts of sexuality, especially since they are primarily funded by international and Western NGOs (Massad 2002, 2006). Most notable is Joseph Massad’s (2002, 2006) critiques of what he calls “the Gay International” and the complicity of Arab LGBTQ social movement organizations, which, he argues, rely on organizing strategies that are not rooted in their local cultures and contexts.³ On the other hand, other scholars and LGBTQ activists argue that there truly exists a global LGBTQ identity and community, which even though takes on different forms depending on the sociopolitical and cultural context, follows one similar “developmental” trajectory (Adam et al., 1999). For example, Adam et al. (1999) argue that even though LGBT movements in various

parts of the world take on different forms, they still all undergo similar steps to “liberation” and share a number of similar features.

While considering the importance of translating dominant LGBTQ discourses, such literature fails to account for the complex ways by which LGBTQ SMOs in the Global South situate and define themselves by simultaneously drawing on both local and global discourses of sexuality. In addition, it does not take into account nor consider the roles and effects of the various and multiple audiences and contexts with which these SMOs have to interact, extending beyond the local context. Such analyses represent and reproduce a homogenized and generalized image of a unified LGBTQ movement that is deemed as either uncritically applying Western concepts or adopting these concepts for the purpose of becoming part of a global LGBTQ movement.

In this chapter, I examine the various ways by which Helem and Meem, the only two LGBT organizations in Lebanon, define themselves and conceive of issues such as coming out, queer visibility and the rights discourse. I consider the tensions between the two competing claims in the literatures cited above and illustrate how they are inconsistent with the behaviors of both organizations. In order to do so, I analyze the ways by which these two groups deploy collective identities differently by examining their conceptions of coming out/the closet, queer visibilities and LGBTQ rights, which are the major points of diversion in their organizing strategies. In addition, I find that these two groups highlight different aspects of their collective identities in different contexts, most notably the local and global contexts. Hence, I draw on both local and global contexts and audiences to understand the complex ways that they deploy collective identities and highlight the multiple positions that they occupy.

Even though both Helem and Meem call for sexual diversity and LGBTQ community empowerment in Lebanon, they do so differently. Whereas Helem is a rights-based NGO working on LGBT rights in Lebanon, Meem is a grassroots LGBTQ women's group, working on women's empowerment and community-building.⁴ Despite their divergent methods in LGBTQ organizing at the local level, at an international level, they are more similar in their focus on geopolitics and the multidimensionality of their positions and struggles. By analyzing these two groups' online identity deployment and the descriptions of their respective organizing methods, I argue that they construct their different strategic choices and deploy queer identities by simultaneously contesting and engaging with dominant models of Euro-American LGBTQ organizing. Therefore, the ways that they define collective identities and conceive of LGBTQ organizing are not consistent with, nor accounted for, by the two views presented in the literature. First, the two groups do not simply adopt or reject Western understandings of sexuality and LGBTQ organizing; rather, they engage with dominant LGBTQ discourses while keeping themselves rooted in a local context. Second, the diversity in their organizing strategies at both the local and global levels points to the fact that they cannot be treated as a homogeneous entity. Third, the fact that they highlight different aspects of their identities at the local and global levels illustrates that the behaviors and collective identity deployment of LGBTQ SMOs cannot be fully understood by accounting for a local or a global context alone.

Since I analyze Helem and Meem's behaviors at both the local and global levels, I divide this chapter into two major parts. First, situated in a Lebanese context, I show how the two organizations' differences are manifested by their contrasting definitions of

collective queer identities, their uses of human rights discourses and the strategies of visibility that each group employs. Second, at the international level, I illustrate that Helem and Meem share more similar positions by their problematization of the binary of coming out and the closet as well as their refusal to be de-politicized by situating themselves within an intersectional struggle.⁵ I do not intend to privilege one form of organizing over the other; however, by recognizing multiple forms of LGBTQ organizing, I want to underscore how each is a byproduct of intersectional struggles and contexts. Rather than understanding the behaviors of LGBTQ SMOs in the Global South in terms of a direct adoption or a complete rejection of dominant LGBTQ discourses, I argue that we need a more complex and nuanced analysis of collective LGBTQ identities and organizing by drawing on the Lebanese case.

History and group formation

Helem, the first “above-ground” LGBT organization in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA), was founded in Beirut in September 2004 by five individuals who were members of a former group called “Club Free” (Dabaghi et al. 2008, 15). As mentioned in chapter five, prior to the emergence of Helem, Club Free existed as an “underground social support group for the LGBT community” in Lebanon, and was restricted to LGBT-identified members. According to the case study written about Helem, when a number of people from Club Free started Helem as an NGO that operates publically and is not restricted to LGBT-identified individuals, they lost many of their former 300 members (Dabaghi et al. 2008). Before publically coming out as Helem, its members contacted the International Lesbian and Gay Association and Amnesty

International, which provided initial support for the group (Dabaghi et al. 2008, 15).

“Club Free” is an important example of the submerged networks that Helem relied on before its formation (Mueller 1994). Having a network of people organized around a common goal and providing a safe space or a safe haven was crucial for the emergence of Helem as an above-ground LGBT rights organization (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995). Even though Helem still does not have official recognition from the state,⁶ its existence is not denied nor celebrated, and there have been no recorded attempts on the part of the state to question or halt the group’s activities. This illustrates one of the ways by which Helem’s existence is ambiguously accepted without any official recognition.

Helem defines itself as an organization with a rights-based approach, with the primary goal of the annulment of article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which outlaws “sexual relations contrary to nature” (often used as a proxy for anal sex). On its website, it defines its goal as “leading a peaceful struggle for the liberation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgendered (LGBT) and other person with non-conforming sexuality or gender identity in Lebanon from all sorts of violations of civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights” (Helem n.d.).

Meem, on the other hand, was founded in 2007 and defines itself as “a support community for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women and transgendered people in Lebanon” (M Nadine n.d.,1). The origin and formation of the group is documented in a number of talks and online blogs where Meem members address the history of the formation of the group. Prior to the development of Meem, a group of women who were members of Helem developed a support group for women called “Helem Girls” (Abbani 2012). This support group, which was developed in order to open up a space for

centralizing women's issues within the organization, derived its strategies from feminist politics (Abbani 2012). In one of my discussions with one of the former Meem coordinators,⁷ she told me that many women felt that Helem was very male-dominated; hence, they sought a space that centered on women's experiences. In addition, she claimed that, even though Helem Girls provided a space for some women, many remained unsatisfied with the affirmative and visible strategies of Helem and some of the hierarchies present in the organizational structure. Hence, a group of women from Helem Girls started Meem in 2007, in order to create an alternative space that was not male-dominated and had different organizing strategies and a different organizational structure. For instance, the new group did not have a governing board but opted for a less hierarchical structure. In addition, Meem stressed the safety of members and hence organized a group that is less visible than Helem. During my interviews with a number of Meem members, they claimed that they needed a space that was not as visible as Helem and that was grounded in feminist issues, which did not foreground fixed identity-based approaches to gender and sexuality. However, not all women left Helem and became Meem members; many remained in Helem and also joined Meem, whereas others broke off entirely from Helem.

In a talk presented by Meem at the ILGA in Sao Paolo in 2009, Meem presented itself as a grassroots organization with the primary goal of creating community and providing empowerment and a safe space for LGBTQ women in Lebanon (Lynn 2010). Unlike Helem, Meem does not function "above ground" and that is particularly the case because the group aims to provide its members with "support and services without the fear of being legally and socially outed" (Lynn 2010, para 1). Hence, it relies on

anonymity and confidentiality in its organizing. Ultimately, what Meem provides is a safe haven for LGBTQ women.

Even though both SMOs are based and work in Beirut in a similar political opportunity structure, they have very different methods of operating. In addition for the need to locate themselves in Lebanese society and in the larger Arab context, they also have to situate themselves within the international community of LGBTQ organizing. Since their work has been recognized and sometimes funded by a number of Euro-American governments and NGOs, their work cannot simply be analyzed at the local level.

By analyzing their self-definitions, stated goals, strategies of visibility and invisibility, and the ways by which they conceive of sexual subjectivities, I am able to better understand their different organizing strategies, both locally and globally. The following questions become pertinent: How do they define their collective identities? How do their collective identity deployments reflect their different organizing strategies, especially with regard to coming out/the closet, visibilities and gay rights? How do they engage with and contest dominant LGBTQ organizing? How do they highlight different aspects of their collective identities when they interact with different audiences at the local and global level?

Collective identities and organizing strategies: queer visibility and the rights discourse

As already mentioned, Helem adopts a rights-based approach to organizing, whereby its major goal is to annul article 534 of the Lebanese penal code. Helem adopts an affirmative strategy of visibility, pride and coming out, albeit in a more cautious way

than its counterparts in Western contexts, by taking advantage of the ambiguities and discrepancies between the law and its (lack of) enforcement.⁸ Even though Helem's main organizing strategy, which is based on the notion of coming out and pride, is similar to the international LGBTQ discourse, it differs in the degree of caution that the group employs.

Helem's work centers on three main issues: health, awareness and advocacy. As outlined on its official website, Helem claims that it raises awareness on HIV/AIDS and conducts outreach work to educate people and counter the misinformation on homosexuality in Lebanese society. It claims that it does so by "providing *objective*, factual information, initiating dialogue and refuting common misconceptions about homosexuality" (emphasis added). In addition to having local, regional and international allies, Helem has closely worked with police forces in Lebanon (which have in turn provided security for them).

Helem also has a community center in central Beirut (the address is publicized on the website) and provides a hotline service. Membership is open to anyone "who shares their values based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." According to its website, Helem's work extends beyond the LGBT community, whereby it lists several issues that the group endorses, including women's rights, nationality campaigns, environmental issues and migrant workers' rights. Even though Helem works primarily for LGBT rights, it does not frame itself as "a community" of exclusively LGBT people. Hence, the group's collective identity is derived from its commitment to human rights issues and abuses in the country, which extends beyond LGBT issues. One could argue that what binds the group together is its struggle for civil liberties; hence, in this case,

Helem's collective identity is built around a cause, "fighting for civil liberties," with an emphasis on LGBT rights (Helem n.d.).

Even though Helem's main goal is the annulment of article 534, it does not have a clear lobbying and advocacy strategy. The group relies on private and personal meetings with "decision makers" as part of its lobbying efforts, even though representatives have not yet met with religious leaders, who constitute the major opposing forces (Dabaghi et al. 2008,18). Given its stated goals, Helem's strategies are centered around education and creating visibility by giving talks, media appearances and trainings, with the goal of ending stigma and discrimination against the LGBT population in Lebanon. In an interview that I conducted with former Helem coordinator George Azzi in 2008, Azzi claimed that Helem attempts to provide alternative space for LGBT individuals besides nightlife. In addition, he also added that the organization attempts to be as inclusive as possible by doing outreach work and extending its services to individuals living outside of Beirut (Moussawi 2008).

Consistent with the ways in which Helem employs an affirmative strategy of visibility, its main types of public and open activities are usually centered on the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO). IDAHO is a one- to two-day public event in which the group holds talks, a photography exhibition, art shows and some social events all under the umbrella of fighting homophobia in Lebanon.

Unlike Helem, Meem adopts a strategy of relative (but not complete) invisibility, focusing on internal community-building and women's empowerment. One of the major ways in which Meem differs from Helem is by not centering its mission on the international human rights discourse, where it does not mention "legal change" as part of

its goals. Meem presents itself as “a community of lesbian, bisexual, queer women and transgender persons (including male-to-female and female-to-male) in addition to women questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity in Lebanon” (Meem 2008). Hence, the group’s collective identity stems from its members’ positions as both women and queer. In addition, the group focuses on community empowerment and group support while ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, which many felt were lacking in Helem. On its official website, Meem also asserts that it is an exclusive group by claiming that it is “a closed, private group, not out of fear, but because we work hard on guarding the safety and security of our members. We believe in empowerment through self-organizing.” Its major goal as presented on its official website is to create “a safe space in Lebanon where queer women and transgender persons can meet, talk, discuss issues, share experiences, and work on improving their lives and themselves” (Meem 2008). Meem also has a community center that is anonymous and private and hence its location is not publicized. The anonymity of the center can be of thought as a strategic choice to make members feel safe to frequent without the fear of being publicized. Helem’s center, on the other hand, is located on a major street close to downtown Beirut.

Examining Meem’s monthly e-newsletters (April 2008-February 2010) reveals that their work combines elements of activism and lobbying, albeit differently than that of Helem’s. Its newsletters include selections on the community center, social events, lesbian and transgender support groups, international conference attendance and local workshops. In addition, Meem focuses on the importance of being heard, read and, therefore, practicing self-expression as a key to the empowerment of its members. In addition, in its newsletters, Meem lists a number of cases where the group did advocacy

work, for example, lobbying for lesbian rights at the MENA women's rights conference in 2008. Meem has also provided legal, financial and moral support to a number of lesbian women in Lebanon and handled asylum cases for a number of queer Arab women (Meem Newsletter 2008).

Meem has not been an active participant in Helem's events; however, there isn't any published information on the relationship between Helem and Meem on their websites. Meem's only public event was held in June of 2009 during the launching of their book *Bareed Mista3jil* (Fast Mail). The book, which is a collection of 41 LGBTQ Arab women's narratives, depicts a wide range of queer women's experiences in the attempt to capture the intersectionality and complexity of these women's lived realities (Dropkin 2009, Georgis 2013).⁹

Collective identity deployment locally: coming out and translation

As already mentioned, both Helem and Meem define collective identity and organize differently based on their different understandings of coming out and queer visibility and their engagements with the rights discourse. However, how can their differences be explained and accounted for? In a similar vein to Mary Bernstein's (1997) study of collective identity deployment in the US, which examines the ways by which LGBTQ groups deploy identity differently based on structural constraints and changing contexts and circumstances, I assess how Helem's and Meem's collective identity deployment can be better understood by centralizing their organizing strategies. Collective identity deployment, according to Bernstein (1997), is practiced "to contest stigmatized social identities for the purposes of institutional change" or "to transform

mainstream culture, its categories and values, by providing alternative organizational forms” (538).

Since one of Helem’s priorities is seeking legal recognition from the state in order to target article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, it has to face different sets of experiences; it is therefore not surprising that it relies on a strategy of open, yet cautious visibility.¹⁰ Therefore, its concern with targeting the law makes it opt for relative visibility and adopt what can be best understood as an “identity for education” framework to counter attitudes and misconceptions about homosexuality (Bernstein 1997). Therefore, Helem’s local work and educational strategies can be understood as less confrontational than that of Meem’s. Even though the active Helem members are at more risk since they are public and have organized public events against homophobia (including a number of sit-ins), they do so for the purpose of “educating” people about homophobia, homosexuality and sexual health awareness. In addition, following its founding, Helem launched a gay periodical titled *Barra*. Titling the magazine *Barra*, literally translating to “out,” and having its initial logo as “I Exist,” are clear examples of the ways by which Helem relies on affirmative strategies of “coming out,” similar to those of Western LGBTQ organizations.

Meem, on the other hand, uses what Bernstein (1997) calls an “identity for critique” approach, whereby members question and reject gender binaries as well as divisions between outness and closetedness, and their major fight becomes directed against patriarchal systems of oppression. Rather than using a legal framework for its organizing, it relies more on a critique of dominant ideologies that subject both women and queer individuals to discrimination and subordination. An examination of Meem’s

weekly online publication *Bekhsoos* shows that, rather than simply trying to raise awareness, they locate dominant patriarchal ideologies as their major opponent. Gender issues for Meem become central, since the group claims that it seeks to “explore and address multi-layered forms of discrimination that [they] faced as women first, and as lesbians second” (Lynn 2010, para 6). Therefore, they position themselves as fighting the patriarchal system and the oppression engendered by the gender binary structure. Meem’s relative invisibility gives it leeway in adopting more radical approaches while remaining safeguarded by being less easily identifiable than Helem.

Meem’s approach resonates with Joshua Gamson’s (1995) call to move beyond strict identitarian models. In addition, the group’s deconstructionist approach to gender/sexual identities echoes queer theoretical approaches to LGBTQ organizing (Gamson 1995). Echoing Gamson, “fixed identity categories” can potentially be both the “basis for oppression and the basis for political power” (Gamson 1995, 390). In this case, Helem’s claim of a more “fixed identity category” illustrates its reliance on notions such as “coming out” and pride in order to be recognized and to work for legal change. In contrast, Meem’s deconstructionist approach to sexual identities entails selective visibility; even though it sometimes might be misattributed as “closetedness,” it actually works to challenge the binaries of both gender and sexuality and the appropriateness of such constructs in LGBTQ organizing in Beirut. In his discussion of the uses of sexual identity models in American LGBTQ organizing, Gamson (1995) questions the effectiveness of using essentialized sexual identities for the purposes of change. On the one hand, lesbians and gay men became effective in the civil rights movements in the US precisely because they presented a “public collective identity,” but on the other hand,

they had to rely on and create essentialized and seemingly fixed sexual identity categories (Gamson 1995).

These questions are pertinent in the Lebanese case; however, Helem's and Meem's uses of identity have to be made intelligible at both the local and global levels. Groups organizing in the Global South, as already mentioned, face the dilemmas of working both within an internationally recognized organizational and discursive template for LGBT organizing, while remaining rooted in a local context. In addition, LGBTQ activists in the Global South also risk being seen as simply adopting a Western understanding of sexual identities, and by doing that they can possibly reinforce the myth of attributing homosexuality as a sign of "Westernization" (Currier 2012, Hoad 2007). Translation, therefore, becomes central.¹¹

One of the primary means by which both groups negotiate their positions is by the translation and redefinition of concepts of sexual identities (Thayer 2010). Thayer (2010) emphasizes that, in order for discourses to travel, they need translators to redefine them and "help them cross borders and set down roots in new places" (31). However, it is important to note that individuals who can "translate" global sexual identity constructs into a local context need to be able to communicate with international and Western LGBTQ groups. Therefore, access is exclusive and restricted to certain individuals with international connections, high levels of education and cultural and economic capital, which would enable them to interact with both global and local actors.

When it comes to translating sexual identity concepts, both groups have lobbied for the usage of new Arabic terms while referring to homosexuality, for example using the neutral term *mithli* (same-sexness) as opposed to *shaadh* (deviant) (Mourad 2013).¹²

Their efforts have been successful as evidenced in the uses of more neutral terminology in reference to homosexuality (*mithliya*) and transgender issues (*al-tahawol al jinsi*) in a number of prominent Lebanese newspapers and TV shows. Both groups also try to rely more on the Arabic language than English or French in their publications and their websites for the dissemination of information. However, most if not all information on their website has been translated to English and/or French. Finally, Meem's publication of the book *Bareed Mista3jil*, published in both English and Arabic, is a striking example of their attempts to root their struggles within a local context, by discussing queer issues in local settings. The launching of the book, which I attended in June 2009 at a local theater in Beirut, consisted of both Arabic and English readings of various selections from the book. The event was open to the public and highly attended; however, the press was not allowed in the theater in order to protect the identities of those who were present.

As demonstrated in the above discussion, both Helem and Meem rely on, contest and translate conceptions from the dominant LGBTQ organizing. First, they both engage with Western conceptions of sexual identities, even though they do so differently. Whereas Helem uses an affirmative strategy of coming out, Meem's reliance on a queer deconstructionist approach also highlights its engagement (albeit differently) with Western conceptions of sexuality. Second, while using the different concepts, they both attempt to stay locally rooted and navigate the sectarianism that characterizes Lebanese society, where groups have had to historically rely on fixed essentialized identities to gain recognition. Third, given their diverse strategies, LGBTQ organizing in Beirut cannot be treated as a homogeneous entity.

Against dominant conceptions of sexual identities at the global level: intersectionality and situated struggles

In order to get at the complexities of the behaviors and the collective identity deployment of both Helem and Meem, I consider the multiple audiences and contexts in which they interact. That is, since these groups do not interact with audiences only at the local level, examining how they present themselves in international contexts sheds light on the complex nature of their identity deployment and organizing strategies. As already mentioned, LGBTQ groups in the Arab world are often locally accused of being “Westernized” and of not being rooted in local contexts, in a similar fashion that is discussed by Massad (Moumneh 2006, Whitaker 2006).¹³ In addition, as already stated, Helem and Meem both contest and apply discourses of global LGBTQ organizing in their self-definition and organizing strategies, rather than uncritically engaging with the dominant discourse. Even though these global LGBTQ identifications can open “new spaces” for these activists and enable them to call for rights and recognition (using the human rights discourse), they find them constrictive. That is, rather than simply adopting dominant views about organizing, they contest what they regard to be dominant and depoliticized organizing by situating themselves in terms of geopolitical struggles and rejecting the binaries of the closet/coming out along with dominant notions of queer visibility.

In order to illustrate how they highlight different aspects of their collective identities in relation to global LGBTQ communities and politics, I draw on three speeches that the two groups gave (separately) in three international settings.¹⁴ In these three speeches, Helem and Meem addressed an international audience of LGBTQ activists. Apparent in these three instances are the ways by which both groups contest

what they call the “de-politicization” of LGBTQ organizing, while calling for an understanding of sexuality in terms of situated struggles.¹⁵ One of the primary ways by which the two groups highlight their differences from dominant Western LGBTQ organizing is by locating and positioning themselves and their struggles within local and regional politics. In particular, they take strong positions and align themselves in relation to anti-war activism, including the war on Iraq and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This illustrates instances where their collective identities become rooted in local and geopolitical struggles.

In a speech that was live-streamed at the International OutGames in Montreal in 2006, Helem’s keynote presentation by Rasha Moumneh stresses the importance of understanding Helem’s struggles in Lebanon, especially in “proving their legitimacy without falling prey to accusations of being agents in the hands of Western Imperialism” and in relation to the lived realities of war and regional instability (Moumneh 2006). Giving this speech during the midst of the 2006 July War, Moumneh openly calls for LGBT groups present at the OutGames to recognize the effects of the War on Terror on the Arab Middle East and to question the “human rights reforms” proposed in such discourses. In addition, she calls international LGBTQ groups to recognize the oppression of both what she terms “domestic authoritarianism” presented by corrupt and oppressive regimes and “international Messiahnism,” which she argues “collude to produce political discourses, rhetoric, policing, wars, leaving those of us who wish to see genuine and sustainable reform with little space in which to navigate” (Moumneh 2006). Such an assertion illustrates the ways in which Helem critically views both local and international political initiatives that present themselves as wanting to save women and

queers from oppressive regimes (Ahmed 2011).¹⁶ Such accounts centralize the local and regional contexts, while debunking myths that regard Western military involvement and aid as a means of “liberating” women and LGBTQ individuals. In that same speech, Moumneh calls for a complete boycott of the World Pride event happening in Jerusalem that year, in order to make a statement against Israeli aggression (Moumneh 2006). Finally she ends her speech by saying that “Helem will continue to work for LGBT rights in Lebanon; however, we will not and cannot do so under bombardment” (Moumneh 2006).

This stance is echoed in a 2009 article by Ghassan Makarem, founding member and former executive director of Helem, in which he documents some of the problematic relationships with Western LGBTQ organizations, specifically in relation to politics in the Middle East and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Quoting the above Helem keynote address, Makarem (even though relying on and engaging with notions of global LGBTQ brother- and sisterhood) restates the need for the international LGBTQ community to oppose war, presenting a picture that is different from that presented by Adam et al.’s (1999) image of a global LGBTQ alliance:

We do not accept democracy at the barrel of a gun. We do not accept to be liberated through war, if the price of liberty is our lives, meted out in collateral terms. The international LBGT community should not shun its brothers and sisters in Lebanon and Palestine. Especially not now when both Lebanon and Gaza are being decimated by Israel (Makarem 2009, 6).

Helem, in this example, employs the dominant discourse of global LGBTQ brother- and sisterhood, while remaining critical of the ways by which their struggles have been overlooked and excluded.

Both groups have also been supportive of and align themselves with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) Movement,¹⁷ which calls for the cultural, academic and consumer boycott of Israeli institutions that deny human rights and equality to Palestinians and profit from the everyday violation of Palestinian's human rights (BDS Movement n.d.). They have also been vocal against the "pink-washing strategies" that the Israeli state is embedded in, which seek to present Israel as the only gay-friendly country in the Middle East (A Queer Movement for Queer Powered BDS 2010).¹⁸ Israeli pink washing, as explained by Jasbir Puar (2007), consists of using queer and LGBTQ rights in order to present Israel as the only gay-friendly country in the Middle East, as opposed to the other "backwards, repressive and intolerant" Arab countries (A Queer Movement for Queer Powered BDS 2010, para 1).

Second, during one of their speeches at the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Agency's (IGLTA) symposium on gay tourism in Beirut, held in Beirut in October 2010,¹⁹ Helem also stresses the intersectionality of their struggles. The speech starts off by asserting that:

Helem recognizes the political aspect of sexual liberation, and, as an organization rooted in Lebanon and the Middle East, takes into consideration the local politics and the context of the region it belongs to, without necessarily adhering to the systems for LGBTIQ liberation that have been established, encouraged, and at some point enforced by international gay communities and organizations (Helem speech 2010, para 3).

In the above statement, Helem affirms its belief in and struggle for sexual liberation; however, the group distances itself from what it calls "systems of LGBTIQ liberation," which it claims to be enforced by international gay communities. By grounding itself in a Lebanese and Arab Middle Eastern context and challenging what it perceives to be the dominant LGBTQ liberation strategy, Helem distances itself from

what it conceives of as the international gay community. This distancing illustrates that Helem does not uncritically align itself with the international LGBTQ community, which is inconsistent with both Massad's (2002, 2006) and Adam et al.'s (1999) arguments.

In addition, during that speech, Helem reiterates its claim that it is not a depoliticized group by defining de-politicization as a situation that forces a person to ignore her/his lived reality "for the sake of conforming to an adopted Western stereotype" (Helem speech 2010). Hence, Helem reinforces the notion that it does not follow dominant LGBTQ organizing blindly, but rather translates and adapts it to the local and regional contexts. When talking about its own context, Helem situates itself in terms of its members' commitment to anti-war activism by recounting the roles that war and conflict play in their life. As an example of their work, they recount their relief work efforts during the war of 2006, where they provided their community center as a shelter for people fleeing the south of Lebanon. In addition, they situate themselves in terms of regional struggles:

A human rights organization cannot and should not operate in a country without taking into consideration the local politics and contexts it thrives in, can we as an organization that fights oppressive systems support, instead of condemn, the oppression of the Palestinian people (Helem speech 2010, para 4).

Even though Helem took part in the IGLTA familiarization trip to Lebanon (unlike Meem, which completely boycotted the event), it was still critical of the promotion of Lebanon as a gay touristic destination, which it argues serves the interests of gay tourists and not the local LGBT community. In criticizing the depictions of Lebanon as an open and liberal country, Helem claimed that:

it is problematic when Lebanon is described as a "very liberal" country, when the reality of the situation is that Beirut is a liberal city, not for the local LGBTIQ community that lives under the daily threat of police violence and imprisonment,

blackmail, and homophobia and stigma, but liberal for the foreign tourist (Helem Speech 2010, para 6).

Finally, Meem's speech titled "Framing Visibility," presented at the ILGA pre-conference in Sao Paulo in 2010 by Lynn, directly addresses the issue of visibility, whereby it asserts its refusal of visibility as a means of rejecting the binary of closet/outness. In addition, it views the binary of the closet/outness as a Western understanding of sexual identity, which the group seeks to challenge. Meem also continues to claim that it refuses to locate itself within hegemonic sexual identity discourses:

When we, LGBTs, locate ourselves within the spectrum of progress that the (predominantly) Western coming out discourse promotes, when we wear masks in pride parades, when we turn "National Coming Out Day" – which originated as a yearly event in 1988 in West Hollywood, California – into "International Coming Out Day" and then on our gay blogs come out with nicknames, we are locating ourselves within a foreign framework that links visibility closely to pride. Hence, this type of semi-coming out, or false-coming-out, looks rather awkward [and] isn't empowering and as playful as it may seem sometimes. We still come off as those less empowered, those more victimized, at the lesser end of the LGBT international spectrum of progress (Lynn 2010, para 13).

In addition, Meem situates itself at the heart of what it conceives of as an "Arab LGBTQI network" by stating that "we seek to remain sensitive to community values, stressing a local and indigenous identity and insisting on an Arab movement, on Arab solidarity, which has led to the formation of a regional Arab LGBTQI network" (M Nadine n.d.,2).

Helem does not publically challenge LGBTQ categories, though it still resists them in the global context while strategically employing them locally for its intended goals. Meem, however, openly resists and rejects what it sees as a Western model of sexual identities, primarily by refusing the binary of the closet and outness. As already

documented, Meem refuses to situate itself in a “Western spectrum of progress” which entails coming-out narratives and “embracing” a lesbian identity, or even participating in events that would position its members at “the lower end of the LGBT progress spectrum” (Lynn 2010, para 11). However, as already stated, both groups distance themselves from what they call “de-politicized” LGBTQ organizing and situate themselves and their goals in terms of intersecting struggles.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the organizing strategies and the collective identity deployment of the Lebanese LGBTQ organizations Helem and Meem and I argued that both groups simultaneously engage with and reject Western concepts of LGBTQ organizing, albeit differently. Their divergent strategies are most notable in their different understandings of coming out and queer visibilities, and their engagement with the global rights discourse. I illustrated that both social movement organizations highlight different parts of their collective identities for local and global audiences and contexts. Whereas at a local level they occupy more competing positions in their different approaches to queer identities and visibilities, at a global level they are more similar in their focus on intersectionality and geopolitics.

I argued that the current literature is not sufficient in explaining the behaviors of LGBTQ groups in the Global South since it homogenizes such groups and does not take into account the diversity and complexity of their organizing strategies. I shed light on the need for research on LGBTQ organizing in the Global South that centralizes the complexity of LGBTQ groups by taking into account the diversity of organizing

strategies and the multiple contexts in which they interact. Having research that is more cognizant of the complexities of LGBTQ organizing in the Global South will promote a more accurate portrayal of the diverse understandings of sexuality and organizing around sexual rights. Even though global LGBTQ groups and global discourses of LGBTQ organizing have helped open spaces of resistance for these groups, it is important to be attuned to the tensions and shortcomings that arise in imagining a global LGBTQ framework that does not take into account diverse conceptions of homosexualities, homophobias and people's lived realities. Finally, I touched upon the fact that both groups are critical of the presentation of Beirut as "open" and "tolerant," which is an idea I will take up in more detail in the following chapter in my discussion of narratives of cosmopolitanism and Beirut's exceptionalism.

¹ A number of recent scholarship has explored various organizing strategies in the Arab Middle East; for more information, see: Al-Qasimi, N and Kunstman A (2012) "Introduction." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8(3): 1-13, Amar, Paul (2013) *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, Maikey and Schotten (2012) on Queer Palestinian and BDS movements, Mikdashi (2013) "Queering Citizenship, Queering Middle East Studies." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2): 350-352, Mikdahi (2014) "Moral Panics, Sex Panics, and the Production of a Lebanese Nation." *Jadaliyya* <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/16570/-moral-panics-sex-panics-and-the-production-of-a-l>

² Dominant LGBTQ organizing has relied on affirmative coming out narratives and the concept of the closet.

³ Massad (2002,2006) argues that the "Gay International" dominated by white gay Western men and organizations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC).

⁴ I use LGBT, LBTQ, LGBTQ, LBTQI as they are respectively used by each organization. Whereas Helem mostly uses the acronym LGBT, Meem uses both LBTQ and LGBTQI.

⁵ I infer their definition of depoliticization, as being involved in and addressing multiple regional struggles including but not limited to LGBTQ rights.

⁶ "According to the legal practices in Lebanon, an organization can assume a legally-existing status if they have not received a negative reply from the Ministry of Interior within two months of submitting the application. Due to not receiving a registration number, Helem is considered a legal organization but does not have official backing" (Dabaghi at al 2008,15).

⁷ I do not identify the individuals by name in order to protect the anonymity and privacy of the individuals I talk to, unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Ghassan Makarem, Helem's former coordinator, recognizes the ambiguities and discretionary nature in the implementation of the law, whereby he argues that it is the already so socially marginalized and economically disprivileged groups who fall victim to these arbitrary arrests and detention (Makarem 2011).

⁹ Dina Georgis (2013) offers an insightful reading of Bareed Mista3jil by examining affective strategies employed in the narratives. In this article, she employs a postcolonial reading of *Bareed Mista3jil*, rejects a

pride/shame dichotomy, and centralizes the role of hope in the narratives.

¹⁰ I am not implying that this is a cause-effect relationship. For more readings on the complex nature of organizing strategies, uses of identity and legal changes, see work done by critical legal scholars and works such as Maya Mikdashi's (2011) "What is Political Sectarianism"

<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1008/what-is-political-sectarianism>.

¹¹ In this sense I don't mean literal translations, rather ways by which concepts get shaped by local contexts. For work done on translation of concepts in LGBTQ Lebanese publications, see Mourad (2013).

¹² For more on uses of language and translation of LGBTQ terminology in Lebanon, see Mourad (2013).

¹³ This is also common in the African context. For more on LGBT organizing in Namibia and South Africa, see Currier (2012).

¹⁴ The first is a speech given by Helem at the OutGames 2006 in Montreal; it was live streamed since they couldn't attend due to the 2006 war on Lebanon. The second is the speech given by Helem in Beirut in September 2010 during the ILGTA symposium on gay tourism in Beirut. The third is Meem's speech given at the preconference of the ILGA at Sao Paolo in 2010.

¹⁵ Even though queer organizing, which challenges and contests heteronormativity, is highly political, I use the term "depolitical" in this context to describe LGBT groups that do not take into account factors that intersect with sexuality (such as race, gender, and class).

¹⁶ More about the critique of the saving mission discourse, see Sara Ahmed (2011) and Ghassan Makarem (2009).

¹⁷ More about the BDS campaign can be found on <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>.

¹⁸ More about pinkwashing can be found on <http://pinkwashingisrael.com>.

¹⁹ The familiarization trip to Beirut was co-sponsored by the ILGTA and Lebttour, introduced in chapter three, in order to market Beirut as destination for gay tourism specifically for gay men.

Chapter Seven

Exceptionalism and Exclusion in Beirut: modern homosexuality and developmental narratives of progress

In May 2015, a newly formed Lebanese LGBT organization “Proud Lebanon” (founded in August 2014) produced an ad for IDAHOT (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia) to address homophobia in Lebanon. The short clip advertising the event, first released on YouTube, featured a number of Lebanese comedians and TV personalities calling for people to end discrimination against homosexuality. In this video, these famous personalities invoke the universal declaration of human rights and call on Lebanese people to support the rights of all, including the rights of women, refugees, and gays and lesbians. In addition, they claim that one can support a cause (and be an ally) even if one is not part of the group that one is fighting for. A male comedian claims one doesn’t have to be a woman to support women’s rights, and another Lebanese artist claims that one doesn’t have to be a refugee to support refugee rights. The ad ends with a Lebanese actress saying that one doesn’t have to be gay to support gay rights, followed by all the other individuals repeating: “it is only enough for you to be a human being. Even if we are different, we shouldn’t disagree.”

Activists and non-activists alike shared, liked, and/or critiqued this video on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Given the multiple questions about this new organization Proud Lebanon headed by Bertho Makso, founder and owner of Lebtour, the Lebanese gay tourism agency introduced in chapter three, the video did not get a lot of support from members of the queer activist networks I interviewed.¹ The advertisement used gender normative, cisgendered, presumably straight, men and

women, and relied on politics of assimilation, stressing the fact that gays and lesbians (there was no mention of trans individuals) are just like everybody else. The main message of the ad was to show that one does not need to be gay to stand up for gay rights, and that standing up for gay rights does not mean that one is queer. Despite that, it was popular with other activist circles and non-activists alike; in addition, it was popular on a number of websites and was falsely reported as “the first gay and lesbian campaign in the country.” In one instance a Lebanese man posted the link on his Facebook account with the title “First step towards civilization #humanrights.”

Explicit framings of linear civilizational and homonationalist narratives, such as the one’ presented above, reproduce Orientalist narratives of progress and ignore the inequalities and exclusions that such a gay rights campaign propagates, particularly with regards to gender non-normative and transgendered individuals. Similarly to the #stripforjackie campaign raised by the Jackie Chamoun incident, discussed in chapter one, the circulation of this campaign in Lebanon relied heavily on a progress narrative that depicted Lebanon as exceptional yet lagging behind. In these campaigns, Lebanon becomes exceptional in the Arab Middle East, suggesting that, in the Arab World, such campaigns would only be possible in Lebanon. However, Lebanon is still considered “lagging behind” Euro-American nations. Even though the Proud Lebanon gay rights campaign incorporated women’s rights and refugee rights, it excluded non-normative gender expressions, migrants and the working class, among others.

Gay visibility is considered a presumed sign of modernity and national or cultural progress (Manalansan 1995). As I demonstrated in chapters four and five, LGBT visibility is always gendered, raced, and classed. One of the challenges I faced while

doing fieldwork in Beirut was explaining to friends and acquaintances what my research was about. My definition of “queer” was very open and hence I did not frame queer experience only in terms of LGBTQ individuals. I included individuals who identified as LGBTQ and those whose sexual lives and experiences are not considered normative in Lebanon and do not benefit from heterosexual privilege, such as asexual individuals, single mothers, and women have sex before marriage.

For example, in a May 2013 fieldwork trip in Beirut, an acquaintance named Sura asked me about my research. I replied that it is about queer subjectivities. She directly responded by saying: “Oh, there aren’t a lot of people identifying as queer anymore here. They used to, but now, since there is more openness, people don’t need to identify as queer. They can just say, “*khallas*, I am gay.” Queer as identification, according to her, gave people the possibility to live in and inhabit multiple worlds. In addition, queer, according to her, seemed to be used as a “cover” for lesbian or gay. What is striking about her claim is that she assumed that with time and more “acceptance,” non-heterosexual individuals are more likely to identify as gay, instead of queer. So she thought of gayness and queerness teleologically: one precedes the other, and each identification is based on/derived from the political situation and the safety of the actors.

Two points are worth noting here: first, for Sura, queer was used to blur “gayness” and hence act as a “safer” identification, which, with time, people would abandon when they feel safer. Second, Sura did not make distinctions regarding what forms of gay visibility might be safer, for whom, and how it differs based on gender, class and context. To think about who is “accepted” is to always have to think about gender, class, race, and religious sect and how they inform one’s position and one’s

possibility of “being accepted” for being queer. Framing acceptance in general terms erases the discussion of the various and multiple exclusions and inequalities present in LGBT communities in Beirut. Other individuals who asked me about my research brought up topics of gay marriage in Europe and the US, pointing out that “we” in Lebanon are still stuck behind, despite it being 2013-14. Such explanations employ linear narratives of progress that perceive gay marriage as the pinnacle of acceptance. In addition, they locate “acceptance,” often understood as “modern” (the years 2013-14), in Western Europe and Northern America and point out how “we” lag behind and have not caught up. These narratives employ “fractal Orientalist” accounts, whereby on the one hand, like the #stripforjackie campaign, Lebanon is hailed as unlike “other” parts of the Middle East. On the other hand, individuals claim that Lebanon is still not making progress in relation to its Western counterparts. Such examples promote dual narratives about progress: one that presumes that modern homosexuality and gay rights are signs of state progress and the other that Lebanon is itself the more developed nation in the region. In turn, these narratives suppress the exclusionary and regulatory practices around race, gender, and class operating in Lebanon and the region.

In this chapter, I focus on how such discourses of progress, modernity, and Beirut exceptionalism are circulated and articulated by queer individuals in Beirut. In addition, I show how discourses of Beirut’s exceptionalism are always built on various exclusions, most notably classed, gendered, racial, and sectarian, which render certain forms of queerness more celebrated and intelligible/recognizable than others. I argue that discourses about the sexual openness and gay friendliness of Beirut inhibit recognition of the multiple forms of privilege, hierarchies and exclusions that are constitutive of the

Beirut public sphere. So, when thinking about queer Beirut or “gay friendly” Beirut, I ask: for whom it is queer and gay friendly? I interrogate these discourses in order to understand who gets included and who is excluded. When certain forms of queerness are privileged and considered more recognizable, “other” queer experiences often become invisible or excluded. I also take into account how, in existing scholarship and in the queer networks of the cities, the voices of activists are centered, marginalizing other alternative queer voices.

Rather than dismissing or simply representing the myth or narrative of Beirut’s exceptionalism, I analyze how my interlocutors talk about, reproduce, and/or resist this narrative. In addition, I revisit my concept of fractal Orientalism, introduced in chapter three, and illustrate how my interlocutors employ and/or reject such a framework for understanding modernity and exceptionalism in Beirut. My interlocutors had varying opinions on Beirut’s exceptional status. Some individuals celebrated Beirut as exceptional and different than other cities in Lebanon and the Arab World, due to what they called “openness to difference” and “diversity,” even though many claimed it was not “complete” openness. Others talked about the exclusionary nature of life in Beirut, whether it is racial, gendered, sexual or based on migrant status. I focus on exclusions to argue that discourses of Beirut exceptionalism are made possible by the creation and exclusion of multiple others based on gender, religious sect, class, race, and migrant and refugee status. Even though these exclusions shift based on the physical space (different neighborhoods of the city) and who one is talking to, the mechanisms of exclusion seem to have a similar pattern of distancing, othering, and excluding.

Narratives of exceptionalism

A discussion of discourses of exceptionalism in Lebanon, as in other places, is also one about exclusion. Discourses of Lebanese and Beirut exceptionalism are predicated on the creation and exclusion of certain “others,” including Syrians, Palestinians, working class, LGBTQ, refugees and migrant domestic workers. Exclusions in LGBTQ communities in Lebanon target working-class individuals, and gender non-normative and feminine-acting cisgendered men.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how dominant gay and queer formations reproduce these exclusions by lauding certain forms of gayness as more appropriate and intelligible. Following women of color feminism and queer of color critique, I consider the exclusions within the categories of LGBTQ individuals.² Rather than treating the category of LGBTQ individuals as marginalized and excluded, I look into the category itself and the multiple marginalizations and exclusions that it is built on.³ In addition, I look at what forms of normativities are circulated and produced, and the exclusions present in the LGBTQ communities in Beirut. Hence, I examine how privilege is complicated by a number of competing positions, which my respondents occupy. Experiences of privilege and queerness become linked to class, gender normativity, migrant status, and religious sect. In addition, like scholarship that interrogates queer complicities and homonormativities, I keep in mind the multiple exclusions that are characteristic of mainstream LGBT movements, including race-based, class and trans exclusions (Duggan 2002, Puar 2007, Haschemi-Yekani et al 2013). These exclusions mark who gets to be regarded as “more modern” and who doesn’t.

To get at the ways that queer-identified individuals in Beirut invoke concepts of modernity and progress in their discussions of queer sexualities, I ask the following questions: First, how do queer identified individuals conceive of and talk about modernity and progress in their discussions of gender and sexuality? Second, how do they characterize Beirut in relation to other cities in Lebanon and to other cities in the Arab Middle East? Other questions I ask include: If modernity becomes defined by the rejection of the closet and assuming queer visibility, what forms of sexual subjectivities do they talk about? How do they talk about Beirut and “queer life?” What multiple exclusions is it based upon? How do local hierarchies structure distinction in the LGBT community in Beirut?

My interlocutors talked about modernity and progress in a number of ways. On the one hand, a number of individuals reproduced the narrative of Lebanese and Beirut exceptionalism by drawing on the presence of 18 religious sects in the country, and described Beirut as “the best one can hope for,” in the region. On the other hand, other individuals contested the exceptional narrative of Beirut and situated it along lines of a neoliberal project of modernity. Also, they brought up the role of urbanization and the exclusions based on their experiences or others’ experiences. These exclusions were based on class, gender, race, religious sect and migration status. In addition, others also contested this narrative and pointed to exclusions within the gay and queer communities in Beirut, particularly along lines of class, gender normativity and access to networks. They showed that even though people in activist and queer circles might be critical of these discourses they unwittingly reproduced them. Thus, many of my interlocutors questioned claims of diversity and cosmopolitanism in Beirut.

Reproducing narratives of Lebanese exceptionalism

In almost all interviews I conducted and conversations I had, individuals pointed to and talked about Beirut's diverse makeup, mainly with regards to the presence of 18 recognized religious sects, where no one sect is a majority. Many individuals used this narrative to distinguish Beirut from other cities in the Arab world. Narratives of exceptionalism are used and taken up by many Lebanese when talking about themselves, particularly as they attempt to fashion a sense of self that is in opposition to the multiple "others," especially in relation to the Arab world. These narratives coupled with practices of othering have become particularly heightened with the war in Syria and the large influx of Syrian refugees in the country and growing suspicion of the "other."

Many of these individuals emphasized Beirut's exceptionalism, pointing to the possibility for more gay visibility and religious diversity. For example, Samira, a 21-year-old Druze Lebanese woman expressed that Beirut is indeed exceptional and diverse, particularly by bringing up the diverse sectarian makeup of the country and the multiple feminist and queer initiatives. Samira identifies as lesbian, and was born and raised in the Arab Gulf, but moved to Beirut to pursue her undergraduate studies at a private American institution. She says:

First, we are known as the most liberal, technically, politically we are the only Christian country in the Middle East. Second, we have so many different religions, not one dominates. We have different backgrounds. In Beirut we all come together. In the city, your identity is lost amongst the masses. So it's beautiful to see 18-19 different sects mash up in one city. At the end, everyone wants to live. After the civil war, people just want to live. Yeah, you still have the Shia area, Sunni, Druze, Maronite. Yes this is Beirut; drop that shit outside, leave your religions in the villages, and come to Beirut and work.

For Samira, being the "only Christian country in the Middle East," meant that

Lebanon becomes the exception, where one can imagine possibilities for diverse ways of life. So, Lebanon actually functions as the exception that proves the rule, the Christian country whose presence is designed to demonstrate the non-modern, non-secular nature of the rest of the Arab Middle East. For Samira, leaving your religion behind, specifically understood as one's religious sect, makes Beirut more diverse and cosmopolitan, which in turn makes various forms of difference more accepted and "tolerated." Here, she invokes fractal Orientalism with her distinctions between village/city and her assumptions that people are "more open," in the city. In this framing, however, Samira erases all historical differences and the experiences of individuals based on their religious sect. She continues to say:

In terms of gender and sexuality, people have expressed it in so many different ways and different spaces. It's fascinating, for example, how Helem and Meem started up as underground collectives that slowly branched out to society. In terms of organizing, they organized and reached out. This is history. This is not like Jordan or the Gulf where they prosecute you; here they didn't prosecute us. They didn't go out to look for gay people. I don't know if it's the nature of the government to just be careless, but we have freedom [here].

In this narrative, Samira argues that Beirut is indeed diverse, and different from the rest of the Arab World (contrasting it to Jordan and the Gulf). Here is another instance of fractal orientalism. However, this time it is by invoking Lebanon and other countries in the Arab World]. She locates a "history" in Beirut and Lebanon, and assumes timelessness in other places. In addition, Samira mentions that the Lebanese people who live in Lebanon are much more what she refers to as "open-minded" than those who are living in the Gulf. During one of our conversations, Samira said that she feels she is talking about a "bubble" that she inhabits in Hamra and she recognizes that it is not representative. Hamra also gets represented as more progressive than other areas of

Beirut.

Many of my cisgendered male interlocutors also described Beirut and Lebanon as exceptional in the Arab Middle East, but they also often pointed out the difficulty of being openly gay and the gay community's exclusion of gender-non-normative men. One example of this pattern is Tarek, who was introduced in chapter three. Tarek lived there with his parents all his life, until moving to Canada alone to pursue his post-graduate studies for two years.

Tarek claimed that Beirut is somewhat but not completely open. He claimed that people in Beirut are “not as open-minded” as those in Canada. When I asked him what he meant, he said that people in Beirut don’t accept gay men and lesbians. He felt that there was no anonymity in Beirut and that everyone knew everyone else, so he preferred Canada because he said, “he could do whatever he wanted.” However, he still claimed that Beirut is much better than other places in the Arab World:

I am always comparing [Beirut] to “worse” places: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai. As far as I know, there is no activism there... I know friends in Qatar; they tell me that gay life is more underground over there, more so than Beirut. Most gay men are married with kids and then resume their lives.

He continued to say that: “Lebanon has become an outlet for other countries in the Middle East to go out, have fun, let go of the repression. This applies to straight people as well.” Tarek’s description echoes the common discourses of Beirut as exceptional that I have been recounting. My cisgendered male informants focused more on legal restrictions in Beirut than my other interlocutors. Most of the cisgendered men I interviewed found Beirut to be very constraining and constrictive and felt the need to draw on their male privilege and gender conformity to navigate the city. Like Tarek, many men claimed that Beirut is exceptional in the Arab world, but considered it is only

open to a certain extent. Cisgendered women and genderqueer individuals were more likely to bring up gender and class, whereas cisgendered men felt that exclusions mainly targeted non-normative men.

Challenging narratives of Beirut's diversity and exceptionalism

Unlike Samira and Tarek to some extent, many of my interlocutors were skeptical of Beirut's exceptionalism and talked about the exclusions and inequalities in Beirut. In addition, individuals redefined Beirut's "openness" and diversity; and questioned the surface image of cosmopolitanism. Some pointed to the capitalist investments that produced such discourses of cosmopolitanism, exceptionalism, and openness.

For example, Souraya a 23-year-old Shia Muslim queer Lebanese woman who attended the public Lebanese university, claimed:

I think Beirut is welcoming to those who can pay, the people like me who can pay 850 US dollars to live in Hamra. Beirut is very classist, very very classist. We might not feel it as Lebanese, but I am sure people who are not Lebanese feel it a lot, much more than we do. Beirut's diversity is ruled by many codes, from nationality to skin color to societal status to class to the way that one looks. If she's a woman like me with short hair, she's not very welcome and then they don't accept diversity that much.

Souraya claims that Beirut is governed by multiple class, gender and racial codes, whereby the people who are welcomed are people who can afford to live in the city. She claims that non-Western foreigners feel the exclusions much more than the Lebanese. However, she continues to say that she as a Lebanese women feels that she is not welcome in certain areas, pointing out to her gender presentation and her appearance, particularly her short hair. Despite that, she still has access to Beirut because she can afford to live there and move safely between certain areas of the city. Class privilege becomes central here in shaping her access to and experiences of the city.

Souraya questions the exceptionalism of Beirut particularly because she is aware of the multiple exclusions that exist. She claims that the discourses of exceptionalism in Beirut are byproducts of the Hariri government of the 1990s and its neoliberal policies that used these discourses of openness to attract and encourage foreign investments in Beirut---particularly from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf, to rebuild the country after the civil war. So, she claims that capital is the driving force behind this idea of Lebanese exceptionalism and Lebanese openness. She also claims that this discourse focuses on the presence of Christians in Lebanon, which mark Lebanon as different and exceptional in relation to the rest of the Arab World.

Souraya claims that the major goal of Hariri's governments was to make Lebanon open to foreign investments:

All things have been worked on: in the government, politics and economics that Lebanon is exceptional...Sexually, it is a sexual haven. The Arabs come here...we have things that other Arab countries don't have, and our women are different. They wear swimsuits; other women in the Arab world don't. We have gay people that other places don't tolerate. But for me, this is all very superficial, of course, and we the people who live here know that it is very superficial.

Souraya claims that it is no accident that the narratives of Beirut's exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism are quite dominant. Several emerging social structures have helped produce these discourses and sense of linear progress and modernity in Lebanon, including: the privatization of media, sex tourism, LGB tourism, and certain measures of bodily autonomy for women. Souraya is critical of these fractal Orientalist discourses that do not take into account the role of government policy in shaping discourses of exceptionalism. Even though she claims that "the people who live here know it is superficial," it's not necessarily the case, as evidenced by Tarek and Samira. She is being very attentive to how social and political economies are occasioning developmental

narratives of progress particularly concerning Lebanon and sexuality.

Also, unlike Samira and Tarek, Souraya claimed that gay life is not necessarily better in Lebanon than it is in other countries in the Arab World. Rather, she saw the conditions of gay life to be different. She states:

I don't see things *better* than others; I see that the conditions of Beirut as being different than the conditions in Jeddah or Riyadh. I don't necessarily see Beirut as open; in Riyadh there is nightlife, and it is all underground. There is no place that is completely cut off from anything, and then another place is more open and progressive. No, people always find their ways, these ways by which people find their own ways to life is based on the conditions that the city is present in. Of course, inside Beirut, there are many differences; this does not mean that there is one area better than the other. It means that the conditions in it are different, and people know how to negotiate them accordingly. I know how to negotiate some areas more than I can Hamra. That doesn't mean that I feel safer. Maybe I feel more comfortable, but safety is something else. Do you know what I mean?

In this example, Souraya claimed that safety and comfort have different meanings in negotiating the city. She refused to reproduce narratives of “gay havens;” instead, she focused on the concept of different life conditions and possibilities. She also asserted that people often negotiate and find leeway in maneuvering the conditions that they are present in and faced with. However, she made an interesting distinction when she claimed that, even though she knows how to negotiate the parts of Beirut she was raised in better than Hamra, it doesn't mean she feels safer there.

Class, capital and queer networks

Class and capital are determining factors in experiencing Beirut as open and gay-friendly. A number of my interlocutors emphasized the centrality of class and networks in accessing “gay-friendly” spaces in Beirut. In addition, some of my interlocutors critiqued the idea that LGBT individuals from Lebanon feel safer in Western contexts. For

example, Sirine a 28 year old Lebanese Armenian woman, identifies as genderqueer, who was born, raised and currently lives in Beirut, argued that despite the fact that Beirut and specifically some areas of Beirut seem “more open,” it is not necessarily the case. She drew on her experiences as genderqueer and compared them to her life in France where she studied for an MA degree. She claimed that, in Beirut, one is welcome despite one’s gender presentation and performances particularly in private establishments, if one can afford access. Mainly what counts is having the money and economic capital to afford private semi-LGBTQ-friendly places. Therefore, class privilege enables access to LGBT-friendly spaces.

In an account that troubles the Orientalist narrative and discourse of queer individuals feeling safer in the West, Sirine felt safer in Beirut (than in France), despite her gender non-normative presentation, primarily because she does not feel like a foreigner in Beirut. Sirine talked about harassment she faced in both Lebanon and France, and claimed that she was less able to respond to harassment in France, particularly due to the fact that she was a foreigner. She claims that in Beirut she feels freer because she knows her way around and knows how to respond to harassment. In France, she said that she wasn’t necessarily harassed only because of her gender non-normativity, per se, but rather her gender non-normativity coupled with the fact that she wasn’t French:

I was never scared for people to harass or attack me [in Beirut] and when they did it, it was-because it is my space, this is my city, I could retaliate. However, in other places you can’t retaliate not because of your gender identity, but because you are a third class citizen, and because they have all these issues of racism and migration. At a surface level, it starts off as if they are harassing you because they don’t understand whether you are a man or a woman or the fact that it is a threat for them. But, in Beirut, this is my street...if you harass me, I will curse you, and I will make a big scene

In France, Sirine was harassed for being gender non-normative and a foreigner, however, unlike Beirut she felt less safe defending herself. Sirine's remarks simultaneously critique Orientalist discourses about the backwardness of Arab societies and at the same time refute the discourse of Lebanese exceptionalism. Hence, the narrative of modernity in Beirut that is based on the tolerance of certain groups, and not others, is similar to that of France, where some immigrant groups are considered to be outside of modernity (El-Tayeb 2011).

Queerness, for some, became an exclusionary, very classed position. Several of my interlocutors also refused the fractal Orientalism of a divide between Beirut and other cities in Europe and the US, and between the city and village, suggesting that experiencing gay-friendliness in cities depended on certain kinds of privileges that need to be acknowledged. In Beirut, having access to gay-friendly spaces is not only about having the money, but also about the networks you have and are part of (particularly activist networks), as several of my interlocutors discussed. So networks here act as social capital.

For example, Mays refused the binaries of modern/traditional and Beirut/other cities. She claims

Clearly, this is an issue to understand Beirut and to define Beirut as progressive in comparison to Arab countries. Usually, Lebanon has all these oppressions, for example the Dekwanah incident.⁴ It is not true that it is better. We are just as bad. This is just an image that Lebanon puts out. It is even more than that. It is not an issue of making a hierarchy of oppression.

Mays refuses the idea that Beirut is better than other cities in the Arab world by bringing up the multiple exclusions and oppressions that exist within the city. Similarly to

Souraya, she claims that this narrative is a surface image that Lebanon presents. Talking about queer life in the city, Mays claims that it is not so much about the city, but rather the networks that one develops and becomes embedded in, in any major city. For example, she claims that the networks of queer activists that she is part of and circulates in primarily shaped her experiences of cities, such as New York City and Cairo.

Therefore, she argues that it is hard for one to draw conclusions about gay life, solely based on one's experiences of a city without centralizing the role of the networks one has already established and relies on. So for Mays, Beirut is not particularly exceptional; however, it has certain networks and people who have access to those networks might find it easier to navigate. However, these networks can be quite exclusive.

Access to “gay-friendly” spaces

Randa touched upon the exclusivity of networks by brining up the topic of unequal access to private places. Randa described how private places, such as privately owned bars, restaurants, and clubs became gay friendly more easily/frequently than public spaces.⁵ Similarly to discussions brought up by Mays and Sirine about accessibility and class, this distinction makes it clear that gay spaces are accessible to those who can afford. In addition, Randa claimed that having gay and lesbian places is less indicative of growing openness and “tolerance” than of capitalism and the profitability of becoming gay friendly. This idea was brought up by Souraya, who argued that discourses of openness are a byproduct of the neoliberal policies of the Hariri governments of the 1990s. For example, when I asked her about Acid, the first gay club

(now closed), Randa claimed that it was “money-friendly” rather than gay-friendly. She continued to say:

Now, let's say something if we think of the very fancy places the one where you pay 50 dollars entrance, people there don't care. I went to a place recently to a gay friend's birthday. I usually go to an averagely priced pub. I don't go to very expensive places. I also have to dress a certain way. I don't like someone to impose on me. I went there, and I saw a lot of people from the gay community I know. They were there, they were dressed (shirt, tie), and they paid the money. If you are going to pay money, no one says anything, unless you are going to make out or dance with someone of the same sex. The problem is that if all of them (queer community) start going there, which is not going to happen, because they all don't have the money.

Randa claims that expensive places are less likely to discriminate based on gender presentation, as they mostly care about the money. This idea was shared with Sirine who claimed that class privilege enables access to gay friendly spaces in Beirut. However, as Randa pointed out the problem would arise if the place becomes labeled as “gay-friendly.” That remains unlikely, according to Randa, as many people are not able to afford it. Talking about the multiple exclusions among her gay friends and circles, Randa recounted how many individuals are excluded simply because they cannot afford the prices of “gay friendly places” in Beirut:

If you are poor you are excluded, you can't pay in certain places, if you are from a prominent family you cant go to these places. You will do things outside of Lebanon. Also women who cant go out at night, they are excluded, if you cant go out you are out of the loop because you cant go out.

Randa pointed out to several exclusions that were echoed by a number of individuals. For example, in certain queer circles, if one isn't able to afford to go out one was not able to be included in outings. Therefore, these privately owned, gay-friendly places are also exclusive to those who can afford to access them. In order to understand the multiple exclusions and the ways that queer subjectivities are defined, we have to take into account the roles of class, race, and gender.

Cosmopolitanism and “tolerance”

In addition to the class inequalities and centrality of networks in the city which are formative of LGBT life in Beirut, many individuals brought up accounts of the racist practices in the city. Accounts of racism in Beirut were echoed by many individuals, who asserted that Beirut is racist, pointing out to how non-Western foreigners, particularly non-white foreigners, are regarded and treated by the Lebanese state and people. Given the surge of Syrian refugees and migrant domestic workers, racist narratives (whether in everyday life, media, and legal) have become very common whether they are symbolic (mainly through discourses around refugees), linked to access to resources (legal restriction on jobs, more recently, the visa system), or limiting mobility (certain municipalities not allowing Syrian refugees of being on the street or leaving their places of residence after 7:00 pm at night). This was most clear in some areas in Mount Lebanon, where I saw banners on the entrances to some villages in June 2013 requesting all Syrian refugees to register with the municipality and stating that Syrian individuals are not allowed to be out at night. Such policies were justified by the need to curb the increasing levels of crime and other offenses, which many linked to the surge of refugees. Even more recently, in January 2015 the Lebanese government introduced, for the first time in Lebanese history, a visa requirement for Syrians who wish to enter Lebanon.⁶

Discourses of “tolerance” in the case of Lebanon are often used in reference to the “tolerance” among religious sects. Tolerance for other Lebanese sects, particularly post-civil war, marks one as “more modern,” as one is able to transcend these distinctions. However, recently and more increasingly, “tolerance” for migrant and refugee groups, is

not a marker of “modernity.” This “suspicion of the other” in Beirut is usually brought up in relation to non-Euro-American foreigners, most notably Syrian refugees, Palestinians, and migrant domestic workers. Tolerance, as Wendy Brown reminds us, is “a political discourse and practice of governmentality that is historically and geographically variable” (Brown 2016, 4). She claims “tolerance nevertheless produces and positions subjects, orchestrates meanings and practices of identity, marks bodies, and conditions political subjectivities” (Brown 20016, 4).

In the Lebanese case, the dominant discourse of tolerance of the “other” is usually understood as someone from a different religious sect as marking a form of (perhaps, secular?) modernity. However, discourses of acceptance and tolerance not do include refugees or migrant workers from East Africa and Southeast Asia. The state and politicians, for example, rely heavily on discourses of “co-existence,” as an example of “tolerating” the other. The claim that Lebanon is built on the co-existence of Muslims and Christians gets staged, most notable in the Hariri memorial, as a means to indicate a form of modernity. One does not have to be secular, but can peacefully coexist. These narratives of co-existence do not map onto migrants and refugees. Even though suspicion of the other and racist discourses circulate in both cases of religious sect and that of migrants and refugees, only one form of tolerance fits the Lebanese narrative of “diversity” and “cosmopolitanism:” tolerance of other religious sects. Tolerance of specific groups therefore becomes employed as a “characteristic” of progress narratives.⁷ “Tolerance” becomes associated with the West, whereas intolerance is associated with non-Western societies (Brown 2006, El-Tayeb 2011). However, at the same time, there is a distinction between who is to be tolerated and who isn’t. Therefore, one could argue

that the “modern” narrative of tolerance depends on not tolerating other groups, who are regarded as outside of “modernity.”⁸

Rabab, who grew up in the South of Lebanon, saw racism and classism to be directly linked to urban development and to urban realms like Beirut. She stated, “Lebanon is a very racist country. The racism is also most common in urban areas such as Beirut, which is a byproduct of urbanization and people thinking the space is open, diverse and cosmopolitan.” In mentioning racism Rabab is talking about both racism towards non-white foreigners, and sectarianism, including against Shiites in Beirut. However, class remains a determining factor in Shiites’ experiences of Beirut.

Rabab refused the distinction between modern/traditional, and the claim that Beirut is more modern than villages in the south. Rabab says that growing up in a predominately Shia village in the South of Lebanon, she had very different experiences of sex and sexuality than the people in Beirut. She described people in her village as being more open around issues of sex. This is quite central, since Shiites, the historically marginalized religious sect in Lebanon, are considered to be less “modern” than their other counterparts (Deeb 2006). Historically they did not have access to education that other groups did and did not have as much access to the capital. Despite the fact that her village might be considered more traditional and conservative, she felt it was more open than Beirut, particularly since people talked about sex directly or jokingly much more than they did in Beirut. Rabab’s discussion of the openness of her village in comparison to Beirut, contrasts the presumptions about metropolitan discourses in the construction of Beiruti exceptionalism and homonormativity.

She then asked the following questions: How are we conservative? How are we traditional/uncivilized/because we talk or don't talk about sex? Attitudes towards sex are then used as markers of who is deemed modern and who isn't. Sex, again, becomes the marker of progress, which is measured in terms of openness and tolerance to discussions of sexuality. Rabab disrupts Samira's binary about Beirut vs the village - therefore countering these fractal Orientalisms. She also points to the exclusionary practices that the queer community enacts, even though many in these activists networks are critical of Beirut's exceptionalism. Rabab particularly talked about class and the assumption of people's ability and fluency in speaking French and English as markers of distinction and class.

In this narrative of modernity, hierarchies of religious sect map onto who is considered "closer" to modernity, where certain sects might be considered as impossible sites of "modern" queerness. As stated in chapter four, Rabab refused the reconciliation narratives and presenting LGBTQ experiences of life in Lebanon as "reconciliations between being Arab and queer." She felt that this framing was quite simplistic and informed by assumptions of binaries and oppositionality. However, she, like many of my interlocutors, explained how her life is informed by a number of contending and intersecting parts of her experiences in Lebanon. These reconciliation narratives are also circulated within Lebanon, where some Lebanese sects (Christians) more often than Muslims are presented as being able to "be" "more gay" than their Muslim counterparts, in a similar manner to Mikdashi's (2014) discussion of secularism, which shows how people assume certain sects are more capable of being secular. However, this is also a very classed understanding of queerness, where queerness becomes a gendered and

classed (even more so than sectarian) possibility. Thus, it is represented as an impossibility for Shiites to embody certain forms of modern queerness. So, in other words, because sect/religion define closeness to modernity (defined as capable of queerness and openness), the “furthest” sects from the modern are represented as impossible sites of queerness. In addition, to racism, classism, and sectarianism exclusions heavily target gender non-normative individuals in LGBT circles in Beirut.

Devaluation of femininities

As stated earlier, gay-friendly spaces like those invoked by Randa exclude groups of people who do not have the economic means to access them and who might not be part of certain networks. Many of my interlocutors claimed that in addition to class, gender normativity plays a central role in who gets excluded from Beiruti queer circles. Most importantly, my interlocutors stated that transgendered individuals (mostly trans-women) and gender non-normative cisgendered men constitute the groups that are most excluded and not welcomed. Looking at the patterns of exclusion more closely, there are patterns of devaluation of femininity and gender non-normativity. Many of my interlocutors recounted incidents of feminine-acting men and gender-normative queer women (in certain queer organizing spaces) being excluded based on their gender performance and presentation. For example, Randa explicitly told me “women are excluded because they are gender normative especially in feminist spaces and in lesbian spaces.” In this section, I look at the ways that femininity becomes devalued and people are excluded based on people’s performance of “femininity.”

In my interviews, the majority of cisgendered men were more likely to distance themselves from gender non-normative men; they were also more likely to talk about maintaining a “heterosexual” image or performance in order to sometimes “pass” and maintain privilege. In addition, men were more likely to talk about feeling unsafe and desiring to leave Lebanon in order to escape harassment. Patriarchal masculinity often accords men privileges and hence men are socialized into maintaining privilege, whereas women are much more harassed on a daily basis. This is, of course, not to say that all men experience privilege similarly, as it varies based on class, race, migrant status, age, physical ability, etc.... However, the majority of cisgendered men I interviewed attempted to maintain their privilege by deriding gender non-normative men and distancing themselves from male femininities. They did so particularly by distancing themselves from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual masculinities, as I explain in more detail below. I use the example of gay masculinities to point out to one method of exclusion that men talked about in the fashioning and construction of their masculinities. I illustrate that, rather than understanding masculinity as a performance, a number of my interlocutors believed that masculinity is something internal and is more about who they are.

Visibilities and masculinities

While discussing visibility with a number of my cisgendered male interlocutors, a different pattern than what I discussed above with queer women and gender-queer individuals, emerged. Most of my interviewees conceived of visibility in terms of gender normativity, more specifically in terms of what many referred to as “Lebanese

masculinity.” The majority of men were more concerned with gender presentation and enactments, rather than sexuality. Being regarded as a *rijjal* (“real man”) was a central concern, whereby each interlocutor spoke of a relational conception of masculinity that distanced them from “straight” masculinities on the one hand, and “non-normative” enactments of masculinities on the other hand. Speaking against their gender normativity as a “passing strategy,” they argued that they were simply “being” gender normative without consciously trying to do so. This interest and investment in presenting gender normative fronts, and their engagement with forms of hegemonic masculinity, highlights how they resisted what they believed is a misconceived conflation of gender and sexual non-normativity in Lebanese society. Most of my interlocutors distanced themselves from both “straight” and “feminine” masculinities and pointed out to the fact that both are harmful to the image of men, since they relied on stereotypical and exaggerated gendered performances.

Gender enactments and their links to visibility then become important sites for negotiating multiple understandings of queer visibility that respond to cultural conceptions of gender nonnormativity and sexualities. Even though my cisgendered male interlocutors had slightly differing conceptions of Lebanese masculinity, almost all of them claimed that Lebanese masculinity is characterized by the image of the *rijjal*: a man who is physically strong, well groomed, loud, and proud of his sexual prowess. This type of man, many claimed, tells stories about women as sexual conquests, which is considered a way to demonstrate a sense of prideful manhood. These notions of masculinity were brought up on several occasions, especially when my interlocutors, talked about strategies for “passing” as heterosexual in some situations.

Lebanese masculinities: distancing and exclusion

Non-heterosexual masculinities also operate on multiple levels of exclusion.

Raed, a 23-year-old graphic designer, claimed that a Lebanese masculine man is always ready to pick a fight, highly interested in sports and cars, and publicly boasts about his sexual escapades with women. When it came to defining his own masculinity, Raed claimed that he does not believe in the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and that he does not think of himself in these terms. By contrast, Tarek asserted that a masculine man is someone who is responsible, “a man of his words,” and someone that can handle stress and difficult situations. However, he also made it a point to distinguish between his own conception of masculinity and the “typical” Lebanese man. According to him, the stereotype of the Lebanese masculine man pretends to know everyone and everything, projects self-confidence, is very social, and goes out with many women. And, not least, “real” men are thought to be always strong, decisive and opinionated. Tarek believed in a different notion of masculinity, one that emphasized respectability and responsibility. When asked whether he consider himself masculine, Tarek claimed that indeed he is a man. “I am just naturally masculine. I don’t do it on purpose.” According to him, being masculine also means that he is not feminine: “I don’t walk or talk like a woman. Thus I am considered to be masculine.” Tarek does not associate with gender non-normative men out of fear of being “outed.” He says:

I simply did not associate with “these people,” when I went out with someone on a date, with someone who was feminine and if feel people would assume that I am gay, then I don’t want to see that person again. I would only associate with them in gay places. I don’t give off the image of being gay, I don’t give it. Not because.. I don’t know actually, I don’t sashay on the street. That’s partly because of who I am. I am

not someone who sashays while walking. It's not me. Even when I had the freedom I didn't do that.

Tarek felt that people would "find out" that he is "gay" if he were seen socializing with gender non-normative men in Beirut. He felt safer to do so in gay friendly spaces.

Wael, a college student in his early twenties, made a distinction between two types of Lebanese men. One type of a masculine Lebanese man is muscular, has sharp facial features, and is always well groomed. The other type is considered "regular;" he keeps to himself in matters of the heart. Wael was critical of straight men. "Heterosexual Lebanese men," he asserted, "are very dull." This illustrates one of the ways by which non-heterosexual men distance themselves from heterosexual masculinity by looking at it as more "rigid" than the masculinities of many non-heterosexual men. In this regard, Wael does not consider himself masculine in the rigid sense, but also he does not see himself as feminine.

Khaled, who recently moved to New York City to pursue his graduate studies, described Lebanese masculine men as pride-oriented and a bit swaggering in the way they carry themselves. He told me that Lebanese men must always project strength, a sense of being decisive and dominant. Khaled was the only one who made a distinction between conceptions of masculinity in Lebanon and other places. After having lived in NYC for a couple of months, Khaled felt more comfortable because he felt he could express himself much more openly. In addition, he claimed that he is considered more masculine in NYC than he is in Beirut, because, according to him, in the latter city, conceptions of appropriate masculinity are more rigid. He claimed that in Beirut, one has to know when to act "hyper-masculine" and when not to, for safety reasons. The performances of masculinity were used as strategies of negotiating Beirut safely. Khaled

does not consider himself masculine but also claimed that he doesn't really care about his gender presentation.

Most of my interlocutors shared similar notions of what were normative notions of masculinity in Lebanon. I found it interesting that when asked whether they consider themselves masculine, those who said no also insisted that they are not feminine either (even though I didn't ask). Most defined their masculinity in terms of not being "typically Lebanese," but also not being feminine. They reject both the extreme ideal of masculinity and the "stigmatized" status as a feminine man. The hegemonic Lebanese man was seen as unnatural and rigid and boring. However, almost all the men were equally critical of "feminine" men. This prompted me to probe deeper into the ways that these men viewed gender non-normativity and their strategies to distance themselves from it.

Almost all my cisgendered male informants considered themselves broadly masculine, if not hyper-masculine. They also expressed a decidedly negative view of feminine men. These men tried to negotiate a type of masculinity that was neither stereotypically masculine nor feminine. In my interviews, gender non-normativity was often understood as men acting in a "feminine" way, but it also meant men departing from hegemonic norms of masculinity. Interestingly enough, most of my respondents embraced the conventional view that gender non-normativity expresses sexual non-normativity. Even though almost all of the men I interviewed claimed that they are gender non-normative in their rejection of hegemonic masculinity, they expressed discomfort and even ridiculed feminine-acting men, including those who were gay identified. The reasons stated for this discomfort was that these feminine men drew public attention to non-heterosexual men. Even though they distance themselves from

heterosexual masculinity, non-normative and feminine men constituted an abject position that they define themselves in opposition to.⁹

This phenomenon is part of what Benedicto (2014) refers to as the “global femme-phobia” in his research on gay communities in Manila.¹⁰ In Lebanon, gay men’s “femme-phobia” is also linked to distancing oneself from “female identification,” and is linked to the conflation of gender and sexuality. Hence, by distancing themselves from the abject positions of feminine gay men, they claim that they “are men.” The fear of conflation of gender non-normativity and sexuality was evident in a number of cases. For instance, when I asked Mazen, a medical student in his mid-twenties, whether he considers himself to be masculine, he wondered whether I could tell he was gay. Mazen, like many other men relied on his masculine demeanor to pass as “straight.” On more than one occasion, many of my interlocutors ridiculed feminine gay men in Beirut. “It is funny how gay men make fun of other gays in the community,” Mazen stated. “Everyone is a tante.” Mazen was quite uncomfortable with feminine acting men and claimed that he believes gay men should not be feminine. “If you want to be a woman,” he said, “then be one.” According to him, a guy’s mannerisms are quite important, and he considered it quite central for a man, whether gay or straight, to maintain gender normativity. He added that he does not have any feminine gay friends and that all of his gay friends are “straight acting.” “I wouldn’t be comfortable with a guy who is very feminine, especially in ordinary places” (places that are not “gay friendly”). Similarly to Tarek, Mazen expressed discomfort in “being seen” with feminine acting men, in routine social situations.

Salim, a 24-year-old graphic designer, also ridiculed feminine gay men on more than one occasion during the interview. Even though he said he doesn't mind feminine men, he still made a point of saying that he isn't sexually or emotionally aroused by them. He repeatedly used the word "tante" in reference to feminine gay men. Salim brought up an interesting point when he said that feminine gay men, whom he referred to as "queens," do harm to the gay community in Lebanon. Interestingly, he drew a parallel between the way "feminine gay men" project a negative image of the gay community and the way "hypermasculine" men project a bad image of straight men. The harm is linked to the fact that they present a stereotypical image of a gay man as lacking valued "masculine traits." "They are not doing well for the community and for its public image as a whole," he said. It is important to keep in mind that it is the performance of gender by men that is evaluated as appropriately masculine or inappropriately feminine. The labeling of feminine acting men as *tante* illustrates this point.

Joe's approach to gender was interesting because of his perception of his own gender difference. At the outset, Joe expressed outrage at what he considered to be "closeted" gay men and extremely flamboyant men. Yet, he was aware that he displays some feminine attributes, most apparent in the way he walks and the way he gestures with his hands. He related that men, even after having sex with them, have distanced themselves from him in public. They apparently don't want to be seen with him because of his gender-non-normative behavioral traits. He related the following to me:

I will be walking with a man on the streets after having been with him for the night, and he will constantly tell me how to act and how not to act. For example, he would give me comments on the way I move and walk by telling me to stop moving my hands or stop walking the way I do. So what if I moved a little bit feminine? Some men also walk in front of me or behind me, and refuse to walk next to me on the streets.

Joe added that even his sister used to get angry because of his gender non-normative mannerisms when, for example, they went out to nightclubs. At the same time, Joe said that, even though he does not consider himself to be masculine, he does not see himself as feminine either. In fact, he rejects feminine men. “Even though I am gay, I get pissed off and angry when I see a feminine guy. I don’t know why. I just don’t want to be with a feminine guy.” When I inquired more into his perception of feminine men, Joe claimed that these are men who wear makeup and refer to each other in the feminine of “*kifik*,” for example (how are you in Arabic). He believes that some people view him as gay not because he is feminine but because he is gentle (*na’im*).

Almost all the men I interviewed agreed that there exists discrimination against gender non-normative acting men in Beirut. Karim claimed that there is a lot of discrimination against gender non-normative men even within the gay community. “They are not very welcomed,” he said, “because, if you’re seen with someone who is feminine, you are directly associated with or thought of as gay. It makes many people uncomfortable.” In fact, Karim thought that things are getting worse for feminine men in Beirut because today men are obsessed with their body image, and with being muscular and fit. “Part of it is reaffirming their masculinity. The image is very important. There’s an obsession with being fit and looking good and being viewed as “ordinary” (heterosexual).” Karim acknowledged that he too was once quite uncomfortable with feminine gay men, but that this attitude changed. “If I want people to accept me for who I am then I have to accept the other guys for who they are.”

Raed and Wael also talked about how feminine men are excluded within the gay community. They were clearly aware of an area of exclusion, mostly with regards to

gender normativity but did not think about it as privilege. Wael terms this exclusion “sissyphobia,” which is even more pronounced in the broader culture. Wael recalled being ridiculed at school for not being “typically” masculine. He was called names in high school, such as *tobje* (fag), even though he had not thought of himself as gay at that time. Finally, and most strikingly, Tarek, seemed to summarize the views of many of those I interviewed:

In Lebanon, if you’re gay, you’re no longer considered a man. It is the close-minded and illiterate people who think that. You’re not considered a man, even if you are very masculine, as long as you are gay. It doesn’t matter. There might be some exceptions, but generally this is the rule. If you’re straight and feminine, you also have a problem.

Tarek’s fear of being viewed, as “less of a man” is felt as real and widely shared by my interlocutors. Tarek has known a few gay-identified feminine men, but his fear has meant that he is not close to them. “I don’t mind them, but I don’t understand why do they have to be so obvious or why they act that way. I am sure they’re not doing it on purpose, but I still don’t understand why.” When I asked him to describe a feminine guy, he said that it was a man who “acts like a woman, uses hand gestures, and body language, [and] is interested in makeup and shopping.” Khaled, was the only who claimed that he doesn’t mind feminine-acting men. “I completely understand where they’re coming from. They are very courageous. They have a lot of guts to do what their instincts tell them to do.” Still, Khaled also used the derogatory term *tante* to refer to feminine-acting men.

Even though almost all the cisgendered men I interviewed reject notions of hegemonic masculinity, they also reject what they perceive as feminine men. As I have argued, maintaining a masculine demeanor is deemed important by almost all of my respondents. In part, gender normativity conceals non-heterosexuality and confers social

privileges on these men. Harassment and exclusion almost always targeted “overtly feminine men.” However, as previously mentioned, gender non-normativity is also very classed and raced. For example, crackdowns and police arrests usually target working class individuals, migrant workers and refugees (Makarem 2012). In addition, as a number of my interlocutors mentioned, establishments are less likely to target or refuse service to gender non-normative men from the Arab Gulf states, as they have money. Therefore, class and race are very central in understanding exclusions targeting gender non-normative men in Beirut.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how queer individuals in Beirut conceive of modernity, progress and Beiruti exceptionalism. On the one hand, some individuals reproduced the narrative of Beirut’s exceptionalism and asserted that Beirut is indeed different from other cities in the Arab World, pointing to possibilities for change, the work of LGBTQ activists, and certain symbolic advancements in “personal freedoms.”¹¹ On the other hand, most of my interlocutors were skeptical of Beirut’s exceptionalism, and questioned the surface image of cosmopolitanism.

Some challenged this narrative by pointing out to the role of capitalist investments and how an image of progressiveness is produced to attract tourists and foreign investments after the civil war. Others challenged narratives of Beirut’s exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism by pointing to the various exclusions, racisms, and inequalities present, most notably along lines of class, race, gender, and religious sect. To highlight the ways exclusions target gender non-normative individuals, I analyzed how my

cisgendered male interlocutors conceived of Lebanese masculinities and how they conceived of their own masculinities.

I illustrated that people situated their lives in Beirut and the depictions of Beirut as “open” and “diverse” in a complex manner, where they referred to and talked about the distinctions between Beirut and other major Lebanese cities, Beirut and other rural areas (example, villages in the South), Lebanon and other countries in the Arab World, and Lebanon and other European countries. The narratives however, did not necessarily privilege Beirut as more open, but provided explanations to why this seems to be the case (neoliberal projects and investments) and also pointed out that the openness (or the seeming openness), present in an urban setting like Beirut, is also built on gendered, racial and class-based exclusions.

Assessing developments in gender and sexualities through the lens of modernity and progress almost always signifies a linear trajectory, assuming that women’s rights come first, followed by LGBT rights. My interlocutors discussed slight changes in terms of LGBTQ lives in Beirut, but also countered the notion that change can be assessed and understood by linear progress narratives. Most importantly, when talking about gay life in the city, they rejected linear narratives of progress by pointing to the number of exclusions that are present in the city. They disrupted linear narratives that assume that LGBTQ rights follow women’s rights, migrant workers' rights, etc.... The fact that there are two LGBTQ organizations and “gay friendly” spaces was not equated to the fact that this is a linear narrative of advancement in terms of LGBTQ lives in the city. Beirut is therefore experienced very differently based on one’s race, class, gender, and sect, and their positions within Lebanese hierarchy. Finally, narratives of Beiruti cosmopolitanism

and exceptionalism obscure the inequalities, hierarchies and exclusions that many of my interlocutors asserted are characteristic of Beirut's public sphere.

¹ For more about "Proud Lebanon" see <http://www.proudlebanon.org/>

² I benefit from Hong and Ferguson's (2011) discussion of the similarities between women of color feminism and queer of color critique: "women of color feminism and queer of color critique reveal the ways in which racialized communities are not homogeneous but instead have always policed and preserved the difference between those who are able to conform to categories of normativity, respectability and value, and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories" (2).

³ In a similar manner to Manalansan (2005), Luibheid (2008), and Benedicto (2014). Unlike Benedicto (2014), I look into how privilege is complicated by a number of competing positions, which my respondents occupy. Whereas Benedicto (2014) draws on his discussions with privileged gay identified men in Manila, my work explores the complications of privilege among the "third world queer."

⁴ An incident in 2013, where the police raided and shut down a gay club "Ghost." Several gay and trans individuals were detained, and verbally and physically abused and humiliated, including Syrian nationals.

⁵ For more on public spaces such as beaches and the corniche (boardwalk), see Sofian Merabet (2014).

⁶ See <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/lebanon-impose-visa-restrictions-syrians-starting-january->

⁷ As Wendy Brown (2006) claims: "Tolerance thus emerges as part of a civilizational discourse that identifies both tolerance and the tolerable with the West, marking non-liberal societies and practices as candidates for an intolerable barbarism that is itself signaled by the putative intolerance for these societies. In the mid nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, the West imagined itself as standing for civilization against primitivism, and in the cold war years for freedom against tyranny; now these two recent histories are merged in the warring figures of the free, the tolerant, and the civilized on one side, and the fundamentalist, the intolerant, and the barbaric on the other" (6).

⁸ This is similar to what El-Tayeb (2011) illustrates in *European Others*, where she argues in that the "Otherness" of Muslims in Europe gets "expressed in religious intolerance, sexism, and homophobia, prevents Muslims from ever becoming part of the tolerance, secular European 'we'" (xxvii).

⁹ Similarly to CJ Pascoe's discussion of the "constitutive outsider" in her examination of the uses of the fag discourses among high school boys (Pascoe 2011).

¹⁰ Benedicto (2014) illustrates the socio-historical specificity of femme-phobia in Manila where he argues: "While the denigration of femininity has long been a feature of gay male spaces in the West, so called femme phobia was complicated in Manila by the historical dominance of kabaklaan in Filipino public culture and the associated, class fear that one's homosexuality might be interpreted as female identification" (85).

¹¹ The advancements are very recent and mostly linked to court cases, where the penal code 534 was not used to criminalize same-sex sex relations. Also, the Lebanese Medical Association outlawed tests of "anal probing."

Chapter Eight

Managing conceptions of modernity and exceptionalism: life between *al-wad'* and the bubble

In the years 2013 and 2014, “the situation” in Lebanon got worse. Around fifteen bombings and suicide attacks targeted civilians and Lebanese army checkpoints. People felt less safe, and as always, checked on their loved ones and friends every time a bomb went off. In an attempt to restore some security, the Lebanese army had set up checkpoints in various parts of Beirut and Lebanon to inspect vehicles that were entering residential neighborhoods, malls, and shopping centers. Navigating and moving throughout the city became harder. These checkpoints were particularly on the lookout for bombs, arms being transported, and potential suicide bombers. The primary suspects for such checkpoints were usually younger men, working class people, Syrian refugees and suspected “foreigners.”

With this heightened sense of security, Rabab, who rides a scooter as her primary means of transportation, was stopped at checkpoints more often than not. She was most likely read as a working-class male, particularly since she rode a scooter. She felt uncomfortable being searched and patted down, so she told them she was a woman, so as not to be searched. Therefore, as previously discussed, Rabab strategically identified as a woman at the checkpoint in order to safeguard herself from being inappropriately touched. Crossing borders and boundaries in Beirut, as I discussed in this dissertation, always involves forms of “code-switching” and managing identities in order to be safe.

Experiences of gender, race, class, and religious sect at the “checkpoint,” from the times of the civil war, are always emblematic of the larger geo- and sociopolitical environment.

Living in post-civil war Beirut means living through political turmoil, instability, wars, sectarian violence, and the specter of terror, more commonly referred to as *al-wad'* or “the situation.” It also means living with the anxieties of an unpredictable present and an unknown future. As discussed in the opening chapter, *al-wad'* is a nebulous term that individuals use in Lebanon in reference to political and economic instability, conflict, wars and the possibility of wars. One of the most notable aspects of *al-wad'* is its ability to disrupt everyday life, while at the same time becoming so normalized that it is not necessarily noticeable or regarded as disruptive to some. For example, I would share my concerns with my interlocutors that *al-wad'* in Beirut is not good, and many would answer that “it is not so bad yet, however, it can escalate very quickly.” Therefore, *al-wad'* always seems more pressing for the outsider, particularly since I had not continuously lived in Beirut for a few years.

In times of upheaval and unrest, individuals create sheltered spaces (both metaphorical and physical), which I refer to as “bubbles.” These bubbles disrupt the effects of *al-wad'* by providing sheltered lives that allow people to resume their everyday life activities. One of the ways that some of my interlocutors resume their lives in Beirut is by denying the larger socio-political context they lived in. They deny it in order to live with it. Even though many people complained, were anxious and shared a deep sense of despair about the present and future, they tried to maintain a sense of normalcy and to live with this constantly changing “new normal.” However, not everyone experiences “the situation” similarly.

In my concluding chapter, I show how *al-wad'* constitutes and is constitutive of the experiences of queer Beirutis. Whereas in my opening chapter, I asked how queer Beirutis manage their lives amidst *al wad'*, in this concluding chapter, I argue that queer Beirutis manage *al-wad'* by creating and living in bubbles that grant them a sense of safety and some distance from “the situation.” At a micro level, these bubbles are privileged spaces that are not accessible to everyone. However, at a macro level, these bubbles, oftentimes coupled with everyday practices of denial of the situation, serve to unwittingly maintain narratives of modernity and progress and of Beirut’s exceptionalism.

I conceive of the bubble as a contradictory formation that is both an expression of privilege and protection, critique and investment. It is both a strategy for the negotiation of life in Beirut, and a part of this larger ideology of exceptionalism and progress. In addition, I understand *al wad'* to be the set of social complexities that disrupt progress. Hence, it disrupts this narrative of exceptionalism and progress by reminding us of the instability and violence in Lebanon and reminding us that not everyone is sheltered. In other words, the situation/*al wad'* primarily affects those who are outside of/excluded from living in the bubble.

The bubble

I understand the bubble to be a safe space where individuals can live their lives and maneuver the city with a certain sense of cautious safety with friends and networks. The bubble, in most instances, refers to various privileges and hierarchies, particularly class, gender, and sect. The bubble also represents networks and ties, whether activist,

queer or familial. In addition, the bubble can be conceived of as “safe,” yet exclusive, spaces or “gay-friendly” spaces, such privately owned gay-friendly establishments in the city. These bubbles allow individuals with certain privileges to experience Beirut and Lebanon as exceptional and to ignore those who are excluded, and the larger sociopolitical context. Some people within bubbles are able to experience Beirut as exceptional and “modern,” while others are not able to, primarily because they do not have privileges and/or access to networks that form these bubbles.

Many of my interlocutors were unaware of the relative privileges these bubbles accorded them. While describing how they negotiate life in the city, a number of my interlocutors argued that negotiating and maneuvering various parts of the city and the country does not have to do with “concealing” or “publicly asserting” their sexuality, but rather about how they are read in certain contexts. Being aware and reflexive of how one is read (whether intentionally passing or unintentionally being read as belonging to a certain category), whether it is in a village, Beirut, European cities, at checkpoints, or bars is very important. Rabab and Sirine’s experiences of cities (discussed in chapter seven) help us unsettle the idea that urban spaces, like those of Beirut, are assumed to be generally more “open” and “progressive” as opposed to the rest of Lebanon.

As previously illustrated, my interlocutors did not employ dominant modes of gay and lesbian visibility, such as coming out and discourses of pride, to resist oppression or heteronormativity. In negotiating their lives in the city, many individuals are actively creating meaning and carving out spaces without necessarily openly asserting their sexual identities. I consider the active creation of and the awareness of living in the bubble (for some) as an example of negotiating queer lives in postwar Beirut.

In the following sections, I illustrate the various ways that my interlocutors conceived of the bubble, including the bubble as networks, safe spaces, and physical spaces (areas in Beirut) that people moved in. These bubbles require at least moderate privilege (based on class, access to networks, and gender privilege). In addition, these bubbles can be understood as spaces that allow one to possibly ignore and deny “the situation.” The bubble, however, does not transcend some of the sedimented divisions that exist in Lebanese society. For example, as illustrated in chapter five, Yara described her queer community as a feminist one, whose members shared more in common than just being queer. Her queer community or bubble prioritized and mobilized around feminist issues and the rights of migrants and refugees, in addition to queer issues. Yara, however, refuses to organize with queer individuals who belong to political parties that do not share her views on immigration and refugee issues.

Cisgendered men did not bring up the bubble as much as genderqueer and cisgendered women. This could be attributed to the fact that they viewed their experiences more in terms of being disprivileged for not being heterosexual. They cited fear of harassment for being gay much more than women did. Hence, many did not perceive their privilege as a bubble that they felt safe in. Others described the bubble as a place where they feel a certain distance from “reality.”

The bubble often structured Beirutis’ lives in multiple ways, signifying the privileges of some people accorded to them based their class, sect, nationality, or other privileges. For example, during the war in the summer of 2006 that primarily targeted Shia residential areas, private establishments including clubs and bars relocated from downtown Beirut to the safer mountain areas, where people resumed their nightlife and

continued to party. Historically, the bubbles have been used as examples of everyday practices of denial, where people attempted to resume their lives while other parts of the city and/or country were experiencing violence, armed clashes or bombings. I am not suggesting that individuals should not find spaces to resume their lives amidst conflict; rather, I am pointing to the ways that these strategies can sometimes co-exist with practices of denial and contribute to narratives of Beirut's exceptionalism.

The bubble as privilege

The bubble helps maintain a sense of Beirut exceptionalism by giving people the possibility of not being attuned to or aware of what is happening around them. For Souraya, the bubble represents living in a reality that she acknowledges is not shared by the majority of people around her. She understands that living in a bubble is a form of privilege, as most people can't afford to live in a bubble. Souraya describes the bubble as representing privileges that grant people the possibility of living their lives without having to think about the reality of others who do not have these privileges. So the invisibility of privilege becomes a central aspect of experience in the bubble, which is why according to her, it becomes a "bubble" as opposed to "reality." Speaking about people who live in the bubble, she says:

It is people who don't need to live the other life, the other reality, these are the people who believe it. They don't need to see this other reality: how the government deals, the people who belong to a class that protects them or they have privileges that protect them, those who have another passport, or those who come from a certain class or a certain area. They are protected. They don't need to see the other reality of Lebanon. Or those people who are able to create their own bubble and live in safety. We all now know the codes in Lebanon and we don't trespass. Whether we like it or not, the majority of us live in our own bubble, and, even though we believe we are radical, we are not.... Some people can afford, they can protect themselves and not see the other face of reality and other people create trenches, like me, who live in them and don't

need to deal with things they don't want to deal with, because they are simply tired. They can, of course, if they can afford to.

For Souraya, the bubble is about the privilege of not having to think about or live the “reality” of others who are disprivileged based on gender, class, and religious sect.

Souraya points to the protections of having a passport other than the Lebanese one, in reference to transnational mobility, to be a privilege that most Lebanese people do not have. However, at the same time, the bubble, which she describes as a “trench” (invoking the image of a shelter from war), creates a sense of safety that otherwise does not exist.

Souraya claims that she has created a bubble as a way to retreat from the reality of Lebanon because she is “simply tired.” She goes so far to claim that even activists who think they are radical are not really so, as they do not acknowledge their privilege and the bubbles they live in; therefore, they deny the larger sociopolitical context they live in.

Souraya claims that people, herself included, who live in the bubble get reminded of its existence when disruptions take place. So the bubble, according to her, is left unnoticed, as people assume it is reality (the invisibility of privilege). Her insistence on the fact that the bubble exists for those who can “afford to,” makes it clear that the bubble is not something for everyone in Beirut but only for people with the privilege to inhabit it.

The bubble as networks and support systems

The bubble is also understood as primarily consisting of one's networks and support systems. While explaining her own life and experiences of the bubble, Souraya claims that she inhabits multiple bubbles within one big bubble and that bubbles are formed of communities of shared values or meanings. For example, she described the

multiple bubbles that she inhabits, from her family bubble to her activist circles and to her university bubble.

According to her, the bubble changes and takes on different forms based on context and the networks included in the particular bubble, or whom it is shared with. However, what makes the bubble possible, is the fact that there is a certain distance from the larger sociopolitical context. The sense of safety created by the bubble can be understood as “shared meaning,” or shared values that are kept “safe” from the society at large.

Even though Souraya does not explicitly describe the bubble in terms of community and support networks, she still points to the central role that networks occupy in forming the bubble. Others, however, talked about the bubble as comprised of community and support networks that are created within the society at large. A bubble is not necessarily hidden; rather it is sheltered.

Mays, for example, understands the bubble as community and support networks. She says:

It [the bubble] is made up of people, spaces and idea. You try to create a support system but you always feel it might crumble, people leave, so few live here. Everyone I knew has a plan B to leave. There is no sense of emotional stability, everyone is on their way out. If you build your support system around people...you can't build your life around it. It can crumble.

Mays is concerned with the fact that many people were immigrating and leaving the bubble which she is part of. She claims that the bubble is quite fragile, and can easily crumble when people leave it. Despite the fact that the bubble for her is about people and a support system, she asserts that it is very fragile. Similarly to Souraya, Mays brought up the issue of transnational mobility as a way that some people escape the situation.

I then asked her what her feminist, queer bubble consists of, and she claimed that:

At the beginning, the bubble was made up of a support system that you built and slowly understand; it depends on the kind of life you envision for yourself ultimately. It might include like-minded friends, a physical space as well. My first support system was linked to Meem and Nasawiya. I took a lot of strength from these places and the ideas circulating in these spaces...It is spaces like these that make you believe of alternatives and make you believe in the power of a collective. The first couple of years there is a euphoria. There is a process: first, you live in a heteronormative world. You build these spaces and it is euphoric and everything is amazing and we are all feminists. But then you realize: everyone around me perpetuates a similar kind of violence that we built for protection.

Mays recounted the processes included in being part of a bubble. Her bubbles primarily include the feminist and queer activists circles she was part of, which gave her a lot of strength and possibilities to imagine a different world. However, while talking about the bubbles, Mays focused on how bubbles are never static and how they change with time. In addition, Mays felt disappointed with the fact that oppressions and exclusions still get reproduced in these bubbles. Mays's reference to the violence that these bubbles perpetuate illustrates how these bubbles become a mechanism by which these narratives of exceptionalism and exclusion exist and are perpetuated.

The bubble as “gay-friendly” space

Others viewed the bubble as extending beyond their own circle of friends and support networks, including the city as a whole and more specifically, LGBTQ-friendly spaces. Randa, for example, claimed that she feels safest in Hamra, despite the harassment she has experiences. She recounted how people are more likely to stare at her, given her gender-non-normative presentation, in the residential areas of Hamra, where she feels less safe than the commercial parts.

Randa claimed that Beirut gives people the space that they want; however, she explained that people experience harassment very differently and that trans women have limited bubbles and thus experience the worst harassment. She claimed that, in Beirut, trans women experience the worst harassment:

[Beirut] allows you the space you want, let's be fair...okay, if we go the extreme who are the most people who get harassed in Lebanon: they are the transsexuals. The status is even worse than women, especially male to female. If someone hasn't done any operation and for people she looks like a sissy boy, for these people who will be harassed by the rest. However, there are a few places they can be relatively safer in but these places are not a lot at all. The more special or queer you are, the more your circle gets smaller. We also have to talk about safety: maybe a trans person can go out during the day but is not able to go to most places

Randa claimed that, the more queer or non-normative one is, the less safe Beirut becomes for them. According to Randa, transgendered individuals are the most excluded from the queer community and society at large in Beirut, and hence, the bubble that they occupy is smaller and more limited. Gay-friendly places, such as those brought up by Randa, have historically discriminated against gender non-conforming and feminine men, such as in the cases of Dunkin Donuts and Wolf bar in the early-to-mid 2000s (Merabet 2004). So, in these spaces, gender performance and presentation is still key to who is welcome and who isn't. Gender identification and presentation, however, are not the only criteria, as gender non-normativity is experienced quite differently for cisgendered men, women, and trans individuals and it is also always experienced through class, race, and migrant status. However, these "gay friendly" spaces or bubbles according to Randa are particularly gay and not "queer friendly" places. She mentioned that the problem with most places is that they are transphobic, with the exception of one or two places. Randa considered gender non-normativity to be the primary axis of experience without considering class, race or migrant status. At the same time, Randa claimed that the

presence of gender non-normative people is essential in making these spaces “gay friendly,” especially since she claimed “we are a very shallow society we judge by looks. That’s why I always talk about looks. We are, to a very high extent, a shallow society.” Therefore, taking up space for her is about gender non-normative people becoming more visible in these “gay friendly spaces.” As discussed in the chapter seven, class privilege enables access to these gay friendly-spaces/bubbles, sometimes despite of gender normativity. Even though these bubbles provide shelter, they are still very exclusive and are restricted to some people. Thus, the bubble is a metaphor of the structures of privilege that allow some of the queer (and non-queer) Beirutis to buy into and reproduce the narrative of Beirut exceptionalism that I have discussed throughout this dissertation.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I drew on the case of queer subjectivities in contemporary Beirut to think about the links between gender, sexuality, and discourses of modernity and progress. I argued against the tendency in scholarship and representations of gender and sexuality in Lebanon (and the Arab Middle East) to focus almost exclusively on culture and rights. Using the lens of culture and rights for understanding gender and sexual non-normativity obscures complexities and lived experiences, and assumes that individuals are impacted in similar ways, regardless of gender, class, religious sect, and migrant and refugee status.

I started with an analysis of the representations of gay and queer Beirut in Euro-American journalistic accounts, and argued that comparing Beirut to places like Provincetown, Paris, and Amsterdam makes it intelligible to Euro-American audiences as

an exceptional place in the Arab Middle East, where presumably LGBTQ individuals can travel to and “discover.” In these representations, Beirut’s primary sexual appeal derives from its location in the Middle East. Beirut’s seeming “tolerance” of middle-to-upper-class gay and lesbian tourists--and not of groups such as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, migrant domestic workers, gender-non-normative, trans, and working-class people--becomes considered a sign of modernity and cosmopolitanism.

Following that, I demonstrated that these discourses and representations do not circulate in Euro-American publications alone, but are circulated in multiple ways in Beirut. I focused on how these discourses circulate and get articulated by LGBTQ individuals in Beirut and sought to determine what forms of exclusions such discourses of exceptionalism are built on. Therefore, I asked for whom Beirut is gay friendly and cosmopolitan?

I argued that Beirut’s seeming openness and exceptionalism actually conceal a series of exclusions. Beirut becomes accessible as a gay-friendly space only to a subset of individuals: “out,” secular, gender-normative, and middle to upper class. However, queer individuals in Beirut engage with, resist and/or reproduce these discourses in a number of ways. In addition, Beirut’s exceptionalism and openness clash with the reality of multiple exclusions along lines of class, gender, race, religious sect, and migration/refugee status. Ultimately, I ask, what does the designation of places as exceptional obscure?

In studying queer subjectivities, I moved away from a conception that privileges dominant models of coming out and visibility, and I sought to understand how negotiating queer subjectivities in Beirut is informed by a number of positions that people inhabit, including but not limited to, gender, religious sect, and class. These positions are

strategically embodied, lived, and experienced, based on situations and contexts. In the context of Beirut, one negotiates and maneuvers multiple strategies that help her fit or pass for the purposes of her well-being and safety. Even though it is primarily about well-being and safety, one's subjectivities and positionalities only gain meaning in certain contexts. Highlighting and drawing attention to one's multiple positionalities (even if contradictory) are a primary means by which one survives, crosses borders (physical borders and neighborhoods in Beirut), and is able to carry out her everyday life. Many of my interlocutors did not celebrate queer life in Beirut as exceptional, nor did they present themselves as victims for being "gay" in Lebanon. Instead, they located their experiences in more complex manners in terms of gender, class, and religious sect. Hence, they were attuned to the multiple ways by which difference operates and the shifting and contextual nature of privilege.

Some of my interlocutors reproduced narratives of progress and Beirut's exceptionalism. Other, however, troubled this narrative of progress by contesting binary oppositions. That is, they rejected binaries of progress/tradition, outness/closetedness, East/West, visible/invisible, and others. In addition, they refused to situate their lives in one of the two binary oppositions; rather, they located themselves neither here nor there, engaging in processes of ongoing disidentifications. This move is not done to necessarily point out to the "fluid" nature of queer subjectivities, but rather as a rejection of binaries of modern/traditional, and as a practice of selective gender visibility strategies.

Rather than imposing definitions of tolerance, cosmopolitanism and modernity, I considered and centralized how my interlocutors talked about and defined modernity and "modern subjects." I questioned the binary of modern/traditional and its uses and

considered how issues of class, sect, and gender issues were central to people's understanding of how they move in and inhabit the city. In navigating city life, my respondents pointed out various ways that difference and privilege operate. Most of my interlocutors considered people's experiences of Beirut's openness and diversity to be quite contingent on their experiences of difference, particularly regarding gender, class and sect.

Finally, I use the concepts of the bubble and *al-wad'* to explain how Beirutis (whether queer identified or not) experience Beirut and Lebanon as exceptional, while others are excluded. Ultimately, I argue that "modernity and progress" are inadequate frameworks to assess the "queer potential" of cities, because modernity itself depends on the exclusion of certain individuals (Muslim, working-class, gender non-normative and trans persons, as well as refugees and migrant workers) who are defined as outside of "modernity."

Appendix A

Data and Methods

For this research project, I draw on three types of data: ethnographic observations, life-history interviews, and textual and discourse analysis. For chapter three, I closely examine and analyze seven articles and gay travelogues on Beirut and the 2009 and 2011/12 editions of the international gay tour guide *Spartacus International*. Given the dearth of gay travelogues, I supplemented my analysis by reading and drawing on over 20 articles about tourism in Beirut since the year 2005. I located seven gay travelogues about Beirut, that are representative of the pool of the articles I have read, written or translated in English, since 2005. For chapter two, I am only concerned with the cultural production and content of these texts. I do not consider the reception of the articles in the Lebanese context, but rather, I focus on the recorded descriptions of the travelers' experiences of "gay Beirut." Travelogues emphasize personal and subjective experience in travel, which allows me to draw on the ways in which the "Self" and "encounters" with the "Other" emerge in these representations. I focus only on analysis of written texts, rather accompanying images.

From the seven articles analyzed, five are primarily targeted to gay audiences since they are published in gay magazines such as "Out Traveller" and "Winq" Magazine. The two others address a general public, such as the New York Times (Appendix C shows the distribution of the articles by title, date and publication). Two of the seven articles appeared in German and Dutch publications, whereas the others appeared in US American publications. I also analyzed the international gay guide *Spartacus International*, published in Germany because it claims to be the most sold and

widely read international gay guide (Alexander 2001, Puar 2002, Massad 2007). Since one of the primary means that gay destinations are presented and marketed is through these international gay guides, having one such example is important in locating similar trends in these circulated images. What makes *Spartacus* especially intriguing is that it has been argued to “set in motion an evolutionary narrative, where homophobia and heterosexism emerge as markers of cultural difference and act as a social border” (Waitt and Markwell 2006, 88).

In chapters four, five, six, seven and eight I analyze how these discourses circulate and are articulated among LGBTQ individuals in Lebanon. In order to get at the ways that Lebanese LGBTQ individuals engage with these discourses and representations, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork and life-history interviews with twenty LGBTQ identified Lebanese individuals. I also draw on a larger number of informal interviews and interactions, conducted throughout my fieldwork. My sample represents individuals from diverse class and religious backgrounds, as well as gender identifications. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among LGBTQ individuals in Lebanon for a total of eight months in 2013 and 2014, in addition to a number of research visits to Beirut during 2011 and 2012. Even though I primarily rely on life history interviews conducted in 2012-14 and 2007-08, I draw my analysis from all my time spent there, talking to and interacting with people, attending events and socializing.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, I relied on snowball sampling to recruit individuals for all my interviews conducted in both 2007-08 and 2012-14. In 2012-14, I made my first contact through feminist networks when I was in the US by email. I was introduced to an active member of feminist and LGBTQ organizing and then after having

a screening meeting in Beirut, she helped me find interviewees in Beirut. It was initially very hard to get responses before being in Beirut. While in Beirut, I relied on meeting individuals once or twice in social settings before conducting an interview. In my call for interviews and discussions with potential interlocutors, I described my research as focusing on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and ideas of progress and modernity in Beirut. I also stated that I am looking for individuals who are LGBTQ identified or who don't necessarily identify but feel that they are non-heteronormative, and who have lived or currently live in Beirut.

Eighteen of my interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted by Skype. The face-to-face interviews were all conducted in public settings in Beirut, primarily "gay-friendly" coffee shops. All of my interlocutors had lived in Beirut for significant number of years in their adult lives, even though not necessarily born in Beirut. Interviews were conducted primarily in Arabic, with some English and French. I translated all interviews into English. My interlocutors included cisgendered men, cisgendered women, genderqueer and bigender individuals. My interlocutors' occupations ranged from and included: college students, NGO workers, graphic designers, health care professionals, and medical doctors. Religious backgrounds were also diverse and included: Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shiite Muslim, Christian Orthodox, and Druze. The interviews lasted between one hour and a half to two hours and a half. The names of all my interlocutors have been changed in this dissertation to protect all my interlocutors and to ensure anonymity.

In the interviews, I was primarily interested in the ways that people talked about their lives, and experiences of Beirut and LGBTQ communities. I was also interested in

how they invoked modernity and progress as they talked about gender and sexual non-normativity in Beirut. I first started with general questions about Beirut, “diversity,” and discourses of openness. Then, I moved to questions about representations of Beirut. Following that, I asked about self-perception and identification, community, exclusion and gender and sexualities in the city. A number of my interviewees had been part of a Lebanese activist LGBT group at some point in their lives, however, not everyone was part of the two major LGBT organizations in Lebanon at the time: Meem and Helem. I conducted two separate interviews with one Helem and one Meem representative.

Since I conducted research in a highly volatile and politically unstable city and region, I rely on what Sawalha calls “flexible methodologies and techniques”(2010). More in-depth interviews would have benefited my research, particularly in giving me a larger sample size and a broader range of stories and people’s experiences. However, the geopolitical situation and the relative lack of safety in Lebanon and the region made gathering more interviews difficult.

Conducting research on gender and sexualities in a highly unstable region provided several challenges. First, at times, it was physically unsafe to be there. Second, given “the situation,” people were less likely to respond and/or to engage with such topics, given the “more pressing” issues. Therefore, I assume and I understand that discussing such issues for many people was not always a priority. Hence, the response rate for my “call for interviews,” coupled with the sensitive nature of the topic, was not very high. Three, my research was disrupted on multiple occasions. For example, bombings made it impossible to do scheduled interviews and led to the cancellation of multiple events and meetings. It also made it challenging to schedule meetings in general.

Particularly after bombings, people understandably were less likely to go out and want to talk about gender and sexuality and their experiences of the city. Given these limitations, I supplement my formal in-depth interviews with informal discussions and interviews that I conducted. In addition, I incorporated the larger sociopolitical environment and attempted to capture and represent how “the situation” affected the everyday lives of my interlocutors and how it shapes life in Beirut in general.

For chapter six, I rely on both Helem’s and Meem’s official websites and all published information on them (including newsletters and speeches), dating from 2004 (Helem) and 2007 (Meem) to 2011. All articles I consulted were published in English. The majority, if not all, of the articles I came across have been published in English and occasionally translated to Arabic and French. There were no sources that were exclusively written in Arabic, hence my reliance on English texts. I analyze the ways in which Helem and Meem present themselves online, since that medium is most widely accessible to different and multiple publics. In addition, I supplement these sources with secondary sources such as articles written by Helem and Meem activists, blog posts by Lebanese activists and other studies on LGBTQ lives in Lebanon. Even though I focus on online publications, my analysis is informed by my fieldwork and interviews.

Appendix B

Pictures: Downtown Beirut, June 2011





Appendix C
Articles, Date of Publication and Publication

Title	Date	Published
“Beirut-Unspoiled Gay Paradise”	June, 2005	<i>Online Forum</i> (German publication)
“Beirut Unexpected”	January/Feb 2006	<i>Out Traveller</i> (US)
“Beirut, the Provincetown of the Middle East”	August, 2009	<i>NY Times</i> (US)
“Beirut’s flourishing (albeit illegal) gay scene”	September, 2009	<i>The Daily Clarity</i> (US)
“Bounce Back Beirut”	Winter Issue 2010	<i>Winq Magazine</i> (Netherlands)
“A Lebanon write up”	2010 (IGLTA symposium website)	International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA)
“Destination: Gay Beirut and beyond”	April, 2010	<i>San Diego Gay and Lesbian News</i> (SDGLN)

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