

LESBANON: THE LESBIAN EXPERIENCE IN LEBANON

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By

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## **LESBANON: THE LESBIAN EXPERIENCE IN LEBANON**

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### ABSTRACT

Very little has been written on female homosexuality in the Arab world. This paper is an ethnographic account of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon as presented through personal interviews and participant observations with twenty individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and are living in Lebanon. The project seeks to understand the experience of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon and the ways in which they navigate different state, legal, social, and cultural institutions that shape, constrain, or seek to define them. The interviews attempt to illustrate firsthand how non-heterosexual women in Lebanon are making sense of a certain set of practices traditionally seen as taboo in Lebanon. This paper is organized around certain themes that surfaced during the interviews, which include identity and discourse, geography and space, and family and society. The first chapter explores the discourse of identity as it is constructed within and against constraints of power. The second chapter examines the geography of Lebanon and the effects that this location has on differences in sexualities within the context of the Arab world. Particular spaces and places in Lebanon where non-heterosexual identities are negotiated, performed and able to exist are also looked at. And finally the third chapter explores the Arab family and society and its relevance and impact on non-heterosexual women in Lebanon.

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## **Introduction**

The initial idea for this research was personal. My father was born and raised in Lebanon and was able to leave during the height of the Civil War and resettle in America. As a first generation American deeply connected to my origins, I am acutely aware of what it means to be an American, given that I could have been born in Lebanon. Every time I return to Lebanon, a sense of uneasiness falls upon me and the way that I present myself there is different than how I live in the United States. This is because I am a lesbian. Recognizing these patterns, I was challenged to think about whether or not this modification in the way I present myself is simply because Lebanon's environment is prohibitive of differences in sexuality or because of something deeper.

At the most basic level I am cognizant of the general differences between the two countries, each the product of its own unique histories and larger socio-cultural circumstances. Yet I was driven to unravel how differently my life could have been had I been born and raised in Lebanon, and why it would have been so different. I know I would certainly not be able to have the same types of experiences that I have had and continue to have with my partner here in America. For this reason, I compiled a range of questions that I was initially interested in understanding and this later developed into my final research question. My research attempts to understand the experience of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon. I am particularly interested in perspectives and practices of identification and what they reveal about life as a non-heterosexual in Lebanon. Through ethnographic accounts I wanted to learn how these women move to negotiate the various state, legal, social, and cultural institutions that shape, constrain, or seek to define them. Because homosexuality is illegal in Lebanon, how and where are

these women able to exist as lesbians? Is there a tacit acceptance between the state and females of different sexualities or was Lebanon simply too concerned with other matters to enforce this law? How are women constructing their identities within the context of the ideal traditional Arab family and society? And finally, what will the future hold for women of non-heterosexual identities in Lebanon?

Although I interviewed twenty non-heterosexual women in Lebanon, I wanted to illustrate the plurality of experience and therefore focus on six women in particular because they reflect a range of experiences, characteristics, and circumstances.<sup>1</sup> All of the participants are in their twenties or thirties, and therefore this ethnographic work should be taken as a snapshot of a community at a particular generational point and their perspectives reflective of these age constraints. Through interviews and personal vignettes woven throughout this thesis, I illustrate how non-heterosexual women navigate their experiences in Lebanon and demonstrate how their lives and circumstances, while linked and intertwined in many ways, can produce different expectations and outcomes.

### **Rana**

Rana is an old friend that I have known since I was young. Our families are neighbors and although I was raised in America, and she in Australia and Dubai, our extended families have remained in Lebanon. Her father is a businessman who works between Lebanon and Australia and is the only other member in her family to have gone to college. Her mother married her father after graduating from high school and instead of going to university she began having kids. Rana admits that her parents were probably not pleased to have their first child a female, however she is the first-born and older sister to two younger brothers. After graduating from high school, she moved back to Lebanon

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in place of names.

to study at the American University of Beirut. Once she completed her undergraduate studies she went on to get a Master's in sports management in England. She has since returned to Lebanon to work in the field of women's sports in Lebanon. As children, Rana and I typically spent our summers visiting our families in Lebanon, and as we both grew older there developed a tacit understanding of our mutual interest in women. At first we would both disclose to one another our anxiety at our family's incessant attempts to find us husbands to marry. One day that conversation turned to girlfriends and we have been confiding in one another since. Rana was the first person I reached out to when I decided to interview non-heterosexual women for my thesis. She is well known in Beirut and her job has made her a semi-public figure. Her work with certain athletes has brought her publicity from the media, but in order to preserve her anonymity I have chosen to omit what particular sport she works in.

Rana has always lived a very fast and hard life. From an early age she has loved motorcycles and just recently she saved enough money to purchase her own bike. She rides it around town but hides it from her family in the garage of their building because she knows they would not approve of a woman riding a motorcycle. Her parents moved back to Lebanon from Australia around the same time that she returned to go to AUB and she lives in an apartment with her mother and father. Rana has dated several women but has only been in two serious relationships. She is currently dating Leila, who she met by coincidence at a mutual friend's dinner party. Rana was my main contact for reaching interview subjects in Lebanon and she showed up to my first interview wearing a black leather jacket and a full-face motorcycle helmet with tinted glass. She is semi-famous after all.

## **Leila**

I have known about Rana's girlfriend Leila for quite some time. Originally born and raised in Saudi Arabia, she is in Lebanon to get her Master's degree in education at the American University of Beirut. Before this, Leila was in London studying linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, (SOAS). Her father unexpectedly passed away after she graduated from SOAS, right before she came to AUB. Her father was a very successful Saudi businessman and she is living alone in his beautiful penthouse apartment that overlooks Beirut's corniche. Leila has been dating Rana for 6 months but is still in touch with her ex-girlfriend. The day we met for our interview, it was her ex-girlfriend's birthday. They were texting back and forth throughout my interview and even though we have just met, Leila is quick to open up. She immediately turns the questioning to me, "Do you think it's possible to love two people?" I tell her I'm no expert on love, but assure her that love is quite complicated and I do believe that one is able to forge complex relationships that may seem like love but are hard to determine in the moment. Leila really wants to have a family and children with another woman but stresses the impossibility of that dream because of her "passport." She is referring to her Saudi citizenship and to the fact that since her father has passed away, her brothers are now her legal guardians. She informs me that they are pretty conservative and believe that they have the right to determine her future. To Leila the only thing standing between her and true happiness is her passport.

## **Nour**

Nour was born in Abu Dhabi but moved back to Lebanon with her family when she was in middle school. Her father works as an engineer in Abu Dhabi and spends the

majority of his time away from his family. Nour lives with her sisters and mother in a small apartment on the outskirts of Beirut. She completed high school a few years ago and told me that she did not want to attend university because she hates school. Instead, Nour prefers sports and like Rana, she works in the field of athletics.

Nour is perhaps the most masculine looking woman that I interviewed in Lebanon. She is the goalie on an all-women's soccer team and we met during one of the team's practices. Every time I saw her she was wearing the same baseball cap and nearly identical athletic clothes. When we were together in public places in Beirut, people would often stare at her and on one occasion a group of young kids came up to her and asked her if she was a boy or a girl. Her face immediately turned red and it was quite obvious that she was very uncomfortable. She told me that this is becoming a regular occurrence and didn't understand how the kids could not tell that she was a girl.

### **Dima**

Dima is a psychology student at AUB who was originally born in Dubai but moved to Lebanon for university. She comes from what she describes as a very traditional and conservative family and told me that her years in Lebanon away from her family were among the freest she has ever experienced. In fact, she says that her self-discovery happened at university when she was able to escape her family and the suffocating atmosphere they have created for her in Dubai. When we first met she told me that because she is a psychology student she is particularly fascinated by and almost obsessed with the psychology behind homosexuality. She told me that if she continues to study psychology, this topic would be what she wants to study. She is graduating a month

after we talk and says that she will reluctantly have to return to Dubai where her parents live. She will look for work there or perhaps apply for more schooling.

### **Hala**

Hala is the only woman that I interviewed who was raised in the United States. She grew up with her parents in California and has adopted a very laid back West Coast outlook on life. She told me that the reason she moved to Lebanon, the birthplace of both of her parents, is because California had nothing left to offer her. On a trip to visit her grandparents in Lebanon she came for a visit and never returned to America. Hala told me that it took her a while to acclimate to life in Lebanon but she said that she is slowly getting her life in order. She works as a bartender in a popular pub in downtown Beirut and is also taking classes part-time to complete her undergraduate degree.

Hala is the only person I interviewed who has not been with a man in any sense. According to her, she has “never so much as seen a man naked.” She coincidentally is also the only person that is completely “out” to her family. Hala is also by far the most eccentric character that I interviewed. She is irreverent and crude and makes no effort to hide it. She tells me that she's slept with many women and rumors are that she has a tattoo on her back marking each and every person that she has slept with. The other girls that I interview have told me about Hala. They have either slept with her or made a huge effort not to be one of her “numbers.” In her interview with me she mentions, almost bragging at times, her sexual experiences, and the numbers that she keeps. She says that it does not count as sex unless there is penetration on both ends.<sup>2</sup> Her quest for infinite partners was originally a bet between her and her best friend. They wanted to see who could sleep with the most people. Her best friend is back in California and they both

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<sup>2</sup> Hala said “penetration on both ends” to mean that both partners were penetrated.

came out at age of thirteen. At first, during the early stages of the bet, they just started counting. As the game evolved the stakes were upped and they both agreed that whoever gets to 200 first wins. When I met her she was at 358.

### **Danya**

When I met Danya the first question out of her mouth was about my astrological sign, and I promptly informed her that in fact, I was a Sagittarius. I was excited for her to tell me my fortune, but instead her only response was to ask me if I am good in bed. I blushed and was unable to answer her question. She could tell that I was searching for a way to avoid having this talk and instead told me that she would rather just find out for herself. This is within one minute of knowing her. In her mid-thirties, Danya is the oldest woman that I interviewed. She has worked in public relations for almost ten years and has mastered the art of communication. She is loquacious and a highly skilled orator and does not miss an opportunity to explain the meaning and origin of words. She is by far the only woman who is most familiar with deeper concepts and theories regarding sexuality and even introduces me to certain terms that I had never heard of. She performs slam poetry almost once a week and by the end of our time together she recited a poem she says that she wrote just for me.

Many of the women that I interviewed told me of a woman who was in Lebanon the previous summer to do similar research. The young scholar was filming a documentary on lesbians in Lebanon and many of the same women that I interviewed were not happy with having their stories filmed. Their experiences in the filming of this documentary had made many of the women that I encountered apprehensive to participate in my interviews, and I acknowledged the tensions that come with overly

intellectualizing these women's subjective experiences. With that, the reader must keep in mind that this study and these interviews in no way reflect completely the lesbian experience in Lebanon. This captures a particular cross-section of people at a particular time that I am almost certain has changed in so many different ways. I am sure that if I went back and asked the same women the same questions they would have very different answers than they did at the time of my research.

This thesis is organized around the themes of identity and discourse, space and geography, and family and society and their contextualization within the framework of agency and navigation. I use the term agency as defined by Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety*, to mean human action that is not absolute, but rather constrained by history, circumstances, language and context.<sup>3</sup> These various factors are considered when examining the agency capacity of the women that I interviewed in Lebanon. The first chapter explores the discourse of identity as it is constructed within and against constraints of power. These women's identities are always in formation and are examined within the larger framework of the institutional and discursive fields of power which shape them. The second chapter examines the geography of Lebanon and the effects that this location has on differences in sexualities within the context of the larger Arab world. I also explore particular spaces and places within Lebanon where non-heterosexual identities are negotiated, performed, and able to exist. And finally, in the third chapter I look at the Arab family and society and its relevance and impact on non-heterosexual women in Lebanon. Through their own words, I illustrate how the women that I

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<sup>3</sup> Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, (2005), 14.

interviewed are active agents in producing their own subjectivities, while at the same time pointing to all of the ways that they are limited by their context.

### **Methodology**

This ethnographic project is the result of months of preparation, inquiry, and scholarship on the situation of women with alternative sexualities in Lebanon. It is a qualitative study based on individual interviews, participant observation, and secondary source analysis. Based on personal contacts through family, friends, and time spent in Lebanon over the years, I conducted the interviews from “snowball sampling” with women of alternative sexualities in Lebanon. Through my contacts and personal friends, I reached out to women who expressed interest in discussing their life experiences as a non-heterosexual woman living in Lebanon. The makeup of the group of women that I interviewed was based solely on the willingness of participants to meet with me and reflects a diverse religious, socio-economic, and political stratum of Lebanese society.

As detailed in the approved IRB protocol and consent form, interviews were confidential, audio recorded and participants informed of that prior to their participation. Every interview was conducted in a setting chosen at the request and comfort of the participants to further protect their anonymity. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, however, because I speak the Lebanese dialect of Arabic, I did not stop participants who chose to use certain expressions in Arabic. I decided to carry out the interviews in English because in casual conversations with women in Lebanon, I have found that most Lebanese are more comfortable talking about sexuality in English. Oftentimes, they realize that they don't know a lot of sexual words or terms in Arabic, and instead have a larger vocabulary for technical as well as colloquial sexual

expressions in English.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study using the language of the consent forms and were not required to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with. It was made clear to all participants that their participation was voluntary and would not result in any negative consequence if they chose not to participate. I informed all of my interview subjects that certain identifying characteristics - such as names - would be changed for the study. Every participant was informed per the consent form that they were allowed to terminate the interview at any point, although no one requested to do so.

There are many methodological difficulties in conducting research on lesbians in Lebanon and some of these problems should be presented and identified so that the reader can determine the strengths and weaknesses of the data being presented. Homosexuality is technically illegal in Lebanon, although the legal provisions against it are rarely enforced. For this reason, it perhaps limited the participation to those women who trusted that their involvement in my research would not be self-incriminating, or lead to their arrest. Several women did decline to sit down and formally interview with me, however none of the women that I spoke with refused to talk to me regarding the subject of their sexualities.

Over a period of several months I conducted twenty individual interviews with women currently living throughout various parts of Lebanon and who identify as having a sexuality that is non-heterosexual. A large majority of participants were Lebanese, however, Lebanese nationality was not required to participate in the interview. I was interested in talking to non-heterosexual women living in Lebanon regardless of

background, and therefore I did not limit my sample pool to Lebanese women exclusively. While all of the women that I interviewed were not necessarily Lebanese, they were in fact, all from the Arab world or of Arab descent. All of the interviews were confidential and the names used in the study are fictional and were chosen at random. The conversations in the interviews were unique, each taking a different trajectory, however I tried to stick to a set of interview questions I compiled for this study. The questions ranged from basic information regarding the participants' background, to their own concepts regarding their sexuality and identity and finally to broader comparisons of conceptions of sexuality in the West and the Arab world.

This study is an ethnographic account of the lesbian experience in Lebanon as understood through individual interviews and observations. The observations throughout my time in Lebanon were by no means formal, and oftentimes led me to informal conversations and introductions to other women in the community. It was important to me as a researcher to spend time observing and even participating in routine happenings with the women that I interviewed. The time that I spent allowed me more observations and fostered a level of trust, credibility, and assurance between my participants and myself.

It is important to keep in mind that even the most unstructured and organic conversations and interviews are guided on some level by the setting, questions, and preconceived notions of what the researcher is expecting, or what the participant wishes to convey or withhold to the researcher. As a ½ Lebanese lesbian, myself fluent in Lebanese colloquial Arabic and well versed in queer and lesbian culture, I began this study with a certain level of access that is not necessarily attainable to others. In fact, I

believe that I was successful in this study because of my own positionality, and many of the participants told me that they felt very comfortable talking to “someone like us.”<sup>4</sup>

While my “insider” status allowed me unique access and understanding of the issues, my positionality undoubtedly shaped the questions that I asked and the assumptions that I brought into the research as well.

My participant observations in this study took place over months and throughout trips and visits across the country. I spent countless nights out in spaces and places where homosexuality was tolerated and considered safe. I followed a women’s soccer team through practices, games, and outings to understand the dynamics of an all-women’s sports team with various sexualities. I was interested in their interactions and how they expressed their sexualities amongst one another. For the final product of this study, I decided to change specific identifying facts and details about where my observations took place, however the characteristics and the significance of the observations remain.

Looking back on the research that I have done and the methods I have used, I am surprised that the various methods that I chose to use for this study yielded very different responses and types of information even though they were centered around the same topic. I used the same interview guide for each of the subjects and was surprised at how differently each of the interviewees responded to the same set of questions. Each participant interpreted the same question in an entirely different way, adding additional layers of thought and analysis to already complex and sometimes abstract questions. The first interview that I did looked nothing like the last, and no two answers were the same. I was touched by the overwhelming sense of honesty and humanity that my participants

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Hala, June 2012.

exhibited as talking about one's own sexuality can be an extremely personal and courageous endeavor.

The individual interviews as well as my observations, participant or otherwise, were supplemented by a limited number of secondary sources from authors who have done research on sexuality and homosexuality in the Arab world. In addition to these sources, I summarize Michel Foucault's historical background on the evolution of sexuality and sexual identity as a concept that many in the West and the Arab world have come to understand.

All of these sources and themes presented from the interviews are a matter of narratives envisaged through the concept of navigation, which drives my initial research question. This study attempts to understand the experience of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon and the ways in which they navigate different state, legal, and cultural institutions that shape, constrain, or seek to define them.

### **Theory**

Sexuality is not only a subject that is difficult to talk about; it is also difficult to write about. Very little has been written regarding sexual minorities or differences in sexuality in the Arab world. Queer theory and gender studies in the United States are relatively new disciplines, and have focused primarily on domestic trends and themes, which have not been fully integrated into other area studies. However, the relative paucity of information suggests that the field is underdeveloped and necessitates more exploration. This section will take an interdisciplinary approach to understanding both the Arab world, and the queer world, when examining the status of sexuality in Lebanon. I use the term alternative sexualities throughout my research to denote types of sexual

orientations that are non-heterosexual, because I find that it is less specific and more inclusive of the differences that exist.

The dominant discourse throughout the available literature surrounding sexual minorities in the Middle East is primarily concerned with the existence, or not, of sexual differentness in this part of the world. The crux of the scholarly debate hinges on the idea that there is a marked difference between a sexual act and a sexual identity, and one does not presuppose the existence of the other. Most scholars writing about the condition of sexuality in the Arab world use this distinction as a foundational tool of analysis to survey how sexual patterns have changed over time and can be understood within existing societies. Two of these scholars are Michel Foucault and Joseph Massad, the primary thinkers I considered when I began to think about sexual differentness in Lebanon. Reading Foucault and Massad, it is evident that there are various ways to interpret sexual ontology. Therefore, one of the central tasks within this topic of study is to be cognizant of human agency and the potential for avenues of expression and change. The interviews I present here demonstrate the agency of the non-heterosexual women in Lebanon while at the same time revealing their limits and constraints. I will be engaging with both of the scholars' theories on sexuality and society and responding to their models of analysis through my research.

### **Michel Foucault**

To fully understand the history behind the unfolding of some of these ideas concerning sexuality in the Arab world, it is necessary to return to the basic concepts of the analysis of sexuality. The French philosopher Michel Foucault was perhaps the most significant contemporary author on the history of human sexuality and has been widely

influential in academic spheres across the world. Foucault's three-volume series, *The History of Sexuality*, traces the interplay of knowledge, power, discourse and sexuality throughout modern history. Foucault contends that homosexuality is a category and like sexuality in general must be understood as constructed out of certain knowledge and experience with cultural, social and historical origins. Foucault finds that the category of the homosexual is the product of specific conditions of the 1870s western world, and is less concerned with the biological truths behind sexuality, but rather how it is produced, reproduced and functions in society.<sup>5</sup>

In *Volume 1: The Will To Knowledge*, Foucault traces the discourses that have shaped sexuality and allowed it over time to move from a set of identifiable acts or encounters, to a constructed category of experience and component of identity. For Foucault, sexual activity came to define a particular type of person, and subsequently, people were increasingly defining themselves around their sexuality and their differences from what had become the "normal" sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Foucault believes that homosexuality must be viewed as a *constructed* category of knowledge rather than a *discovered* identity. In contrast to earlier periods in history where homosexual *acts* were identified, this new 19th Century species was framed as a determined condition of the individual. At this particular juncture, he contends that there was a momentous proliferation of discourses about sexuality and that institutions and discourses played a crucial role in the formation of sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Foucault's analysis provides us with a useful instrument of research as well

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, (1990): 68-69.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990, 33.

as a better understanding of how people were actually beginning to perceive of themselves and their sexual behavior during a specific time period.

One of the challenges posed by Middle East sexuality studies is the supposition that Western discourses of concepts can be understood or taken as universal. Foucault is a 20th century philosopher whose writing is primarily concerned with 18th and 19th century Europe and the West. Throughout *The History of Sexuality* he constantly reminds his readers that he is deconstructing sexuality “in a society such as ours”<sup>8</sup> and is then able to explore truth, knowledge and sexuality through his own categories of societies. He lumps China, Japan, India, Rome, and the “Arabo-Moslem societies” together when referring to the way that they approach and have knowledge of sexuality. It is problematic for Foucault to lump such vast countries together as one distinct category of civilization, as it oversimplifies the east versus west binary. According to Foucault, these societies are known for having an *ars erotica* (Erotic Art), whereas western civilizations understand sexuality through *scientia sexualis* (Science of Sexuality).<sup>9</sup> By taking into consideration these concepts of sexuality as examined within the Western context, we can nuance Foucault’s idea of a socially constructed sexuality as an equally exportable analytical model throughout the world.

### **Joseph Massad**

In his book *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad – a Jordanian born Palestinian who studied and now teaches at a Western university – is hostile towards the incitement to discourse on sexual desire in the Arab world. Massad’s work differs from that of Michel Foucault in that it is as he puts it “decidedly *not* a history of ‘Arab sexuality,’ but an

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

intellectual history of the representation of the sexual desires of Arabs in and about the Arab world and how it came to be linked to civilizational worth.”<sup>10</sup> Massad acknowledges the dearth of scholarship on sexuality in the Arab world, and in his introduction indicates his production of a modern collection of Arab writings about sexuality. A protégé of the late Edward Said, he is skeptical of the “Orientalist impulse”<sup>11</sup> that he believes systematically shapes and constructs the way the Arab people think about and perceive sexuality. Massad warns against accepting the Orientalist taxonomies and infatuations with Arab culture and society, as he believes this has the potential towards creating a system of hierarchical classification. He is concerned with individuals in the Arab world accepting and internalizing Western ideas as normal ways of being, and warns that if adopted, the potential to perpetuate this system of thinking is even greater.

In today’s post-colonial reality, Massad argues for the rejection of the Western ways of thinking that have been imposed on and subsequently adopted by Arab citizens, because Orientalist discourses have the capacity to stifle, contain and repress other organic and potentially different ways of expression. His assumption here is that members of societies other than the West will benefit from rejecting the unfamiliar (read: West), however he fails to consider the isolating potential surrounding this choice within a globally linked and connected world. He is also wary of the West importing a discourse surrounding sexual practices that have the potential to generate a bifurcated view of either “civilized” or “uncivilized” and nothing in between.<sup>12</sup>

Massad is credited with coining the term “Gay International” which he uses to describe the “missionary tasks” or the “Western male white-dominated

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<sup>10</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, (2007), 49.

<sup>11</sup> The term is used often and throughout Massad’s book.

<sup>12</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, (2007), 195.

organizations...that sprang up to defend the rights of ‘gays and lesbians’ all over the world and to advocate on their behalf.”<sup>13</sup> He sees an emerging push towards the universalization of sexual rights as a negative imperialist agenda transpiring around the world. He believes that universal rights granted on the basis of sexuality are harmful in that they not only identify, but also categorize and label people according to their sexual preferences and thereby open up the potential for them to later be discriminated against legally and within society or marginalized because of these newly created labels.

However, I argue he oversimplifies the nature of the LGBTQ rights movements and his argument must be anchored and considered in the time when it was produced. While I do not argue against the existence of the Gay International, I do find it problematic that he equates the entire Gay International with the West. This direct equation overlooks other potential outside influences and only reifies the traditional dichotomy between the East and the West. Massad’s term, the Gay International, was initially proposed in his 2002 article “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,” and therefore it is important to keep in mind that his argument is embracing a perception that is more than a decade old. Around the world, laws and institutions regarding sexuality have changed since Massad wrote and published both his article and book *Desiring Arabs*.

Additionally, although there exists a common practice among Western homosexual advocacy organizations to encourage identification as a means of empowering the individual, this does not indicate that there is an organized and comprehensive liberatory Western movement that is united and working towards a common goal. This assumption can perhaps also be considered one of the perils of equating the Gay International with just the West. Thus Massad’s position overlooks the potential for opposing views and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 161.

fissures throughout campaigns. It is also important to remember that for every progressive Western organization, there exists an equally conservative group that seeks to resist the goals of what Massad calls the “Gay International.”

One of Massad’s most provocative assertions is his idea that the Gay International produces an identity-based idea of homosexuals in the Arab world, through the application of the traditional “hetero/homo” binary, meaning that to be homosexual is to be a form of identity and not just a sexual preference. This bold assertion is a primary concern of this paper. During the course of my research I encountered many self-identifying non-heterosexuals in Lebanon indicating that the discursive binary of the Gay International has been embraced by many of the women that I interviewed. This demonstrates that Massad has in fact described the discursive and real power for a certain group of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon about the terms and ways in which they self-identify, but for whom the origin of these ideas (in the West, for example) is not important. This also reveals that like other institutions such as laws, society and government, the Gay International plays a role in discursively shaping identifications for a group of individuals. In this sense, Massad sees the power of the Gay International to be like the disciplinary power of states and institutions in that they are working to define and label people and practices.

It is important to keep in mind however, that for this particular group of women, his argument regarding the Gay International may feel outdated because many of them already think of themselves within this homo/hetero identification framing. As of 2012, when my interviews were conducted, the language of the Gay International was setting the terms globally and has become the dominant paradigm through which a particular

group of people is identifying. While Massad believes that the force of the Gay International is working to label people, for those women I interviewed having a known construct in which they can self-identify helped negotiate their tenuous position within society. When investigating Western colonialist trends and their impact on the contemporary Arab world, Massad concludes, “It is the very discourse of the Gay International, which both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, *where they do not exist*, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Massad argues that the Gay International produces sexual minorities where they otherwise would not self-identify as such. However, his statement is misleading and as my research indicates it would be more accurate to argue that homosexuality as both a practice and a strict identification does not exist in the Middle East as we in the West have come to understand it to exist.

In building this argument, Massad engages with and goes beyond Foucault’s ideas behind the construction of sexuality as a complex product of diverse social, historical, and cultural factors. He implies that gay and lesbian life has long managed to exist in the Arab world without the need to be the “other.” But, for people who are reading his book, there is the potential to interpret his argument as declaring there are absolutely no homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender individuals in the Middle East, because that way of life (and related identities as such) does not exist outside of the West. Just as much, there is the danger of believing that Arabs who engage in homosexual acts do not want or desire that identification, and they do not sense the same impulse of homosexuals in the West or heterosexuals everywhere to engage in romantic relations free of shame and secrecy, and sometimes even to achieve equality under the law which

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<sup>14</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, (2007): 162-163.

inherently necessitates that people identify. Massad's focus on the Western imposition of a binary construct of homosexual or heterosexual is a legitimate concern and he indicates that this binary destroys the fluidity of identities. However one of the currents within this fluidity may be the "hetero/homo" binary of the Gay International and in denying that this has become the dominant option he overlooks other possibilities. This is in part because he fails to acknowledge how the world has changed when he critiques the existence of modern institutions which he believes work in ways that discursively label and categorize us. By structuring his argument in this manner, and further failing to follow-up or clarify his statement for his primarily Western audience, he leaves ambiguities susceptible to interpretation and misconception. This ethnographic account of lesbians in Lebanon addresses the potential ambiguities by demonstrating the agency of individuals to claim the fluidity of their sexuality through first-hand accounts.

If we are to take the argument that the Gay International produces, labels, or is a formal indicator that a group of people in a certain location all share a sexual differentness, then it is useful to think of the implications of this category. As previously mentioned, the controversy surrounding the argument of the Gay International hinges on the supposed production of a group of people, which can then be used as a method by which to discriminate against them. Massad views the Gay International's imposition as ultimately eliciting less than hopeful outcomes and reconstructing them from practitioners of same-sex acts to individuals who embrace a particular identity, an identity which can then be used as a form of persecution and harassment. While this line of thinking may be true in some instances, such as the 2001 arrest of purported

homosexual men on the Nile Queen Boat in Egypt,<sup>15</sup> it is necessary to be cognizant of Massad's overgeneralizations when describing the wants and needs of a contingency of people. His explanation for the emergence and goals of the Gay International fails to consider the individuals who openly embrace the universal categories used to denote sexual minorities. He considers the category of a Western defined non-heterosexual identity more problematic than the non-heterosexual act itself. Thus Massad's greatest weakness is his propensity to speak for others. His assumption that the people in the Arab world do not wish to be recognized or represented by their sexual identity is a baseless and unsubstantiated claim, which has the potential to silence an entire group of people.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I decided to begin my study. While conducting research in and visiting Lebanon, I have come to know many individuals who through their own free will have established their whole worlds around their sexual identities, be it heterosexual or not. It is important to at least offer a platform from which these individuals can speak to both Foucault's assertion of a sexuality as a constructed category, and Massad's Gay International. Through my research I have found that there is not a fixed way in which individuals in Lebanon identify as non-heterosexual. Additionally, homosexuality is not necessarily a western imposed hegemonic category, nor is it always a liberating category for people who wish to remain inconspicuous, and negotiate their sexuality on their own cultural terms. This ethnographic study demonstrates the fluidity that exists between both of these interpretations of sexuality.

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<sup>15</sup> BBC News, "Anger over Egypt Gay Trial." *BBC News* – Home. 15 Aug 2001. Web. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/1493041.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1493041.stm)>

## **Chapter 1: Discourse and Identity**

### **Introduction**

The interviews that I undertook with non-heterosexual women in Lebanon afforded me the opportunity to observe the interrelationship between discourse and identity, since identities are products of discourses. In their article “Beyond ‘Identity,’” Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper suggest we rethink the way identity is used as an analytical category. They argue that identity “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).”<sup>16</sup> To understand identity in a more complete sense (both strong and weak) they propose three alternative “clusters of terms.” The first is identification and categorization, the second self-understanding and social location, and the third, commonality, connectedness, and groupness.<sup>17</sup> I use the ideas included in the three terms proposed by Brubaker and Cooper to guide the analysis of my research.

My first interview with Danya demonstrates the necessity of rethinking identity discourses to encompass a more inclusive set of terms or definitions. She indicates how important it is to have a basis from which to draw certain meaning and understanding about her sexual identity, but she is hesitant to establish concrete and ubiquitous definitions. While her response echoes many similarities to Massad’s argument for fluidity, he does not allow the so-called Western concepts to be part of the fluidity that Danya refers to:

*What words would you use to describe your sexuality? Fluid. What does that mean to you? It means I regard sexuality as - I don’t know- I was never really good at biology but there was osmosis and it’s like that. It flows through, it’s energy, and it’s fluid. Sexuality in itself is also fluid. I can move around comfortably anywhere, between the sexes. So*

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<sup>16</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond "identity"" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

*you would say fluid over bisexual?* I would say that I have a problem with defining everything because I think when you define something, that's it, you've limited it and I just believe things are much greater than they seem, even the little details. So when you define something...it's cut. Now I know we need some kind of definitions, we need defining characters in our lives, but I think what people fail to realize is how much you can move within what you've been labeled.

It is clear that Danya recognizes the concept of identity as a constant process where different qualities are negotiated and massaged as they change throughout one's life. She is aware of the amorphous character within us all noting, "We don't reduce ourselves to one thing and oftentimes we use our identities in different ways at different times."<sup>18</sup>

Danya's comment is a key example of how discourse relates to identity as a fluid process. For Foucault, discourses are bound up with specific knowledges. These discourses exist within and support institutions and social groups as integral units in the construction of categories. In examining the varied responses to several of my interview questions, I analyze the role that the discourses of the subjects play in the formation and creation of sexual identities. I found that certain discourses contribute to the maintenance of specific power relations in Arab and Lebanese society. Through Foucauldian discourse analysis, I explore how self-identifying discourse and language is used as a form of both submission to and resistance of power, depending on the participants and audience. The next section illustrates how these women are constantly navigating discourse among each other, between themselves and society, and amongst their families. In turn, the discourse is shaping who they are and how they relate their identities to their particular practices.

### **Foucault and Discourse Analysis**

In the Foucauldian sense of the word, discourse does not necessarily mean dialogue or speaking; rather it is a historically and geographically (Western) situated

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Danya. June, 2012.

concept that produces and reproduces power relations. Power is diffuse and discourses exist within and are tied to specific knowledge. Power circulates in particular through the production of specific knowledge about sex and sexualities.<sup>19</sup> Foucault believes that, like sexuality in general, homosexuality must be viewed as a *constructed* category of knowledge rather than as an innate biological *discovered* identity. In talking with Danya about whether she thinks homosexuality is genetic or a choice that individuals have over their lives, she indicates her take on the constructed discourse:

*Do you think homosexuality is a choice or do you think people are born gay? Well here we go back to my definition of sexuality. I really think it is fluid. I think all people in essence if you took away all of these definitions would ok be lost for a little second, but then you would have to make up your own. The ones that I made were - I'm attracted to, I like love, I like people. So be it man or woman, gender doesn't matter. So is it a choice you make? Yeah I think it's a choice you make to disregard what everyone else has said. If you want to put some kind of definition to it, I think people by nature are "bi." They are attracted to both men and women and I think that if they had never had the idea of being straight or being gay I think everyone would be bisexual. It is a social construct.*

For Foucault, the construction of sexuality varied at different historical moments. This newly established category of homosexual identity came into being in the late 19th Century and has been constructed almost as a different type of species. Historically, homosexual *acts* were identified, whereas this new contemporary species was viewed as a determined *condition* of the individual. Early science and doctors (and even some to this day) tried to cure this condition.<sup>20</sup> Several of the women that I interviewed were sent to medical as well as psychological doctors in order to eliminate their sexual differentness and end their "silly attraction to women."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Lack of Discourse (Silence) on Matters Regarding Sexuality**

Because alternative sexualities are rarely if ever discussed in Lebanon, there is a

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, (1990), 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Leila. May, 2012.

silence, or an absence of discourse on different sexualities. The silence helps to maintain the status quo in the country and fails to challenge the prevailing hetero-normative narrative. It also creates uncertainties and inconsistencies that affected the way my interview participants discuss their sexual identities with others. I found that the women I interviewed have chosen not to bring up the issue of sexual identity with their parents because they do not have the vocabulary to do so, and also because it would violate the unspoken understanding within families regarding acceptable and unacceptable topics of discussion. Most women indicated that they were not allowed to talk about their sexuality because it was inappropriate of them to do so and also made their parents and other family members uncomfortable.

Foucault's discourse analysis helps elucidate why the women I interviewed remained silent on matters regarding their sexuality and instead chose to continue the existing hetero-normative discourse. Because discourse—and its absence—are both tied to power, what these women were choosing not to say to their families indicates the various power relations at play.<sup>22</sup> The parents' unwillingness to even allow the mention of non-heterosexual subjects, and their decision to remain ignorant of their children's process of identity construction demonstrates the dominance they continue to have over their children and their expected obedience from their children. This is further indication of the power of society, the state, and the dominant culture over Lebanese subjects. These forces all have power to control and shape and perpetuate the dominant hetero-normative discourse.

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, (1990), 27.

Many of the women I spoke with consider silence on the matter of their sexuality as a something that is forced upon them. They believe that the intransigent nature of their family and society brings them to an impasse. After learning of Leila's strict upbringing in Saudi Arabia and the controlling male figures in her family I still decided to ask her why she has yet to tell her family that she is sexually attracted to women:

They make us keep it from them. In refusing to accept other ways of life and sexuality, they force us to not talk about it, or to lie to them and sneak around.

Leila's girlfriend Rana tells me that her mother has suspected she is attracted to girls but hopes that it is just an experimental phase that she will soon grow out of. Her father on the other hand has yet to broach the subject with her. Regardless, it is clear that Rana is deeply affected by the power dynamic:

*Have your parents ever suspected? Yeah. That's when she (her mother) broke down. Literally. Did you deny it? Umm well I went to a therapist with her and we talked and I told him my situation. I told him everything. My mom was outside the room at this point and he understood everything. He talked to her alone and I really don't know what the conversation was but after that she was more stable. I'm not talking about one session. This is several sessions. I don't really know but I think, well what I'm guessing is that he told her that it is something normal for a woman at an adolescent age to experiment. But I'm not sure because this is me guessing. Because all my mom did was tell me at one point it's okay, you're confused. And in my head I'm like 'no I am not' but I'm not going to tell her 'no I'm not confused.' I was worried she might have a heart attack. Does your dad suspect? No he doesn't. I don't know. We've just never talked about it... Are you going to tell your mom eventually? I don't know, I think about it all the time. I don't know if one day I just might tell her. I would have to put her under a lot of sedatives, that's for sure.*

Nour revealed that her mother actively silences her when she tells her that she is not interested in a future with men:

*Does your family know that you like women? My sister, her husband, the brother of her husband, my brother's wife, I think my mom, but in denial. I think my parents know but they're in denial. So you've never really told them? No not my mom or my dad, but my sister and my cousins. Why don't you tell your parents? Sometimes I try. Every time my mom comes and tries to talk to me about guys I'm like "listen mom I don't like guys. I won't get married. I won't date a guy." And she's like "What? Are you going to date a woman?" And I'm like "yes" and she's like "stop talking." Do you think your parents*

*will be ok with them knowing?* I don't know. I think if they don't want to know, then they're just in denial.

These examples of the obdurate posturing of parents towards their children's' sexuality indicates just one of the many challenges these women have when navigating their roles with their families. To be sure it was the inflexible nature of the parents, and not their own reservations I asked women if they are comfortable talking about their own sexuality and, if so, with whom and where. Every single person answered that they are comfortable talking about it, but only with their very close friends or close relatives. No one indicated that they are comfortable discussing it with their parents. Therefore, they are permitted to speak about their own sexuality laterally, with friends and family members who hold no power or authority over them. Hierarchically speaking, in the Foucauldian sense this indicates that power and authority is less pronounced between the women and their friends or close relatives than it is between the women and their parents. It is important to note that in Lebanon women are typically beholden to their parents until the age at which they get married and move out of the family's house. Therefore, it is quite normal that many of the women that I interviewed are deferential to their parents in some senses, however this in turn raises many other issues that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Discourse of the Academic Literature**

One of the questions that I asked the women I interviewed was if and what they had read about sexuality. I not only wanted some measurement to gauge the level of their understanding before beginning my interviews, but also wanted to see how relevant academic writing was in their lives. None of the participants had heard of Foucault or Massad or read about sexuality in the academic sense. Of course, it is important to note that the academic literature and theories regarding sexuality are not easy reads. The type

and level of language that theorist like Foucault and Massad use is very high and difficult for readers to understand, even after several reads.

Central to his argument against the Gay International, Massad criticizes the available academic literature on Arab desires. He argues that the Gay International only produces two kinds of literature on the region, “academic literature produced mostly by white male European or American gay scholars ‘describing’ and ‘explaining’ what they call ‘homosexuality’ in Arab and Muslim history to the present; and journalistic accounts of the lives of so-called ‘gays’ and (much less so) ‘lesbians’ in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds.”<sup>23</sup> He believes that both of these types of literature that have been produced around the topic work either to inform white male gay sex tourists about the region or help to inform readers and potential advocates about how and what to “liberate” in the Arab world. He is sure that both of the discourses further the imperialist aims of the Gay International and in turn work to create certain truths about the region. Massad leaves no room for other types of academic scholarship, such as the types of literature that he himself produces.

It is worth noting that both of these types of literature are not readily available or easily accessible within the Arab world. This only reinforces the exercise of knowledge (power) over a group and the fact that none of the women I interviewed have encountered Massad or Foucault suggests exactly this. It is also important to note how the “foreignness” of the English language and the Westernization of the way that people think and talk about non-heterosexuality is not just a tool of domination as Massad suggests. My research demonstrates how the women I interviewed use it to empower

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<sup>23</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007. Print. pg. 162.

themselves and articulate their identities within the Lebanese system. The following section on Meem and Helem reveal how these organizations are tangible examples of how women members empower themselves using tools that Massad sees solely as a means of domination.

### **Discourse of the Organizations Helem and Meem**

While silence prevails in families, some civil society organizations both offer the non-heterosexual a public voice, and work to counter the silence in families. A first-of-its-kind for the Arab world, Helem, (*himāya lubnāniya lil-mithliyīn*) which means “dream” in Arabic, is a non-profit advocacy organization that over the years has become the seminal advocacy group for the Arab LGBTIQ population in Lebanon. Helem's mere existence and the strides the organization has made to strengthen and improve the lives of the LGBTIQ community in Lebanon is a significant development in the culture and society of the Arab world today. On the organization's webpage, there is a section specifically addressing the legality of the organization in a country such as Lebanon, where homosexuality is illegal. The group indicates that it applied for the proper registration as a non-profit in 2004 with the Lebanese Ministry of the Interior, however the Ministry has yet to issue a receipt of registration. Helem's coordinators take the nine years of operation without official registration as tacit approval of the group's existence by the Lebanese government.<sup>24</sup> Helem is also jointly registered in Quebec, Canada as a precaution in case the Lebanese authorities decide to shut down the group.<sup>25</sup> Helem has established itself as an integral institution that opens its doors to everyone by providing an easily accessible and centralized community center in downtown Beirut. The center,

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<sup>24</sup> Anonymous interview with former Helem member.

<sup>25</sup> "Lebanese Group Tackles Biggest Taboo - Archive - Al Jazeera English." *Al Jazeera English*. Web.

which is free of charge, not only offers refuge to those who seek support from like-minded individuals, but also provides counseling services, a twenty-four hour helpline, and an extensive library and resource center.

The organization is also actively engaged in outreach to the straight community and has partnered with Lebanon's Ministry of Health to create health awareness programs offering free and anonymous HIV testing and up-to-date literature. Helem publishes books, pamphlets, reports and case studies that offer information regarding sexuality and sexual health. The literature provided by Helem debunks common myths and misconceptions about homosexuality and also provides facts to help explain unfamiliar concepts. The group has put together a book that is available online in English and Arabic for the families of homosexuals in order to counter the lack of information on this subject in the Arab world. This literature offers successful ways to approach family members who are non-heterosexual and ideas about how to initiate dialogue and talk about this subject with them. Helem's mission statement is evidence of their push to counter the absence of discourse on sexual differentness that many of my interview subjects mentioned:

In order to break the silence surrounding sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, Helem has consistently promoted the idea that knowledge is the key to openness, tolerance and acceptance. We aim to counter the lack of information (particularly in Arabic) and the pervasive misinformation about homosexuality by providing objective, factual information, initiating dialogue, and refuting common misconceptions about homosexuality.<sup>26</sup>

In August of 2007 a second homosexual advocacy organization in Lebanon called Meem was created, targeting lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women who are questioning their sexual orientation (LBTQ). The group, which emerged from Helem, has

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<sup>26</sup> Helem Website. 2013. About Us, Goals. <http://helem.net/node/59>

adopted a narrower role by restricting its membership to LGBTQ women who are Lebanese (anywhere in the world) or to women who are living in Lebanon (of any nationality).<sup>27</sup> The fact that Meem does not include a “G” as part of the makeup of their members indicates that it does not consider Gay as a probable label for women. This choice to omit gays is significant because it is a woman-centric organization aiming to specifically tailor itself to the needs of women who like women. The fact that they use the term “womyn” to refer to their safe house (removing the “men” from the word “women”) is in the same vein of some radical feminist gestures. By keeping their constituency small and distinct Meem has been able to maintain its Lebanese identity and concentrate its efforts on improving the lives of members in a substantive fashion. They now have hundreds of members in a country with a population of roughly four million people. Much like Helem, Meem has a community center in downtown Beirut known as the "Womyn House" which offers counseling and psychological support at a very affordable price. Meem's website is available in Arabic and English and includes a blog, a You Tube channel, and a queer Arab magazine called Bekhsoos.<sup>28</sup>

In 2009 Meem published a short book titled *Bareed Mista3jil (Express Mail)*, which contains a collection of true personal vignettes of the Lebanese queer. The book brings together the stories of over 150 women and transgender people who are not heterosexual. It is a set of first-person narratives arranged by various themes such as religion, coming out, family, community, discrimination, and self-esteem as well as many others. Each chapter can be linked to more than one theme and offers an intensely personal glimpse into the lives of contemporary queer society in the Arab world. The

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<sup>27</sup> Meem Website. 2013. What is Meem? <http://www.meemgroup.org/about.php>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

book was first written in English and then translated into Arabic, however it was ultimately published in English. In the introduction, the editor's note, "When we began the process of translation into Arabic, we were faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality. The words didn't exist to express exactly what we wanted them to."<sup>29</sup> It is here that we actually see the English language, which Massad would argue is an integral and negative component of the Gay International, as a fully functioning and integrated instrument of expression. While it is true that English is the language of the West and of power, in reality many people in Lebanon, and in particular Beirut, are very comfortable using English. The use of English is evidence of both the power inherent in the language and the empowering capabilities that accompany it. The women of Meem have chosen to publish their stories in English not only because it is perhaps the best utility of expression, but also because it is an empowering avenue of articulation.

Both Helem and Meem use the language of what Massad calls "Western discourse" to reach their audiences. They articulate similar missions to those of outreach and advocacy organizations in the West and follow similar structures and approaches to achieve their goals. Part of their outreach includes pamphlets and literature that is specifically for the family members of non-heterosexual people. Because they are both non-heterosexual advocacy organizations, they have also chosen to specifically identify along the hetero/homo binary that Massad suggests is ubiquitous. In a recent interview, Massad criticized Helem specifically as an organization in Lebanon that is working through the rubric of Western-funded organizations, which is "championed, funded, and

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<sup>29</sup> *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*. Beirut: Meem, (2009), 6.

defended by a huge imperial apparatus.”<sup>30</sup> The condemning of these organizations by Massad threatens their members’ ability to identify as they wish and imposes a negative interpretation of an individual’s personal decision to classify or identify as non-heterosexual.

### **The L Word**

The L Word is an American fictional television show that portrays the lives of a group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender friends living in sunny West Coast Los Angeles, California. Running from 2004-2009, the show achieved mainstream success in America and was only available on the premium cable channel Showtime, and later for purchase on DVD. A majority of the women that I interviewed downloaded the show online or bought copies of the DVDs to tune in. These women in Lebanon use the show as a touchstone from which to draw commonalities and feel connected to a larger collective identity. I use Brubaker and Cooper’s third set of terms from the cluster - *commonality, connectedness, and groupness* – to better capture the meaning in its entirety and further understand the implications that may follow.

Brubaker and Cooper indicate that the point of having this last set of terms is to “develop an analytical idiom sensitive to the multiple forms and degrees of commonality and connectedness, and to the widely varying ways in which actors (and the cultural idioms, public narratives, and prevailing discourses on which they draw) attribute meaning and significance to them.”<sup>31</sup> For many that I interviewed, the show fosters a sense of community in the absence of other female and homosexual role models. This lack of different representations of sexualities in Lebanon and the broader Arab world

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<sup>30</sup> Boggio Ewanje-Epee, Felix, and Stella Magliani-Belkacem. "The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad." *The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad*. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond "identity"" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 21.

make the characters and their identities on the show even more salient. The women of The L Word are important common references for the women in Lebanon and also for some, the type of lesbian with whom they feel they most closely associate. The characters in the show cover the spectrum and range from ultra-feminine to very masculine.<sup>32</sup> Most viewers have their pick of which character they feel closest to. For the majority of the women that I interviewed, The L Word is a touchstone for all things lesbian. However, participants differed widely in how (or whether) they integrated the show's discourse into their conception of their own identities. Some lesbians in Lebanon look to this show for a point of entry into the lesbian scene and community, while others steer clear of the potential stereotypes this show produces.

When I asked Rana if she followed depictions of lesbians she quickly jumped to inform me of how ridiculous she thinks The L Word was:

*Do you follow depictions of lesbians?* Well there is the television show The L Word. I hate it. I watched one episode and I just can't watch homosexual series. I just can't relate at all. *Why not?* Well for one, they're just too open about it. I'm not saying it's a bad thing or anything, but here in the Middle East - I mean let's face it - we're not open about it at all. Another thing is I always find it cheesy and it just doesn't interest me. *Is the L word community similar to the community in Lebanon?* Well there are wanna-be Shane's in Lebanon, that's for sure. I think a lot of girls watch that series and try to be one of them. There is a pub here that one of the bartenders is identical to Shane. *Do you think that is harmful?* No not really, it's just like a kid who wants to be just like Spiderman. I just think it's immature, but not harmful.

Leila had similar sentiments and although she used to watch the show, she could not move past how fictitious and far from reality many of the characters were:

*Do you follow Western depictions of lesbians?* I used to watch The L Word but I think it's the most ridiculous show. It's too sexual I think. It's all driven by sex. There isn't one genuine relationship on that show.

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<sup>32</sup> A number of character names were mentioned during the interviews, however I have only included quotes where Shane and Alice were mentioned. Shane is one of the main characters whose look has been described by some as androgynous or slightly masculine. Shane is usually single and dates a lot of women. Alice is the only bi-sexual on the show and is very feminine in her appearance.

Leila and Rana's responses represent nearly half of the women that I interviewed, who are hesitant to express their sense of belonging as strongly tethered to the characters and situations depicted on this fictitious television program. They find other ways to conceptualize their identity. Conversely, the remaining women that I interviewed find significance in the associations they have made with the characters on the show. Dima elaborates on the similarities between certain characters on *The L Word* and members of the lesbian community in Lebanon:

*Do you watch western depictions of homosexuality?* I watch the L word and so do my friends. We have the DVDs. *Do women in the community here define themselves by the characters in the show?* Yes they do. They will be like 'I'm a Shane.' I've heard that the bartender at Ob Bla Di looks like Shane. *Do you think that's problematic?* No not really. I'm not sure about other people but my friends are not like that. They would say like 'Oh you have some characteristics like Alice' for example, but they don't really try to follow the stereotype. Like Shane has short hair and she's thin or whatever, but they won't try to be like her. They don't emulate them. This is my group at least. I'm not sure about in the community because in the community it's much more. The people in the community are very close and there aren't any heterosexuals. I don't really know too much about them, but with my friends it's not like that. I am friends with gay people and straight people so it's very mixed. *Do you watch The L Word together?* Sometimes. *Do you see similarities in groups and dynamics and dramas in the L word?* Yes but I feel like you find them in every group. It's not just necessarily The L Word or us because we're gay or straight. Drama is everywhere. Everyone has drama.

Hala encourages us to examine the commonalities and connectedness one may feel for *The L Word* as integral part of the path to self-understanding. She understands that people's affiliations with the show change over time. She also elaborates on these terms as composed of forces that for some elicit strong affiliations and for others weaker affiliations. She also contends that for some, the television show marks a rite of passage into lesbian life:

*Do you follow Western depictions of homosexuality?* I don't follow any kind of depiction. I follow my own. I mean of course we all watch *The L Word* but that's only because we want to kind of find some kind of connections. Because you've got to think about it, every lesbian kind of goes through that whole "I'm alone, no one understands me, no one

feels me” and The L Word kind of makes you feel that no, you can still be gay and successful and still be gay and doing this. When I was younger I watched The L Word, and Shane oh my god, by my 20s it was kind of like, ok it’s a TV show and my life is a lot more real and a lot more feasible than anything I can watch on television, whether it be Queer As Folk or anything.

*Do you think it’s bad to have something like the L word because it is so stereotypical?* I think that what they were trying to do with The L Word is just give you a various look on the lesbian world. It’s not stereotypical if you think about it because typical lesbians stereotypically are conceived as butch and all up in your face and none of us are really like that. We’re actually quite sweet and most of us are charmers and most of us have been through so much in our lives that we’re not really that mean. So I think that The L Word kind of went a little overboard with the whole fact that every one of them is overly successful which kind of gives a lot of the new girls that are coming out the idea that they have to strive for something that big. The whole of society is giving you the feeling of inadequacy - and that because you’re gay you’re inadequate and you’re not up to par - you feel like you have to strive for even more in your actual career and your life to prove to them that me being gay does not make me dumber or incapable of getting to where you are.

*Do you see a difference between women in the L word and women in the community here?* Oh God yes. Women in Lebanon, well it’s everywhere I think but for women who are with women there is a heightened amount of estrogen and you’re going to “U-Haul<sup>33</sup>” no matter what country you live in. And I think even the L word doesn’t depict accurately homosexual life in the States. I was raised there and I don’t remember lesbians being that out and about and it’s slowly getting there. I don’t think there are many similarities between The L Word and lesbians in Lebanon, although we do try, and we try to do it as much as we possibly can. When The L Word was first coming out everybody was pulling off the Shane look everybody was doing everything that The L Word girls were doing. And it’s normal. People do the same thing with Twilight and it affects everybody. A show is a show. And it’s only a matter of time before the rest of the world catches up with The L Word.

Having been raised in California herself, Hala recognizes the powerful role of popular media in shaping our ideas about certain groups of people. While she believes that the characters on The L Word offer positive nuanced examples of lesbians, as they are essentially a reductive cross-section of an infinitely diverse population, she acknowledges that the success and popularity of the show is primarily driven by the consumers thirst for drama and a good story. Overall respondents feel that The L Word is particularly useful

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<sup>33</sup> U-Haul is a term frequently used by lesbians to refer to an act that women do who decide to move in together after only dating for a very short period of time.

for women who are just beginning to explore their non-heterosexuality, but should not be taken as the ultimate archetype of lesbians.

### **Women's Discourse and Discourse of the Individual**

While it may be very difficult for some of these women to talk with their families about their sexualities, I found that they take pride in their own self-identification. Using Brubaker and Cooper's second suggested set of terms – *self-understanding and social location* - to understand this activity is particularly helpful. This awareness of self indicated to me how these women were able to control, be it briefly, how their non-heterosexual identity functioned in their lives without the influence of their parents. As Brubaker and Cooper note, this type of self-identification “cannot capture *others*' understandings, even though external categorizations, identifications, and representations may be decisive in determining how it is regarded and treated by others, indeed in shaping one's own understanding of oneself.”<sup>34</sup> My interviews demonstrate women's agency as they undertake the task of self-understanding and self-categorizing. This agency helps fuel their navigation and keeps their non-heterosexual lifestyle sustainable despite the need for silence in some dimensions of their social lives.

The self-understanding that I witnessed and gathered from the interviews varied and shifted throughout the interviews, especially the discourse that was used to describe women's own sexuality. Like Brubaker and Cooper, these women see identification as a process. Massad on the other hand believes that Arabs who self-identify as “gay” or “homosexual”<sup>35</sup> seek to do so only through “public social identifications” and these

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<sup>34</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond "identity"" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 18.

<sup>35</sup> Quotation marks added by Massad.

public actions are of course part of the larger Western imperialist agenda.<sup>36</sup> He sees identification as a public act and does not leave any space for the private. In doing so he restricts individuals' agency and leaves no room for personal decisions. My interviews demonstrate how women in Lebanon are making personal decisions to classify or self-identify in a certain way and are actively adapting these understandings to different social contexts.

### **What Word or Words Would You Use To Describe Your Sexuality?**

After becoming acquainted with one another and working through basic background information, this was the first question I asked every participant. I chose the early placement of this question to see how initial self-identification would frame the rest of the interview, and also to see if the women would use the same identifiers or labels when referring to themselves or the non-heterosexual community in the remainder of the interview. Continuity in their stories was nowhere to be found. Every interview was rife with inconsistencies in terminology and discourse throughout each participant's narratives. This only reinforces how the process of identification changes and overlaps and is able to encompass multiple factors.

These inconsistencies also reveal that in order to facilitate the process of identification, the most useful tools of self-analysis may not be tied to one word or label and are able to hold many different meanings. The variable nature of the women's responses is a strategy to avoid reifying their answers and consequently their identity. Changing their responses is also a way to navigate and stay one step ahead of anyone or any force that might wish to negate their self-identification. For example, it prevents the

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<sup>36</sup> Boggio Ewanje-Epee, Felix, and Stella Magliani-Belkacem. "The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad." *The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad*. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.

state from labeling them in a country where labels are everywhere – even on their own identification cards. This inconsistency can therefore be viewed as a strategy to maintain personal agency. It both acknowledges and fights against the power of external forces in shaping internal self-identification.

In my interview with Hala, she describes how the word “gay” is often used pejoratively and for that reason she prefers to use the word homosexual to describe her sexuality. She continues to refer to herself and the community in Lebanon as consisting of “homosexuals” who engage in “homosexual acts” but also switches from time to time to calling herself gay. Here we can see the fluidity in her process of identification. There are visible shifts in the words that she uses which demonstrates the role and influence of outside perceptions during this process:

*What words would you use to describe your sexuality?* **Homosexual.** I don't like the term gay because they have such negative connotations to it nowadays in our society - it's just that people if they call you gay - like my kid brother punched a kid because he got called gay, not because the kid meant gay as in his sexuality, but gay as in not cool. And the negative connotations hanging on every word we say - have turned queer - have turned faggot into a horrible kind of word - and technically in terms it just means homosexual - just as I've said. *So you wouldn't say lesbian or bi?* No. I'm a **homosexual**.

(Further on in the interview) - *So she's not the first person you've dated, right?* “No God no. I've been **gay** since...well I came out when I was 13...since then I've realized that I'm just really **gay**...and I'm alright with it.” (After a few more questions) “I'm just **gay** and it's not a bad thing...none of us choose to be **gay**” (When I asked her how she first came to understand the term lesbian) “It was kind of given to us in sex-education class. I knew the term lesbian when I was around nine or ten and by eleven or twelve I had kind of consecrated the idea of what a **lesbian** was and by thirteen I realized that **I was one.**”

Dima also stresses the influence that outside factors have on her own identification process and realizes how hard it is for some people to recognize that she is just attracted to a particular sex and not interested in thinking much more about it:

*What word or words would you use to describe your own sexuality. My own sexuality?* What words? I would use the word confusing. Maybe but not on a personal level. Not because I'm confused, because I'm not. I mean confused because of the society I'm in. I

have no problems with myself when it comes to me and my sexuality but when it comes to dealing with people and their views on it. Some people are cool and some people are not. And the majority is not – so basically it's pretty hard trying to cope with other people. *In terms of terms though- what would you use? Non-heterosexual.* I don't really like labels honestly. So I don't really know. Like I never labeled myself. People just ask me do you like girls or boys and I say girls and they say, 'Oh, so you're **gay**?' And I say, OK if that's what you want to call me...it's whatever. *What does it mean to you to be non-heterosexual?* Nothing. I think it's extremely normal. Some people like girls, some people like boys - it doesn't matter.

(Later when referring to the girl she's currently seeing) "She's **straight**. She doesn't define herself as **gay**."

Like Dima and Hala, many of the women that I interviewed are negotiating their sexuality on their own terms and using whatever identifiers they feel in the moment. The inconsistencies may mean nothing to them, but are useful for thinking about the flexible nature of the process of identification and how they respond to different contexts and are thereby restricted by the context as well.

### **How Did You First Come To Understand The Term Lesbian?**

Building off of their first cluster of terms to comprehensively explain identity, Brubaker and Cooper elaborate on the type of identifications that take place, noting, "One key distinction is between *relational* and *categorical* modes of identification. One may identify oneself (or another person) by position in a relational web (a web of kinship, for example, or of friendship, patron-client ties, or teacher-student relations). On the other hand, one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation etc)."<sup>37</sup> I found that the women I interviewed used both relational and categorical modes of identification when they first learned of and came to understand the term 'lesbian.' Leila admits that although the first time she heard the term 'lesbian' there were syntactical errors, and the word did not lead her to a eureka

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<sup>37</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond "identity"" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 15.

moment about her feelings for women and its definition. She did however learn of the term by identifying someone else as a member of a *category*:

*When did you first understand the term lesbian?* From my cousin...I think we were like eleven and she was eleven as well. She thought the word lesbian was “a lesbian” because there was always the [A] in front. So for the longest time I thought the word was “a lesbian” - like “she is an alesbian” So I think I was about eleven and it was gossip. We were talking about these girls and she was saying I think they’re alesbian. And I said no they’re just friends. And she said no they do more, they kiss. And I’m like “oh my god.” *At that point did you think - oh maybe that’s me?* No no no - I thought ewww. Why isn’t she kissing a boy?

Rana could not exactly remember the first time she heard the word so instead I asked her if there was an Arabic word with the same meaning. Her response demonstrates the difficulties she encounters when trying to think of the concept in Arabic. To her, the word ‘lesbian’ does not exist to express exactly what she wanted it to:

*Is there an Arabic word for lesbian?* I think it’s something like suhaqqiya (struggles to pronounce a noun from the SHQ root). I don’t really know. My Arabic is weak and I don’t even think that the word fully translates.

Danya also has trouble producing the word for ‘lesbian’ in Arabic. She too, believes that it connected to the SHQ root, which comes from the verb “to rub.” She also offers the feminized form of the noun “Mithli” which means homosexual. Both of these words are correct terms for a female homosexual in Modern Standard Arabic. Danya however, goes on to remind me that she personally does not need nor does she use these categories or terms in Arabic.

*Is there an Arabic term that’s used for Lesbian?* Yeah I don’t really know. Something like Mithliyya or Sahiqqa I think. My Arabic isn’t actually very good. I mean it is it’s fine, but I don’t pay attention to things like that - like that terminology. I don’t need it.

Nour recognizes the term both categorically and then in relation to how others have perceived of her, her entire life.

*How did you come to know about the word lesbian?* This first girl who I had a thing with. At first I was against it. I used to think that no this is something wrong and that it was not something right because I had never seen anything like this, until then. Most of the people used to think I was gay my whole life because I am a tomboy, but I had no clue about anything. Until this girl, the 18 year old (referring to the first person she hooked up with). And this is when I started remembering everything.

Dima on the other hand, learned of the word through a relative of hers who is also non-heterosexual. After learning of her relative's identification, she took the information she received from that relative and decided to search to learn more about it on the Internet:

*How did you come to understand the term lesbian?* I kind of understood it when I was really young because a relative of mine is gay too and she was older. My family didn't talk about it but I knew. I don't know how to explain it but I would go ask her or her sister if she was gay and she would say, 'No! Why are you asking me that?' But I felt something and as it turns out I found out seven years later that I was right. *Does she know about you now?* Yeah. She is in Dubai. *What's her life like?* Very normal. She works, she parties, she goes out with friends and everything is fine. She also has a girlfriend and everything is well. They live together. *And no one in your family knows?* No they just think that they are friends. Very good friends. So it was through someone else that I learned about it and then I started researching it as well. A little bit on Google, I would enter in "what is homosexuality?" But when I found out about her or when I thought she was, that's when I started researching. But it didn't take a long time because I was just curious about it for a month or two and then I forgot about it. And then there was an incident at school where two of my friends who were very close - there was nothing going on - but everyone at school started saying that they were gay. These were girls because it was an all-girls school, and it got really big. The principals found out about the rumors so they gave them both detention and they couldn't see each other at school. It was really bad. So that's when it started coming back into my head all over again.

While many of the respondents were perhaps too young to recognize the word 'lesbian' as holding significant or personal meanings, the fact that they all learned of the word and its definition in English is rather significant. This only reinforces Foucault's notions regarding discourse and its ability to discursively produce or maintain power. This proves again that Massad's analysis misses the complexities of multilingualism and the fact that English can be used to empower, rather than constrain, identity formation.

## **Chapter 2 - Geography and Space**

The geographic location and space that Lebanon represents is important to understanding how the women that I interviewed have managed to navigate and craft meaningful places out of the spaces that they are in. These places and spaces have in turn worked as part of the process that shapes them and allows them to express their non-heterosexual subjectivities. The concept of space is abstract, yet useful for describing the freedoms available to these women and characterizing the mobility these women need to navigate and exist in Lebanon. Through several of my interview questions, I survey the significance of the geographic location of Lebanon and its unique character within the broader Middle East. Next, I turn to the concept of space to understand how areas in Lebanon are transformed spatially through symbolic undertakings. I found that some of these spaces are among the only venues where certain types of non-heterosexual identities could be claimed and performed.

Sofian Merabet offers useful theorizations of space as they relate to non-heterosexual identity in Lebanon. In “Creating Queer Space in Beirut,” Merabet takes his readers on a stroll through the Lebanese capital to explore zones of encounter within the Lebanese male homosexual sphere. In the beginning of the article, he provides the reader with the term “queer space,” which he describes as “places in which the socially assumed dichotomy between “public” and “private” becomes redundant and gives room to what I perceive as being “zones of encounter,” namely urban sites that foster attempts, not necessarily always with success, at transcending spatio-temporal fixities.”<sup>38</sup> Merabet’s article acknowledges the complexities of the daily life experiences for male homosexuals

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<sup>38</sup> Merabet, Sofian. “Creating Queer Space in Beirut” in Khalaf, Samir, and John H. Gagnon. *Sexuality in the Arab World*. London: Saqi, (2006), 200.

in Lebanon and demonstrates a variety of ways these men have appropriated, contested, and represented particular “queer spaces” throughout the country. Merabet’s term “queer space” accurately describes the similar types of spaces the women I interviewed appropriated and contested as their own places in which they could perform their subjectivities.

Geographic space in Lebanon is intricately interwoven with the transformations that have occurred since the end of the Lebanese civil war. The war, which lasted from 1975-1990, left a devastating legacy tied to the tangled politics of religious identity. The current government of Lebanon is a parliamentary democracy that employs a consociationalist model known as confessionalism. Some view the pluralist confessionalist system in Lebanon as a temporary solution aimed to encourage a utopia of Lebanese plurality. Others believe that the implementation of such a system only serves to reify further the sectarian ideology that ultimately categorizes people according to religious sect. As a system based on sectarian identifications, consociationalism has been used as a tool to exaggerate differences amongst others and has been ultimately hindered the forging of any sense of secular national unity. The sample of women that I interviewed is representative of the diverse socio-economic and religious makeup of Lebanon and the broader Arab world. Their specific backgrounds are an integral component of their identities, the implications of which will be explored in this chapter.

In accordance with Lebanon’s factional system of government, groups have sought to appropriate various geographic locations as enclaves of their own. These geographic locations are the result of particular histories and larger geo-strategic outcomes. At the macro level, the majority of the constituents of certain cities, towns and

villages are generally all from the same religious group. Of course other minorities do exist within these majority-dominated areas. Place of origin typically indicated the religion of my interview subjects. Because I used the snowball method of sampling prevalent in ethnographic research, the women that I interviewed originated from various locations in Lebanon, as well as other countries in the Arab world. Some women were from Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon with a Sunni Muslim majority. Others were from the primarily Druze mountains or Shia suburbs just south of the capital, Beirut. The majority however, came from and were living in Beirut.

Once known as the Paris of the Middle East, Beirut embraces all of the paradoxes and incongruities of a major city. The urban and rural texture of Lebanon can be felt in the centrally located capital, as many of its inhabitants have moved there in search of school or work. During the civil war, Beirut was divided along a “Green Line” which separated the mainly Christian East from the predominantly Muslim West. The post-civil war landscape of Beirut is slowly secularizing, however there remains a whole set of physical obstacles and numerous barriers that more often than not tend to be of a mental nature. Even within neighborhoods the socio-cultural configurations vary from one part of the street to the next. With the exception of Hamra Street near the American University of Beirut on the West side of town, the majority of my observations and interviews were conducted in locations within the boundaries of East Beirut. That being said, in all of Lebanon, no places or spaces exist that are clear and distinct areas for non-heterosexuals.

### **Global Understandings of Lebanon**

In a highly globalized planet, products, concepts, and ideas move around the world through unpredictable forces. Lebanon's larger path in the global context is riddled with complex inconsistencies. In an instant, the country can go from being on the State Department's travel warning list to having rave reviews on the front page of the travel section of the *New York Times*. Each year, numerous Americans and students from all around the world travel to Beirut to attend AUB and the various other universities throughout Lebanon. The country has managed to simultaneously maintain its charm and allure while also remaining very unpredictable and unsafe at times.

A number of journalists and scholars have documented and provided commentary on the local "gay scene" in Lebanon. Most authors, when comparing Lebanon to other countries in the Arab world, find an increasing open-mindedness and growing cultural acceptance towards sexual minorities. In July of 2009, Patrick Healy from the *New York Times* wrote a short travel article titled, "Beirut, the Provincetown of the Middle East" - the title being a direct reference to Provincetown, Massachusetts - considered by some to be the hotspot for mostly gay men and some lesbian women tourists in the United States. Healy interviewed a handful of gay Arab men from around the region who had come to Beirut for the flourishing gay scene, noting, "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 to them at home."<sup>39</sup> While the write up in the *New York Times* is exactly the type of journalistic writing that Massad refers to, it is still worth noting the special reputation that Lebanon has taken on which sets it apart from its neighbors in the Arab world.

### **West vs. East – Is Homosexuality a Western Construct?**

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<sup>39</sup> Healy, Patrick. "Beirut, the Provincetown of the Middle East." - *NYTimes.com*. N.p., 29 July 2009. Web.

Approximately half of the women that I interviewed had studied abroad in the West or at a Western institution in the Arab world. Women from rural areas or cities other than Beirut were more likely than Beirut natives to have never been abroad. Compared to the women who had limited exposure to the West these women demonstrate significant differences in the ways that they conceive of their sexuality and the sexual culture in Lebanon. At the most basic level, the vocabulary and words that they use are distinctly different from the women who had no experience abroad. They are comfortable with words other than “gay” or “homosexual” to describe differences in sexuality. They also have fewer difficulties translating their desires into actions and identities in comparison to the women who have not spent time outside of the country. Perhaps that time spent in the West influenced these women’s ability to conceive of and identify with other globally accepted models of sexuality. I am not suggesting that there is a direct link between wealth, education, or geographic background and level of knowledge regarding different sexualities. I do however, believe that all of these factors may allow a person access to different spheres of life that are unavailable to others.

One example of a woman with less direct exposure to the west is Yasmine, who was born and raised in Tripoli and comes from a very religious Sunni Muslim family. I met Yasmine when she was in Beirut for the night to party and see her girlfriend. When I asked her during our interview to describe her sexuality, she had trouble applying non-heterosexual identifiers, even though she was dating someone of the same sex. During the interview, she even denigrated other homosexuals in Lebanon, claiming that she was “not like them.”<sup>40</sup> Yasmine’s insistence of her differentness suggests she is uncomfortable

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Yasmine. June, 2012.

with the way that homosexuality is understood and portrayed in Lebanon. While some may view her response as hypocritical, one explanation for her partial disavowal of homosexuality may be that it is her own way of making sense of the complicated process of identity construction. Or perhaps she is an example of the type of homosexual produced by the Western Gay International that Massad refers to in *Desiring Arabs* and her refusal to identify as homosexual is really a rejection of the homo/hetero binary that others take on.

I asked every participant, regardless of time spent abroad or exposure to the West, if she believes that homosexuality is a Western construct. I wanted to see if they believe that sexual differentness varies from place to place, and if they feel that the binary of homosexual or heterosexual is imposed upon them. Everyone that I interviewed described similarity or a universality of concept and agreed that sexual differentness is handled differently in the West, but no one felt that homosexuality is a category imposed on them. Rana and Dima see similarities across the globe, whereas Hala thinks that geographic location is irrelevant to sexual identity:

[RANA] *Do you think homosexuality is a Western construct? Mine specifically? Uh no. I think it's the same here as in the West.*

[DIMA] *Do you think homosexuality is different in the West than it is here in Lebanon? Yeah in a way that it's more open in the West. Do you think it's a Western idea or concept? No not at all. It exists and has existed for such a long time. It's not a Western concept or an Eastern concept. And I don't think the label is Western.*

[HALA] *Do you think homosexuality is a Western construct? No. I think it's just who you are. It has nothing to do with anything else in the world. Regardless of where you live, regardless of nature, regardless of nurture, regardless of anything it's your own identity. I don't try to define it - I'm just who I am.*

While some of the women see the homosexual label as sturdily universal, others see it as inherently fluid and constructed. According to Danya everything in Lebanon, including sexuality is fluid and subject to change.

*Do you think homosexuality is a Western Construct?* You mean do I think homosexuality is brought over as a definition from the States? I don't know. I don't know would have to be my honest answer. I think sexuality is fluid, so I don't know how to really explain it here in the Arab world, because fluidity is always moving. You can't put a box around it. I mean everything is fluid here in Lebanon, our lifestyle is fluid, the laws here don't stick, we never know what time water or electricity is going to come on. We're constantly moving and shifting. I think a lot of people are trying to make it an identity and a lot of people in our society are kind of shifting towards that. I think wherever you go in the world, you'll find a select group of people that think fluidly. And I think it's growing too. I hope so. I hope that's the new world order.

Danya's insightful response reflects a mentality that I often saw expressed by Lebanese people more broadly, as they are no strangers to the unpredictable and mercurial whims of the state. Leila simply believes that homosexuality exists equally everywhere in the world:

*Do you think homosexuality is a western idea?* No I mean maybe not openly but I think it (homosexuality) exists just as much here. Just percentage-wise it is the same. It's just that some people here don't even follow it up.

These interviews reveal that non-heterosexual women living in Lebanon do not necessarily believe that their sexuality is Orientalist taxonomy. Their perspectives complicate Massad's claim that homosexuality in the Arab world is a Western binary construct that has created homosexuals where they do not exist. Massad asserts that the Western imposed binary destroys the fluidity of sexual identities, however, by denying the possibilities of even choosing the binary, he is constricting the very fluidity about which he speaks. In his analysis, Massad overlooks the contingency of human practice and the realities of everyday resistance to multiple forms of power. These women's responses reflect the difference between abstract theorizing and everyday life practices. .

### **The Lesbian Community**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the advocacy group Meem and the television show *The L Word* are important points of reference and affiliation that contribute to the feeling of *groupness* for non-heterosexual women in Lebanon. In this

section, I seek to understand the spaces where the physical pursuit of the community takes place. I wanted to know how and where members of the community interact and how united and visible they are as a separate entity. As I mentioned above, the landscape of Lebanon is generally divided along sectarian lines. Through my interviews, I sought to learn more about how these women navigate the structural and institutional constraints on their expressions of sexuality imposed on them by the Lebanese state. How do they appropriate niches for themselves and their community? What are the physical, social and political locations within Lebanon and the broader Lebanese society where these women can express their identities?

I purposely framed my initial question in a way that encouraged the participants to identify their own role within the lesbian community. I understand that this question assumes that there is one completely unified and inclusive lesbian community in Lebanon; however that was intended to see if respondents objected to the idea of a single holistic group. All of the women I interviewed voiced their concern to me regarding both the community's reputation and the activities in which it engages. Leila, Nour, Dima and Rana pointed to a level of drama and spectacle that seems to be taking place within the community as of late:

[LEILA] *Are you into the lesbian community here (in Lebanon)?* I mean, they know me, but I'm not very active. We don't really go to many places, just because the caliber. I mean, the class is horrible and it's very dirty. Again, it's very sexual and all they do - they just want to sleep with you. Like for example last year I went to the bathroom and this girl came, she and her girlfriend, and when I came out of the toilet the girl approached me and said "Hi we think you're really cute. Would you want to come home for a three-some?" And I cracked up, and told them I was very flattered, but what the fuck?

[NOUR] *Are you big in the lesbian community here in Lebanon?* Yeah but lately, see before I used to go every weekend, every night partying with them. And then one day my sister came to me and she was like "just step back a little bit because there is this girl and this girl and this girl and they are wanted because of drugs and all that." And I was like "Fuck - if my sister knows all of this and she's out of the scene..." So I stepped out.

[DIMA] *Are you active at all in the lesbian community in Lebanon?* No. *Why not?* Because I've heard a lot of bad things about the community - like they're too dramatic and they all talk about each other and it's basically just drama drama drama and so I don't want to be a part of that.

[RANA] *And so you're not really friends with any other lesbians?* I don't really care and I don't really like the lesbian community in Lebanon at all. *Why?* They're very immature and they always wish harm – and they're very jealous and they're all about drama and they're all about creating something out of nothing. You know what I mean? They're not decent people. *Wish harm?* Harm – not in the sense of - I want to kill you - but harm as in like they talk about people behind their backs, they do shit that is not necessarily...they call other people's parents and will say "your son is gay, your daughter is a lesbian." *So you just stay away from it?* Yeah, but even if I was straight – even in the straight world I wouldn't be friends with such people.

Most women I interviewed were beginning to physically keep their distance from particular members of the lesbian community as the group began to be known for illegal and taboo activities *other than* homosexuality. It is worth noting that these claims of illegal drug activities are accurate, as I did witness a handful of non-heterosexual women take drugs. Therefore, one tentative explanation for why most of the women I interviewed denigrate this community and do not want to associate with it may be because they desire to distance themselves from (and perhaps raise themselves above) a community that is not socially acceptable so that they can be more socially acceptable themselves. Regardless, this is a point for further inquiry and research. Thus, it is difficult to contend that there is one homogeneous lesbian community in Lebanon and it would be more accurate to say that there are small groups of non-heterosexual women of varying identities and hobbies.

### **Meem**

*"The best thing about driving the bike is all the smiles I get from women."* – Alia

I met Alia at a hip new coffee shop that had just opened up on the main stretch of Hamra Street in West Beirut. She is a member of Meem and has worked with the

organization since its inception. Before we met, we had agreed to meet at a time and location, however we both neglected to describe our physical appearance to the other so that we could identify each other at the café. When I walked in, I scoped the area for a female sitting alone who fit the typical stereotype of a lesbian. Alia did not fit the bill. She wears a veil and is the only non-heterosexual woman that I interviewed who covered herself. Alia was born and raised in the Hezbollah controlled Shia suburbs of Beirut and, although she is in her late twenties, continues to live with her family in the house that she grew up in.

Her parents know and understand that she is attracted to women sexually and is only interested in romantic relationships with women. Her younger brother is also attracted to his same sex; however their parents perceive of them and treat them very differently. They scoff at his feminine characteristics and features and wish that he would act more masculine, whereas her parents revere her masculine qualities. They believe that her unwomanly ways are helpful for when she gets caught in “sticky situations.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to their appreciation for her masculine and independent attributes, her parents may also prefer her attraction to the same sex because it means that she will not be messing around with males. Regardless, the double standard that Alia’s parents have towards their two children reflects a widely held discrimination against overt or conspicuous feminine or homosexual behavior in men. Merabet discusses how prevalent this prejudice is in Lebanese society, noting how effeminate behavior is a particular threat to the social ideal because it is “far from embodying the traditional power attributes in a

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<sup>41</sup> Alia told me this story regarding the ways in which her parents treat the two siblings one night in June when we were out together.

society dominated by the ideal of strong and virile males.”<sup>42</sup> Alia has a male alter ego and plans to transition to a man one day when she can raise enough money to afford the surgery. Alia tells me that she wears her veil, not because she is religious, but because if she chose not to wear it, it would upset her parents. I was completely shocked when she revealed that her parents are comfortable with the knowledge that their daughter is gay, but would not allow her to display any outward rejections of Islam.

Alia and I met because a mutual friend has introduced me to her. She declined to sit down for a formal interview, but agreed that our time together could be documented, as long as I changed her name. She told me about her time at Meem and even tried to convince me to become a member. I politely declined, and informed her that my role as a researcher would conflict with my role as a member. Regardless, we sat down together to discuss the history of the organization, how to become a member, and its broader functionality as an advocacy organization in Lebanon. She told me that Meem membership is highly respected and coveted in certain circles. Alia vets each and every member herself and has worked hard over the years to ensure that the screening process works effectively. To join Meem you must read and accept the 8 group rules. Alia told me that they started out with far fewer rules than 8, but have added further guidelines, as they have been needed.

The Group Rules are the foundation of Meem and work to ensure that the group is effective while at the same time preserves its confidentiality. The location of the organization, a.k.a the “Womyn House,” is not advertised and only known through word of mouth. Potential members will only learn of the location of the safe space once they have become full members. The secrecy behind the location is to ensure that the space

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<sup>42</sup> Merabet, Sofian. "Disavowed Homosexualities in Beirut." *Middle East Report* 230 (2004), 31.

remains safe for all members and that anonymity is guaranteed. The mere space that Meem creates is symbolic and significant for its members and their existence in Lebanon since traditional public spaces are unsafe for this community. The types of safe space that this organization has created are hidden, fluid, and liminal.

### **The Physical Space of Where These Women Meet, Hook Up, and Exhibit PDA**

Throughout my observations I noticed that the women that I interviewed are not particularly interested in performing their non-heterosexual identities in overtly conspicuous ways in Lebanon. Because homosexuality is illegal, “seeing and being seen”<sup>43</sup> is not of particular importance to them. Being seen or recognized is potentially dangerous and cause for secrecy. For that reason, I was curious to know what locations or spaces were used to meet one another. How did non-heterosexual women recognize one another? Was it because they were both in the same types of spaces- spaces perhaps which are deemed safe and accepting of different sexualities?

All of the women that I interviewed, except for Leila, still live at home with their parents. For this reason, I was curious to ask them what spaces or places the women used to perform non-heterosexual acts with their partners or other non-heterosexual women. I wanted to know where they met one another, where they “hooked up”<sup>44</sup> and if they exhibited public displays of affection out in the open. My observations did not take me to intimate places such as bedrooms, so I was left to ask these types of questions during my interviews. Rana and Leila both told me that they do engage in public displays of affection (PDA) when they are out in public, but only in subtle ways that are known to both of them. The couple is essentially performing their non-heterosexuality by hiding in

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Hala. June, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Here I use the phrase “hook up” to mean engage in any type of sexual activity.

plain sight. They told me that they are lucky because in Arab culture, it is not uncommon for female friends to be touchy and hold each other's hands. I did not notice it at first, but the more time that I spent with this couple, the more it became apparent that their handholding was different than other girls'. Rana informs me that she is lucky to be dating someone who does not live with her parents:

*Do you and your current girlfriend exhibit PDA?* Uhh we're affectionate enough to the extent where if you don't know us and you're looking at us - if you're smart you'll figure it out. If you're not - if you're one of these innocent minded naïve people - you'll just think we are two friends that are tight. I'm sure *you* would pick up on it. *Where do you guys hook up?* My place, her place. She lives alone, so it's ideal that way. And my parents yeah whenever they're not around. *Do you sleep over at her house?* Occasionally yes. *So it's a pretty ideal situation?* Yeah - just the parents are the problem. I could really care less about it; it's just the society, and people's opinions and reputations.

Leila, Rana's girlfriend, tells me the story of how the two met, and later tells me how she maneuvered through the strict[er] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with her first girlfriend:

*Would you mind telling me a little bit about your relationship?* We met last year at a dinner party hosted by mutual friends. We met right there actually - that house - that building (points out a building to me). *At the dinner party, how did you know that she was gay?* She looks gay. *So it's all about looks?* No it's not all about looks, because I'm gay and I don't think I look gay. But anyone can tell that she is gay. *So you don't think that you look gay?* No. *Is that on purpose, or?* No no no certainly not. *Are there "gay" looking women in Saudi?* Yes. Big time. Some girls are just tomboys but they're not gay.

Later on in the interview, I asked Leila about her first relationship back in Saudi Arabia:

*Where did you guys hook up?* Well before our parents found out it was easy because I would sleep at her house or she would sleep at mine. But then both of our parents found out. It was awful. They spoke to each other - it was like a confrontation. Her parents found messages from me and then her parents contacted my parents and then they decided that we should all meet. So we had this conference and then they made us promise that this is the end and then as she was shaking hands she put a letter in my hand. Honestly I wish I could write a story about this. Oh and then after they found out it was funny because we would have to find new places to hook up. Like we would go to a fitting room and have sex there. *Weren't you worried about getting caught?* I was but I was nineteen at that time, I don't think...I wouldn't do it now...not for anybody. Like I would rather just have phone sex for the rest of our lives. *Can you do that in Saudi?* Yes we used to do it.

Nour's statement also indicates how easy it is sometimes to get away with having a girl sleep over without her father at home:

*Where do you hook up?* Either my place or her place. There are places. I live with my mom and my dad is in Abu Dhabi. So it's just me and my mom and so it's like I live alone.

Through my interviews I learned that the bodily practices and performances of non-heterosexuality vary according to space and circumstance in Lebanon. Family homes and public spaces can be a "safe space" as long as a fiction of close friendship is maintained. The women are essentially hiding in plain sight, but when that façade is breached these become hostile places.

### **Club Eve**

Social venues such as cafes and restaurants were among the safe and important spaces where the women I interviewed were able to perform their identities. Rana and Leila introduced me to "ladies night" which I soon learned is code for "lesbian night." A handful of bars in Beirut, the majority of which are in East Beirut, dedicate at least one night a week to the idea. The night is typically well advertised, however most patrons do not understand the true meaning behind the word "ladies." Rana and Leila tell me that the location of the bar changes each week to keep the party dynamic and also to stay ahead of anyone who might object to the concept. I found that alternating locations kept an allure of mystery to the night, while managing to keep similar faces returning each week. Stable spaces that can be identified by outsiders are unsafe, unless the women are able to hide there in plain sight. It is here where we see fluid and ephemeral spaces allowing them to perform their identities more openly.

In all of Lebanon there is only one bar that is exclusively for lesbians. Club Eve is in East Beirut. It is not located on a main street or one of the more popular areas for

nightlife, but rather in a developing neighborhood, which I witnessed change according to space and time. The particular alley in which the bar is located transforms into a non-heterosexual cruising ground at various hours of the night despite the completely unrecognizable identity the exact same street would have during the day. For a limited number of hours at night and on the weekends, non-heterosexual women from various backgrounds could formulate and sometimes negotiate their various identity performances, also laying claim to an unmistakable place in society.

The actual bar is long and narrow, like a shotgun house in America, with a thin cramped dance floor in between the bar and the seats. The doors are heavy sliding doors made of metal with windows that are purposely blacked out. No one can see what happens inside. The owners of the bar are both lesbians, partners in love and business, and the women that work in the bar are lesbians as well. In certain circles the name and reputation of Club Eve, is known, but it is certainly not advertised. My interview with Leila speaks to the type of activity that I witnessed taking place at this bar:

*How do you know which places to go? I don't know...My girlfriend takes me. Club Eve is the biggest. But again, that's if you want to go and have sex. You're not going to go to meet people to get into relationships.*

Before my first visit to the bar, the women that I was with joke that the crowd there will "absolutely love me because I am fresh meat." They warn me to prepare myself to be groped, shoved and aggressively approached by women that I do not even know. The "hook-up" culture is best exemplified within the walls of Club Eve. Suggestive gazes and symbolic body posturing are everywhere and hard to avoid. These visual and physical gestures are highly encoded with meaning as lesbian women in Lebanon spend their nights at this bar picking a mate. Within Club Eve, physical gestures are encoded with social and sexual meanings, just as they are on the street and in family homes—but

the codes are totally different. Behind closed metal doors and blacked out windows in an out-of-the-way alley at certain specific hours of the night, these women can aggressively display their sexual identities. This is markedly different from the demure, suggestive handholding that happens in plain sight on the street next door. The women of Lebanon have learned to switch fluidly between the two.

### **My Observations From The Soccer Field**

A number of the women that I met while conducting my interviews in Lebanon happened to be on the same recreational soccer team. This all-girls team was based out of Beirut and played other teams in matches around the country. I traveled with the team to a few of their games and spent several weeks practicing with them at their home field. The women practice at a soccer field in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The area hugs the border of a predominantly Shia and Hezbollah-controlled neighborhood. To get to the field, one must take the same highway that leads to the airport. This road is a critical transportation artery that has been shut down throughout the various conflicts in Lebanon to restrict movement. The day after I arrived to do fieldwork in Lebanon, many of Hezbollah's supporters blocked this road by burning tires in several locations. The stadium is visible from the highway, and to access the field you must get off the highway and loop back around to get on the opposite direction to proceed to the correct exit. This is just one of the many pointless and unnecessary turns that makeup Lebanon's infrastructure.

During certain hours the field is closed off to men and several women's teams of all different age groups come together to practice. The minute the doors are shut to men, the stadium takes on a different feel and becomes a different world to the women who

practice there. Women who are usually veiled take them off, to expose their hair. Some girls choose to change their clothes out in the open, or play games in their sports bras. Each time I visited the stadium, I noticed young men scaling the walls, at the chance that they would get to see these women in this space that is off-limits to them. The men are relentless in their harassment of the players as they whistle and catcall until the security guards eventually reprimand them.

I discovered that over half of the teammates on the soccer team are non-heterosexual. One of the captains of the team is getting married later this year. Her parents arranged the marriage to a man she does not know and is not in love with. She is deeply in love with one of her teammates, but informed me that she could never tell her family that she is in love with a woman. The only time she is able to be with her female lover is the time that they spend together practicing as a team and playing games. She has decided to go through with the marriage and maintain her relationship with her girlfriend on the side.

The women on this soccer team are taking advantage of gender segregation to create a safe space for themselves, not just in couples but as a group. This is very different from a group of non-heterosexual women meeting at Club Eve to hook up. The purpose is not sex, but rather community. This community is not part of the “lesbian community” that my interviewees so denigrated but rather a space apart from that.

### **Conclusion**

Through interviews and participant observations I learned of certain places and spaces in Lebanon that are contested and appropriated as non-heterosexual. Only through word of mouth was I able to discover the places and spaces that manage to accommodate

non-heterosexual practices. Countless nights were spent observing spaces such as Meem's Womyn House, Club Eve and the soccer field where many of my subjects spend their time, all of which occurred within and against the constraints imposed on them by the previous colonial laws. Societal constraints clearly shape the spaces that the women that I interviewed are allowed to occupy. However, the women both subvert and work within these constraints to transform hostile spaces and make them their own, whether by hiding in plain sight or creating ephemeral, hidden spaces where they can perform their identities more overtly.

### **Chapter 3 - Family and Society**

Even in the broad and disparate Arab world, it is an accepted commonality that the family is the central unit of Arab society. The power of the family unit within Arab society is derived from its traditional, conservative nature; the roles of man and woman, husband and wife, parent and child are clearly defined. Patriarchy rules. The interests of family typically supersede the interests of the individual. As a result, there is a collective, often willful ignorance of certain taboos such as different sexualities, which are seen as threatening to both the family unit and patriarchy.

As was mentioned before, the relations of power within Lebanese families are evident through the discourse analysis of the women I interviewed. No one was comfortable talking with their parents about their sexualities, and oftentimes the parents would silence the mere semblance of difficult conversation. Women and men in Lebanon have to operate in a highly stratified social environment, with rules and structures which are tacitly understood and in which prejudices against differences exist. The formation of non-heterosexual identities is dependent upon the woman's familial circumstances as well as the pressures of society at large.

The pressures of society at large are perceived by the women I interviewed as highly prevalent and difficult to change. Indeed, my own experiences in Lebanon often illustrated the difficulty of accepting difference in this country. I am a girl with short hair who often dresses like a tomboy. Most people in Lebanon stare because they are unaware of what to make of this difference. I only felt like I truly fit in when I was in the company of the women that I interviewed. Perhaps society at large believes that masculine women contain or reproduce the traditional power attributes of their male counterparts and are

afraid that this could be threatening to the societal order in Lebanon. Or perhaps they have rigid gendered expectations for women which have resulted in narrow notions of femininity.

### **Law vs. Lived Reality**

Most Muslim majority countries throughout the Arab world continue to uphold and enforce outdated and antiquated laws regarding sexuality that are legacies of their particular colonial history. In 2006 the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) compiled a report based on “factual macro and micro studies of the legal systems and the laws in detail, or from second hand sources when the legal texts have not been possible to obtain”<sup>45</sup> from various countries around the world. The review examines specific laws pertaining to male-male sexual acts and relationships as well as female-female sexual acts and relationships and the exact legislation and punishments that differ from country to country.

The Lebanese legal system is governed by a series of special codes of law known as the Lebanese Penal Code, which was put in place by the French in 1943, the year Lebanon gained independence. In Lebanon both male-male and female-female sexual relations are illegal according to Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code. More specifically, Article 534 prohibits having sexual relations that go against “the order of nature” and may result in a term of imprisonment lasting from one month to a year, and a fine ranging between LBP 200,000 to LBP 1,000,000 (approximately \$132 USD- \$664

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<sup>45</sup> Ottosson, Daniel. "With The Government In Our Bedrooms." International Lesbian and Gay Association, Nov. 2006. Web.  
<[http://typo3.lsvd.de/fileadmin/pics/Dokumente/Homosexualitaet/With\\_the\\_government\\_in\\_our\\_bedrooms\\_-\\_November\\_2006.pdf](http://typo3.lsvd.de/fileadmin/pics/Dokumente/Homosexualitaet/With_the_government_in_our_bedrooms_-_November_2006.pdf)>.

USD). The annulment of this article has become the main objective of the organization Helem.

I came across a few women who have seen first-hand how Lebanese authorities enforce Article 534. I decided to ask the women I interviewed how things would change for them personally or for Lebanon as a whole if the article was abolished. Danya is the only person that I interviewed who had actually been arrested for illegal sexual activities. She told me that she was unable to talk about her arrest for legal reasons, but did let me know that the charge of homosexuality was on her record:

*What are your thoughts on Article 534? You're in Lebanon. Is there anything that's really illegal? Do you know anyone who has been arrested under Article 534? I have. You've been arrested for... (interrupted me) For being gay? No. But they put me in the 'Ahira anyways. What's that? Prostitution. Which also includes in a sense lesbianism. The thing is, when you're arrested in this country they throw you all in one pit hole. Can you talk a little bit more about your experience? Actually I can't. It's one of the things I can't talk about. But homosexuality was one of the charges they wanted to use against me.*

Dima's realist approach to the hypothetical question I posed to her reinforces how difficult it is to change the social and cultural understanding of homosexuality. It also points to the role that religion plays in cultivating social intolerance of non-heterosexual women and men:

*If 534 is abolished do you think that would change things in Lebanon? No not really - the mentality is still going to stay the same - the culture is still going to stay the same. It's a good step but in the long run it's going to be much harder than that to change people's minds about homosexuality. Do you have any ideas about how to change people's minds? It's really tough because if it's just about education and letting them know about things for them to understand it more, rather than it being just like a bad thing and it shouldn't be. It's more than that. It's religion and people don't believe that it's acceptable because of religion. To take out that religious aspect of people, that's extremely tough and especially in Lebanon. So a solution would be really really really tough.*

Leila discusses one coping mechanism with this intolerant system: trying to act the way society expects you to act. She also speaks about the failures and frustrations this inevitably leads to. Leila is on the soccer team that I spoke about earlier, and is clearly

speaking about her fellow teammate who is in love with a woman, but going through with her arranged marriage to a man:

*If 534 is abolished do you think things would change in Lebanon?* I think it would change things on a smaller scale, but you would still have conservative people that would never allow it. I know people here who end up really getting married to men, or men who end up getting married to women. I have a few friends who are queers but they thought ‘where is this going?’ so they just ended up getting married. But then they end up cheating.

Leila’s comment sheds light on the practice of sham marriages that some self-identifying homosexuals are undertaking with members of the opposite sex. While these marriages have existed for some time and will in all likelihood continue to exist, the dishonesty between marriage partners has serious implications and may reflect differences in perceptions between legitimate relationships that is contingent on their makeup. The example of the young woman that Leila refers to on her soccer team illustrates just this. Leila told me that although her teammate will be getting married to a man, she does not consider her relationship with a woman as cheating or an act of infidelity to her future husband. The practice of homosexual’s following through with arranged heterosexual marriages is a topic that is explored by scholars who focus on male homosexuality,<sup>46</sup> and would be something to explore further in the case of female homosexuals.

Nour’s response not only distinguishes between male and female homosexuality, but also leads me to wonder how many others in Lebanon are as completely misled about the law as she is. This speaks to the fact that male-male sexual relationships are even more denigrated in Lebanese society than female-female relationships, as I discussed earlier:

*Do you know about Article 534 of the Penal Code here in Lebanon and what do you think*

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<sup>46</sup> This includes but is not limited to Joseph Massad and Sofian Merabet

*about it?* I know that it's only for boys not for girls. I think so, or that's what I heard. Because there was a policeman who told me that if they catch two girls that they can't do anything about it, but if they catch two boys...*They told you that? Did they catch you?* No. *If 534 was abolished do you think things would change in Lebanon?* My life would be the same - only with some other girls would things change. Girls who are afraid.

Hala is particularly adamant about not changing her way of life because of this law, but still admits that she is afraid of getting arrested. Her response demonstrates a very different approach from other women I interviewed, as she is okay with performing her identity publically and risking public humiliation for it. She tells me of her ex-girlfriend's arrest and how the Lebanese police treat foreigners and Lebanese citizens differently for this crime:

*Do you know about Article 534 of the Penal Code here in Lebanon and what do you think about it?* I think you can't expect Middle Eastern societies to advance like the Western world. I mean they're still having debates about it in the States. They took away the right to get gay married in California when Obama was elected with Prop 8. It happens, and you'll have closed minded people no matter where you are and you'll have open-minded people no matter where you are and it's just about being able to accommodate to your surroundings. *If Article 534 is abolished, would it change anything for you?* It wouldn't impact my life at all. *Do you walk down the street holding a girls hand?* Yes. Just as they impose their laws and their ways of thinking upon me, I have every right to impose mine upon them. I don't impose it but I don't think it's right that they say it's ok for two straight people to make out in the street but it's not ok for two lesbians to hold hands. *You're not worried about getting arrested?* Of course I am, but sooner or later I would just rather be happy than living in fear. I would rather hold my girlfriend's hand and be proud of it. And if I have to go to jail it's just me standing up for what I believe in. It's the same as what I did with my parents. I stood up for what I believed in and I left the house at 16 and I've been doing it ever since. I'm not going to stop my way of living and stop my understanding of kindness and compassion towards one another on account of how everybody else is an ass. If I'm kind, sooner or later everybody else will catch on. *Have you heard of anyone getting arrested?* Yeah my ex-girlfriend, she got arrested for making out with her girlfriend in Hamra (neighborhood in West Beirut where American University of Beirut is located). Right in the middle of Hamra Street, which I thought was ridiculous to start with. Granted she was Australian so they couldn't haul her off - they hauled her off and she pulled out her Australian passport and they let her go. But it was very bad. They ridiculed her, the humiliated her - and I don't even know what happened to the other girl. The other girl was American so they both got out of it. But if you have Lebanese citizenship...like I have a Lebanese one and an American one, and even if I get arrested they won't even look at my American - it doesn't exist to them. I'm Lebanese. I have a Lebanese passport and to them that's the first thing. They don't care what kind of passport you have if you're Lebanese on Lebanese soil you're going to follow Lebanese law.

Although only one of the respondents that I interviewed had actually been arrested under Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, it is common knowledge that the non-heterosexual acts that the women I interviewed are engaging in, are prohibited by the state. Hala's response indicates the state's selective approach to enforcing the law and reveals how the state only tolerates acts that are against the "order of nature" if you are not Lebanese. The women that I interviewed acknowledged the difficulties that come with changing the prevalent views of society because the prejudice against them is ingrained in the society. Although they use different approaches to living within oppressive social constraints, they broadly share a perspective about how difficult it will be to abolish these constraints.

### **Pressures of Marriage From Family or Their Own Concepts of Marriage**

In the Arab world, marriage is not only a time-honored tradition, but also a rite of passage. There are very few households of single people in the region as marriage is the norm and unmarried women (and often men) tend to live with their parents. I was curious to know how the women that I interviewed were dealing with pressure from their family or society to get married. As the unmarried daughter of a Lebanese man, I am facing some of these same pressures myself.

Rana and Leila are both very serious about getting married to each other one day, but neither of them has logistically figured out how to proceed. In two separate interviews they both voiced similar concerns:

[RANA] (We're talking about her current relationship with a woman) *What do you see for your future?* Well she wants to get married. And I'm down with getting married but it's just a little complicated for me right now. I don't know how I'm going to do that. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm down with marriage. I don't see a problem with it but I just need to find a way to work around the parents, specifically my mother. And we would have to go somewhere like Canada or the States to get married because it's impossible here in the Middle East. *Do you want to have kids?* Yes definitely. *How is*

*that going to happen?* (Pointing to a male friend) He's going to be our donor. I'm just scared of birth so I think my girlfriend will do it.

[LEILA] *Did you guys talk about a future together?* Yes and that's why we went to the States. We were even getting adoption brochures to see what the deal was about adopting.

*Do you ever plan on telling them?* (I'm referring to her parents) Yes. I think if I'm going to settle down with someone, and by that I mean moving in, moving somewhere. *Maybe marriage?* Yes of course, but with a Saudi passport it's impossible. Ahh, marriage. If I could, I think I would be marrying Rana now.

As of 2013 when this thesis was written, same-sex marriage in the United States is only legal in a handful of states and is not recognized federally. Many respondents spoke of whimsically moving to the States or Canada to get married to their same-sex partners but did not fully understand the process. In addition to facing uncertainties about marriage, the women that I interviewed are in same-sex relationships that would not allow them to have biological kids. Several of them told me of a woman that they had heard of who had a one-night stand with a man just so that she and her girlfriend could have a child. Given that a pregnancy out of wedlock would be unacceptable for the large majority of Lebanese women regardless of sexuality, it seems as though no one is willing to follow in this woman's footsteps to have a child. I found that most respondents could not conceive of starting a family without a man. This indicated to me that the hetero-normative ideas regarding family were fixed and deeply rooted. In casual conversations women would automatically tell me that they think that they need a man to have a family and other alternatives did not even come up, and possibly aren't known to them. I asked some women if they had even considered adoption or other means of impregnation, but no one had. Danya is brutally honest about how she wants her future to play out. She tells me that her ultimate goal is to have children, so she has resigned herself to messing around now with women and then settling down with a man in order to have a child:

*Do you think you'll end up with a man or a woman?* In a way I kind of hope that it's a man...and this is for one reason only. I really want kids. I really want my own kids. I want someone I chose to say let's create spawn and have them rule the world with me. Eventually, because honestly there is something that I noticed...there's nothing more important than family. And if you don't have one, make one.

It is clear that most of the women I interviewed would not be following the traditional path for marriage or family that their parents envisioned for them. Some of the women expect to one day be able to live the way they want to, but acknowledge that it will require leaving Lebanon. Part of the difficulty of doing this is the strength of family ties that makes both women hesitant to make a total break from them, but unsure how to handle the relationship while asserting their freedom and at the same time desiring family closeness. While this attitude is not unique to Lebanon, by not fulfilling their parents' wishes, the women I interviewed are again working against the established and customary institutions and defining themselves in unconventional ways. In sum, there are two distinct paths that the women I interviewed articulated to me: one in which they see themselves as reproducing the "family," just differently, and the other as choosing to have a family in known and accepted societal terms while not necessarily disavowing their homosexual desires or identifications.

### **Generational Differences**

Out of the twenty women that I interviewed, only one woman is completely out to her parents that she is non-heterosexual. For the remainder of the women I interviewed, at least someone in their family is aware and does know about their sexuality, but the majority of the time it is someone that is of the same generation as they are, such as a brother, sister or cousin. This generational divide between whom they can tell and who they fear cannot handle the truth is very important when considering the future for these women. I have noticed that no one has thought ahead to how long this type of falsehood

can exist. No one has really considered their biological clocks, or the fact that they might end up living their lives in the same deceptive holding patterns for years. They are constantly sneaking around, lying about whom they are out with, lying about their “friend” who is really their significant other. Almost all of Nour’s extended family is aware that she is non-heterosexual, but she has never told her parents the truth:

*Does your family know?* My sister, her husband, the brother of her husband and my brother’s wife. I think my mom, but she’s in denial. I think both of my parents know but they’re in denial. *So you’ve never really told them?* No not my mom or my dad. But I have told my sister and my cousins.

Danya is more comfortable with strangers in Lebanon knowing about her sexuality, but told me that she would be unsure of how to act if her parents found out:

*Does anyone know about your relationships with women?* My sisters. Half of the Lebanese community. (Joking about her promiscuity).

Dima has gone to great lengths to ensure that her parents never find out about her different sexuality. Her only way out of telling them the truth is to leave the Arab world and settle in a new location:

*Do your parents know?* No. They have no idea. *Not even a suspicion?* Nothing. *Do you think you’re going to tell them?* (big sigh) Maybe my mom...but eventually and only maybe. Maybe. But my dad. No way. He would be heartbroken because he wants to see his kids get married and all of that. No I can’t tell my dad...no way. *So how are you planning on living your life?* As long as my parents are not pressuring me to get married, I think I’m going to be fine. Eventually I don’t want to stay in the Arab world...I want to go to Europe or London or somewhere like that. So I don’t know...I think eventually...I don’t know...I guess until the time comes we will see because I don’t know how it’s going to be. I might have my own life or I might still be living in Lebanon or Dubai for all I know so I have no idea.

The fact that the nineteen out of twenty respondents cannot be truthful with their parents about their sexuality only reinforces the inflexible and traditional structure of family in the Arab world.

### **“Alternative Family”**

In the Arab world, because the family is such an important factor in an

individual's life, it is hard for one to exist as an autonomous being outside the framework of the family. The notion of personal identity that is self-determined, and unrelated to and not reliant on the family is absolutely unheard of in the Middle East. For some families the head of the family makes the decisions that he sees best and as a subordinate member of the family you really do not have a say. The patriarchal type of existence under the rule of the family makes it very difficult for members of a society to understand and express themselves - especially their sexuality - in the same manner and with the same freedoms that we are able to in the United States. If someone from America wishes to identify sexually with a label that is something other than the normative heterosexual label, they have many more resources to turn to, with or without the blessing of their families. This is simply not the case in the Middle East.

All across the United States, social institutions, programs, and groups have organically come into existence specifically to help people understand their sexual identity and the way they want to live their lives. These programs and institutions have taken shape and appeared as a result of the queer kinships that have formed as an alternative to the family. It is clear that many of the women that I interviewed want to tell their families that they are not interested in getting married or having kids with a man, yet they are afraid to do this, and they do not have the same opportunities or even desires to turn away from their families in search of their own destinies. Because these women have not been given the opportunity to exist as an autonomous independent entity, the normative form of kinship is all that they know and perhaps all they will ever know.

The traditional understanding of family doesn't make space for differentness, so there has to be an alternative creation of family or network of support. This concept is not

well understood in Lebanon or the larger Arab world, however, it is happening slowly. There is a community of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon, but like any community, there are fissures and it is not a homogenous group. In thinking about the gay community in the United States, typically it is becoming the case that when young men or women come “out of the closet” they have support networks and “alternative families” that they can run to for help. This isn’t necessarily the case in Lebanon.

### **Final Thoughts**

While I am hopeful that the perspectives presented here from non-heterosexual women in Lebanon are integral to gaining insight into a group that is largely overlooked, I also hope that this work sheds light on their own identifications of the non-heterosexual experience in Lebanon. Through first person accounts and personal vignettes presented throughout this thesis I have attempted to offer readers a snapshot of a particular generation of women who are making sense of a certain set of practices that are traditionally regarded as taboo in Lebanon. My research demonstrates that while these women are still working through many of the obstacles and complications that they are faced with and limited by, they are able to work to exist in their own ways as non-heterosexuals in Lebanon. While as a researcher I was sometimes uncomfortable overly intellectualizing these women’s subjective experiences, I believe that the stories that I have included provide testimony to what their lives and experiences are like in Lebanon and that I have been successful in pointing to many of the ways in which they negotiate their identities within their contexts. For this reason, I am confident that this study will be informative to other women in Lebanon who may be questioning their sexualities or unsure of how to make sense of what they are feeling.

Because the human experience is so diverse and complex it is difficult to lay substantial claims and conclude here with certainty what life is like for all non-heterosexuals in Lebanon. While I agree with Joseph Massad that the rubric of the Western-dominated Gay International has become ubiquitous and omnipresent in the region and especially in Lebanon, I do believe that an honest assessment of the women that I interviewed would reveal that the majority of them openly embrace this paradigm. Because human sexuality is abstract, the hetero/homo binary seems for some to offer a more concrete way to make sense of certain desires and practices. Sure, there may be some cases like Yasmine, who in not applying non-heterosexual identifiers when describing her own sexuality (even though she was dating someone of the same sex) is evidence of the type of person for whom the Gay International's template of framing acts and identities is not reaching. Perhaps for her, the binary holds less significance or meaning or perhaps she has other ways of understanding herself.

As this thesis demonstrates, the topic of sexuality in the Arab world is fundamentally complex and cannot be understood as one-dimensional. I have explored the themes of discourse of identity, the space and geography of Lebanon and the Arab family and society to understand how these all affect non-heterosexual women. While the laws that exist regarding sexuality differ from country to country, so does the level of societal tolerance and potential punishment from the state. There is also variance in the practices of identification as to what constitutes sexual minorities and differentness. Is there an identity behind a sexual act, or does the act define the identity? The ongoing discourse and increased recognition of a people that wish to live their lives in the Arab world and claiming a different sexuality is unmistakably apparent and must not be

ignored. Through advocacy groups such as Meem and Helem in Lebanon and an increased interest through scholarship, we are beginning to see the emergence of group of people who embrace the Gay International and wish to make their cause known. We are also at a time in the United States where the issue of sexual differentness is not fully accepted or recognized by our traditional institutions. Thomas Jefferson was particularly perceptive of the advancements to come when he remarked, “Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners of opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.” With this in mind, perhaps this research is evidence that Lebanon may be a landscape of hope for the future of sexual minorities in the Arab world.

When I initially began researching this topic of study I noted the fact that the overwhelming majority of information was written on homosexual males in the region. While research on homosexual men adds to the scholarship on sexual differentness in this part of the world, I knew it necessary to study females in similar situations. I hope that through this thesis I am contributing to a lacuna in Arab Studies while at the same time enhancing our understandings of the complex nature of the human experience. I was once told that theses are initial forays into a topic or field of study and I hope that by presenting these women’s stories I have been able to open space for discussion about the experiences and identifications for non-heterosexual women in Lebanon.

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