Lebanese Colonial Hang-ups: Anti-Blackness and the Kafala System in Lebanon

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Abstract
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In this project I argue that a complicated and nuanced understanding of gendered racial configurations in the Middle East, and specifically within the Lebanese context, through and Arab and Islamic feminist perspective can help strengthen transnational solidarities in finding connections through and fighting global oppressions. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how gendered racial constructions within the Lebanese context, continue to place migrant domestic workers in extremely vulnerable positions by relying on anti-Blackness. This project will look at mediated performances of anti-Blackness through a critical understanding of heteropatriarchal, colonial and racist spaces within the Lebanese context.

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Lebanese Colonial Hang-ups: Anti-Blackness and the Kafala System in Lebanon

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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by

Sarah Gonzalez Noveiri

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Advisor: Dr. Santhosh Chandrashekar
Abstract

Lebanon’s colonial legacy has not only influenced the legal and political systems which operate in the country today. As I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation, the strength and cementation of these systems can be seen as a consequence of negotiations of identity, citizenship and nation state that took place during the Ottoman Empire and French colonial rule. The Kafala is one of such systems that developed through the Ottoman Empire and against the backdrop of European colonization. Discourses of race, citizenship, gender and sexuality that were being negotiated by colonial citizens and colonial powers, served to cement the racialized and gendered logics that continue to uphold Kafala today.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................................... iii

List of Figures.................................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter One: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

  A Love letter ................................................................................................................................... 1
  Background ...................................................................................................................................... 2
  There is a deep racial problem in Lebanon ..................................................................................... 3
  Lebanese Historical Context: How the Lebanese Socio-Political System Came to be .................. 8
  Contextualizing Global Migrant Domestic Work and the Kafala System in Lebanon ............ 13
  Muslim Arab Transnational Feminism: Guiding Principles and Politics .................................... 17
  A Performative Rhetorical analytic of Lebanese Popular Culture .................................................. 25
  Chapter Summaries ......................................................................................................................... 32

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and the historical contextualization of Lebanon ................. 34

  Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 34
  Muslim Arab feminism through a Transnational Paradigm ........................................................... 37
  Historical context ............................................................................................................................ 55
    Race: Tracing Pre-Ottoman, Ottoman and European colonial racial configurations
    Influencing the Middle East ........................................................................................................... 57
    End of the Ottoman rule, European influence and Control ......................................................... 66
    Gender and sexuality: Ottoman rule and European Control ......................................................... 77

Chapter 3: Anti Blackness in Lebanese popular culture ................................................................. 85

  Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 85
  Racism in Arab media a short overview: .......................................................................................... 91
    The Colonial path to Racism in Arab media .................................................................................. 93
    MENA’s media and anti-Blackness ................................................................................................. 96
  Audiovisual analysis: Goumi by Myriam Fares ............................................................................. 101
    Lyrics ........................................................................................................................................... 101
    Goumi,The Video ......................................................................................................................... 102
    Neck rings .................................................................................................................................... 104
    Body paint .................................................................................................................................... 108
    White and gold face paint ............................................................................................................. 110
  “It’s not appropriation it’s appreciation” and erotic desires of multicultural neoliberalism in Lebanon ......................................................................................................................... 116
Chapter 4: Appropriating Black pain for personal gain: Complicity and forceful forgetting. ................................................................. 122

Introduction ........................................................................................................ 122

Lingering Colonial Photography and Third World Racialized Subjects ............... 126
Hopping on the Allyship Trend Train ................................................................. 132
  Black Lives Matter and Social media, a Brief Contextualization....................... 134

Analysis Discussion ............................................................................................ 138

Online Movements and Stolen Hashtags ............................................................. 145
Allyship, Solidarity and Other Made-up Stories ................................................... 154

Chapter 5: Conclusion ......................................................................................... 160

From Shared Complicity to Shared Accountability ............................................. 160
Protests, Kafala, COVID_19 and A Country in Turmoil ....................................... 164

The Hostage Taker ............................................................................................... 170
History, Popular Culture, Politics and Lebanese Social Movements .................... 173

Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 183

References ........................................................................................................... 187
List of Figures

Figure 1: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 1 102
Figure 2: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 2 104
Figure 3: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 3 108
Figure 4: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 4 110
Figure 5: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 5 112

Figure 6: Tania Saleh BLM Support Photo 139
Figure 7: Tania Saleh's Response to Backlash 143
Figure 8: Mixed Feelings Exhibit 1, Portraits 150
Chapter One: Introduction
A Love letter

My beloved Lebanon,

For me Lebanon is home. For me, Lebanon is more than a country; it is the simultaneous physical existence of eternal hope and despair. A space where nothing has ever been constant. A country that can be loved and criticized in the same sentence. And that is beautiful. Lebanon is a land of persistence despite the oppressive colonial/political regimes and the never-ending struggle. Lebanon is of simultaneous turmoil and unconditional love. “Habib Albe Lubnan” loosely translates to the love of my heart. And it is true, Lebanon is my love and what I long for when darkness takes over me. I miss you every day. We have been forced to live a long-distance relationship where our short yearly encounters are reminiscent of the first summer teenage romance. A first love.

I am never satisfied with our encounters, I lust for your busy streets, cars honking through Hamra street, the smells of food and gas, the kindness and love of your people. I crave the discussions that take place in your coffee shops and taxis, often political and full of anger and a desperation for change. I can’t live without your wild nightlife and vibrant musical artistry. Your sunsets are like in no other place in the world. How can I not love your imperfect perfection? My love for you is what brought me to the work I do. My love for you is what makes me want to radically imagine a different Lebanon, free from political corruption, a country that recognizes and is able to deal with its colonial
legacies. I want you free. My love for you is why I write. It is why I critique. It is why I chose the path of continuous learning and activism. I want a just Lebanon. I love you, and I, as my work, are eternally devoted to you.

**Background**

Less than a year has passed since the ammonium nitrate explosion engulfed half of Beirut. My pain pales in comparison to the agony of the 300,000 people who have become homeless in a split second, or the families that have lost loved ones; at least 215 dead and 7,500 injured. At the same time, seeing my beloved Beirut blow up into ashes due to decades of political inaction, corruption and negligence is a feeling hard to describe for those of us who live in the diaspora. I can’t remember how many hours I’ve spent crying. Time seems so trivial and unimportant. Deadlines fall through the cracks and I cannot help but think of the firefighters that were given a death sentence when they were asked to stop a fire in the Beirut port without informing them of the 2,750 tons of explosives that were being stored there.

I’ve seen the damage in countless videos and photographs that family and friends have sent. Their lives have forever changed once again, and the blast still seems unreal. The streets and sidewalks that I visited last year, the coffee shops I worked at, decimated. Everything is under rubble. Yet, once again, Lebanese civilian volunteers are the ones picking up the pieces with no governmental help or support whatsoever. This trauma, and these memories, are unfortunately nothing new to the Lebanese people. Our parents had to live through a Civil War; so desperate calls to family and friends who were near the blast site, and a fear of the worst, always looming, seems so natural to them. Again, another generation living in collective trauma because of the same sectarian political
system that continues to suffocate the country. I don’t know how much longer Lebanon will fight for air; our last breath seems closer than ever before.

At the same time, it’s encouraging to see the devastation being cleaned up by young volunteers coming together after yet another catastrophe we have no control over. It’s heartwarming to see how many other countries and organizations are currently offering aid to the people as opposed to the government. But, as stated by the Lebanese Anti-Racism Movement (2020), these efforts are contaminated by racism. Volunteers denounce that “certain relief efforts, organized by political parties, NGOs, and unaffiliated individual initiatives, are deliberately excluding non-Lebanese people” (Anti-Racism Movement, 2020). This exclusion is nothing new. Migrant workers, particularly migrant domestic workers and refugees, have been systematically dehumanized in our country. Recall when our government attempted to blame Palestinian and Syrian refugees for the fires of summer 2019. Hence, I join the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon¹ and name some of the people we have lost that Lebanon refuses to recognize.


There is a deep racial problem in Lebanon

I have always spent all my summers in Beirut, visiting family and friends. One of our favorite pass times is spending time at the beach. We could spend all day there, from

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¹ Reports of non-Lebanese deaths: https://armlebanon.org/content/beirut-blast-solidarity-tainted-racism
sunrise to sunset. On an extremely humid and hot morning, my cousins and I walked from our apartment home close to the Cornish to the Riviera hotel five minutes away. The sweating was terrible and the humidity suffocating. When we got to the resort entrance, our bags were checked by security to make sure we’re not bringing outside food, beverages, or weapons. While this was going on, I remember focusing on a sign that was placed right after the cashier’s desk that read “No maids allowed in pool.” I remember thinking that this is very classist. In all honesty, I didn’t think of it again until a couple years later when a friend texted, “We’re not going to Riviera anymore as they’re racist pieces of shit.” I asked him what had happened, and he said that the staff had forced a dark-skinned woman out of the pool presuming she was a maid. This woman, who had been publicly humiliated and forcibly removed, was none other than the wife of the ambassador to the Philippines in Lebanon who happened to be doing her morning fitness exercises there.

She was not a maid, yet the color of her skin and her ethnicity signified to the resort staff otherwise. I stopped to think, knowing what I know now, I don’t believe I would have understood the sign of “no maids allowed” as anything other than class-based discrimination. After the incident we just stopped visiting the resort but continued to go to others that still had “no maids allowed” signs. In fact, there are still many beaches that either deny migrant domestic workers entry all together or forbid them from swimming. This is to say that I would not have been able to ask the questions that I ask in this introduction if it weren’t for the extraordinary labor of love and radical resistance of BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color), specifically located in the U.S. My politics, my work, my ethics and morals and my desire for a just world built on intentional and
material decolonization and anti-racism is all thanks to Black, Indigenous and Brown scholars, writers, artists and poets.

I use the above performative pieces to contextualize and set the stage for what troubles me most as a scholar and activist, and why I come to ask the questions I have. I do not want to center myself in this study, but I believe it will be important for my readers to know what is at stake for me in writing about this issue. Lebanon has a race problem. Therefore, I am interested in unpacking the racial assumptions that Lebanese society has and finding the connections to our colonial past in order to help understand the precariousness that migrant domestic workers face. Hence, the main question that organizes my project is: how are Lebanon’s racial assumptions related to a colonial past? How do they inform the lived experiences of migrant domestic workers?

I argue that a complicated and nuanced understanding of gendered racial configurations in the Middle East, and specifically within the Lebanese context, through an Arab and Islamic feminist perspective that attends to Blackness and anti-Blackness can help strengthen transnational solidarities in finding connections through and fighting global oppressions. As a queer Spaniard and Muslim Lebanese feminist woman, I believe it is my responsibility to look at the ways in which we participate in the oppression of Others. Consequently, I want to complicate the ways in which we think and talk about gendered racial oppression in Global South locations so we can further understand the vulnerable spaces that migrant domestic workers occupy in Lebanon. I believe that a more nuanced undertaking of historical and colonial configurations of race and gender can help us uncover what Flores (2014) calls the messiness, ambiguity and contestation of race.
Global migration for domestic labor is not a new occurrence. Stemming from colonial times, the movement of peoples across borders continues to be tied to “complex relations of power” (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 60). Transnational migration is structured by traces of colonialism in what we call the ‘post-colonial’ world. As Rodriguez (2007) states, “transnational migration has evolved in a global setting marked by postcolonial cultural, economic, and political relationships, as well as by new forms of imperial power” (p. 60). Ong (2006) for example, observes how the servitude of migrant domestic workers “emerges out of a postcolonial intersection of racialized nationalism, [gendered labor], neoliberal strategies, and disjunctive moral economies based on kinship and ethnicity” (p. 198).

Lebanon’s colonial legacy has not only influenced the legal and political systems which operate in the country today. As I hope to demonstrate in the pages below and chapters to come, the resilience of these systems can be seen as a consequence of negotiations of identity, citizenship and nation state that took place during the Ottoman Empire and French colonial rule. The Kafala is one such system that developed through the Ottoman Empire and against the backdrop of European colonization. Discourses of race, citizenship, gender and sexuality that were being negotiated by colonial citizens and colonial powers, served to cement the racialized and gendered logics that continue to uphold the sectarian political system and particularly Kafala.

Many journalists and activists in Lebanon continue to ask for the abolishment of Kafala or for amendments to the laws that regulate it. However, one of the aims of this dissertation is to demonstrate the usefulness of a deeper understanding of where gendered and racialized assumptions that Lebanese nationals have towards migrant domestic
workers come from so we can complicate discourses that call for the abolishment of the system. Would our racist ideologies change if the Kafala was no longer in place? Would adding migrant domestic workers to our labor code change their vulnerability? Unfortunately, I believe not. Abolishing the Kafala without attending to its undergirding structures (racism and sexism) will ensure that certain people will continue to be oppressed.

I am not trying to suggest that abolishing the Kafala is futile. Rather, I want to dig deeper in order to understand why this system has become so accepted and normalized. Of course, I am in favor of abolishment, which, I think is necessary to move forward. At the same time, I worry that it will not be enough. The attitudes that Lebanese people have towards migrant workers are drenched in racist and heteropatriarchal ideologies. Hence, paying attention to anti-blackness through an Arab and Islamic perspective that adopts a transnational model of solidarity is of great importance.

As such, the purpose of this dissertation is to look at how gendered racial understandings within the Lebanese context rely on anti-Blackness to continue placing migrant domestic workers in extremely vulnerable positions. Anti-Blackness was strengthened during the colonial period of Ottoman rule and cemented throughout the transition to European occupation. The following chapters look at mediated performances of anti-Blackness through a critical understanding of heteropatriarchal, colonial and racist spaces within the Lebanese context. As I write this introduction, Lebanese nationals have continued the protests that started in October 2019, weeks after the ammonium nitrate explosion. These protests demand the resignation of the entire political system, and
advocate for a reconfiguration that adopts an anti-sectarian, secular government and liberal market system.

This has become a key moment to examine the ‘skeletons in our own closets’ and look at how racialized staged performances protect, reinforce and reproduce systems of power such as the Kafala in Lebanon against the backdrop of a country that purportedly wants to see colonial influences in their socio-religious-political climate be erased. By racialized staged performances I mean the ways in which racialized individuals are represented in popular culture. Staged performances do not necessarily have to take place in what we understand as a physical theatre. Rather, I am talking about performances of the Other from a Lebanese standpoint that appear in staged (made up) audiovisual materials such as music videos, comedy sketches, movies and documentaries.

In the following pages of this introduction I first contextualize global migrant domestic work and expand on the Lebanese historical context as it relates to heteropatriarchy, colonialism and race. Second, I outline the frameworks of Arab, Islamic and Transnational feminism that are weaved in all the chapters of this dissertation. Third, I detail how a performative rhetorical approach as theory, method and methodology guides the aforementioned feminisms in revealing how anti-Blackness is cemented in the Lebanese context. The aforementioned feminisms and the performative rhetorical approach will act as the train tracks that carry and guide each chapter. Finally, I summarize the organization and main arguments of each chapter.

**Lebanese Historical Context: How the Lebanese Socio-Political System Came to be**

For the purpose of this introduction, I will shift our focus mostly towards the ongoing protests in Lebanon taking place before and after the explosion of August 4, and
the meaning of these protests to conversations about racism and migrant domestic work. However, in order to make sense of Lebanese frustrations, I will outline some of the historical context of the region that helps us situate the protests today in this introduction and expand on the historical context in the next chapter. The area now known as the Lebanese Republic has historically had contact with the West and its socio-economic-political logics, as well as the West having access to and influencing Middle Eastern regions. Therefore, understandings and conceptualizations of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion and citizenship have been negotiated between colonizers and the colonized while, at the same time, being tied to enterprises of power (Thompson, 2000).

European influence on Mount Lebanon and surrounding areas was already being cemented before the Allies defeated the Ottoman Empire in 1918 (Salibi, 1998; Kaufman, 2014; Thompson, 2000). Salibi (1998) for example, notes that during the nineteenth century, Mount Lebanon and greater Syria were already heavily exposed to European powers. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the end of World War I, opened up the possibility for Allies to reconfigure a large portion of the global geopolitical map (Salibi, 1998). Colonized regions under German control were re-distributed between French and British powers. Sectarian politics, therefore, were cemented while the re-distribution of territories was being consolidated by Britain and France.

During this same time period, Christian Maronites were demonstrating on the streets of Beirut calling for their separation from Syrian Arabs. They were, therefore, not calling for independence from France, considered to be their “mother” and savior (Salibi, 1998), but working for a separate configuration that would separate the people of Mount Lebanon from Arabs in general. This detail is important to note because it also constitutes
part of the consolidation of sectarian politics in Lebanon. Arab nationalists, who were mainly part of the Muslim and Druze sects, were in favor of unifying Mount Lebanon to Syrian territories, whereas Christian Lebanese nationalists were in favor of French and British territorial partitions. According to Mikdashi (2019), the Lebanese constitution was declared in 1926 under French control, and it was imperative in producing legal, bureaucratic and ideological configurations that continue to inform the Lebanese socio-political system today. Conceptualizations of nation state and citizenship were, therefore, structured by the Western creation of Arab states and within the close surveillance of colonizing powers (Choueiri, 2013). In addition, and particularly in the context of Lebanon, the newly created state mimicked the social order of its colonial power: France.

Arab understandings of race were influenced by European racial classifications before and during the fall of the Ottoman Empire, throughout European occupation of the Middle Eastern region, and continue to be influenced by Western standards today. As such, skin color became one of the main frameworks that positioned people within an Arab social hierarchy. According to Walz and Cuno (2010), we find evidence in Egyptian census records during the Ottoman period that point towards how Africans were classified based on not only origin but skin color, which continuously positioned them in a status of servitude. They found that Blackness and Sudanese origins were the identifiers usually associated with slavery, whereas whiteness (the Slavs) or proximity to whiteness (white Arabs) were considered to be more apt for positions such as commanders or higher-level officers of the military force.

When considering racial assumptions in present day Lebanon, and in connection to migrant domestic workers, skin color continues to denote inferiority. For example,
migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are referred to as ‘sirlankiye’ (from Sri Lanka) regardless of what their national origins are. If the migrant domestic worker has dark skin color, that is the term used. On the other hand, migrant domestic workers from the Philippines, who happen to be of much lighter complexion, are referred to as ‘filipiniye’ thereby reducing the Ottoman significance of national origin as a racial classifier and increasing the significance of skin color. This is not to suggest that skin color did not play an important role during the Ottoman period. Imagine a balance with multiple scales. Each scale represents different identifying factors such as race, nationality, education and religion among others. During the Ottoman period, it can be said that the position of the scales barely differs from one to another. Throughout the years it might change, making the scales move, but for the most part they balance each other. Once European contact became more prominent, skin color would be given more weight, therefore, completely unbalancing the equation. What I am trying to point out is that even though skin color did have significance during the Ottoman period, it was always coupled with national origin, education, religion etc. Once contact with European powers increased, skin color became the main construct to delineate a social hierarchy.

In a different example, reported by Lynch (2010), we see how racial configurations of anti-Blackness often times result in the exclusion of migrant domestic workers from public spaces, in addition to spaces protected by law. Some beaches and resorts deny entry altogether to migrant domestic workers (most of the beaches in Lebanon are privately owned by resorts or hotels) while some deny them the possibility of swimming but allow them to enter the space (so they can continue to watch over the children of the ‘madams’). Therefore, racial configurations that rely on anti-Blackness
and are traditionally seen as specific to the U.S. and other European powers were being translated and taught in Mount Lebanon and larger Syria within discussions constructing our own Arab identity and nationality (Gualtieri, 2009; Massad, 2008). In this way, colonial citizens in Lebanon were not only negotiating ways of understanding their own identity during colonial times, but they were also doing so against the backdrop of U.S. racial logics.

The Middle East has always been home to multiple religious sects. In Lebanon alone, there are 18 officially recognized religious communities. Different religious communities and communal affiliations existed in the area of Mount Lebanon during the Ottoman caliphate, through European colonial occupation, and today. Christian Maronites managed to secure positions of power politically and religiously within the area of Mount Lebanon, making it a privileged province within Ottoman political, religious and economic realms that would have the backing of France and other Western powers.

The development of notions of civilization, culture, modernity and progress as opposed to the backwardness of Others, have been focal points of concern to the West. As a result of colonization, colonized citizens have adopted these civilizational measures to either maintain some parts of their identity or to reform their societies in resemblance with the West. These discussions on who belongs in the modern world and who does not can still be seen today. According to Ayoub (2019), there are still Lebanese elites and their intermediaries that are invested in maintaining the status quo, which at the moment makes it difficult for us to effect any real change. However, he also stresses the importance of continuing the anti-sectarian protests in order to protect those who do not
fit within the heteropatriarchal, capitalist and sectarian logics that dominate Lebanese politics today. Throughout this dissertation, I hope to situate myself within a discussion that connects heteropatriarchal and racist structures to colonial influences and logics using an Arab, Islamic and transnational framework guided by a performance ethic in order to complicate our understandings of migrant domestic work experiences in Lebanon.

**Contextualizing Global Migrant Domestic Work and the Kafala System in Lebanon**

The labor of domestic work is not only relegated to women because of its gendered features (such as cleaning, cooking and care-giving) but because it is also considered work of little value and little effort (Mills, 2003; Wade, 2013) as evidenced in the Lebanese Labor Codes that purposefully omit non-Lebanese and Lebanese domestic workers alike. Apart from this type of work being gendered, it is also racialized since most of the women participating in domestic work programs across the capitalist world are migrant women mostly from the Global South as opposed to “local” people or “locals” (Gomes, 2018). Migrant domestic work, mainly comprised of women, make up some of the largest percentages of the migrant work force. For example, “the majority of workers migrating from the Philippines to the Middle East are women” (Gomes, 2018, p. 761). In other words, the way in which gendered and racialized labor is understood positions female bodies from the global south as the most acceptable for domestic and care work (Rodriguez, 2008) since they “tend to be darker-skinned and racially marked” (Wade, 2013, p. 195) within the global capitalist market. This understanding is pervasive globally, and specifically in Lebanon where the imposed inferiority of migrant domestic workers is informed by racial and gendered logics.
According to Cheah (2007) global capitalism “involves two macroscopic forms of power, that of state formations and political economic systems, as they are constituted and interact in a global theater” (p. 83). In addition, he argues that “the macrological formations of global capital and international geopolitics manage to exert a hold on the unpredictable micrological functioning of power through the ideological formation of subjects” (p.83). In this way, understandings of anti-Blackness that affect migrant domestic work subjecthood within the Lebanese context, are informed by the colonial state formation and the creation of an economic political system that are linked to a larger global capitalist economy. Cheah (2007) shows that temporary migrant workers are forced into the international division of labor because their interests are crafted as “subjects of needs” in global capitalism (p. 90). In addition, Ong (2006) argues that “concerns of the wealthier nation to secure middle-class entitlements depend on the availability of foreign others, creating an environment of class privilege and bias that tolerates slave-like conditions” (p. 198). In a later reading Cheah (2011) develops their thoughts on the ideological subject formation to suggest that processes of colonization have produced “the colonial subject/indigenous elite and the postcolonial/third world subject as native informant, that function to mute the subaltern’s voice and interests” (p. 81).

Ong (2006) observes that the ways in which migrants, refugees and illegal immigrants are placed into different categories, define them “in ways that make their rights claims external to citizenship and the law” (p. 196). This is ever present in the Lebanese socio-political climate where Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees and migrant domestic workers are kept outside of citizenship. The most recent example, which I will
expand below, is in the way that the Lebanese government scapegoats both Syrian and Palestinian refugees to avoid accountability for our country’s mismanagement and economic crisis being protested for months, ensuring that migrants are not able to claim citizenship regardless of how long they have lived in the country or even if they are born in Lebanon (many Palestinian refugees have been born in Lebanese refugee camps).

The ways in which the state designates classifications for migrant domestic workers permeates and trickles down to our inner consciousness and can manifest in popular culture among other sites. It is therefore not surprising that the “state system interacts with other ethical regimes [religious sectarian politics, the family, the personal, and popular culture] that also operate along a continuum of inclusion and exclusion” (Ong, 2006, p. 197).

It is important to look at staged performances of anti-Blackness in Lebanese popular culture in order to better understand the attitude towards migrant domestic labor in its historical and local specificity so we can further complicate our grasp of capitalism, citizenship, race, gender, sexuality, heteropatriarchy and colonial influence. Being able to hire a domestic worker in Lebanon has become a sign of wealth and prosperity, and “entitlement of middle and upper-classes” (Ong, 2006, p.196) throughout the country. As an easily interchangeable type of laborer, women in the business are considered essential to keeping up with social status in cities like Beirut. As Ong (2006) puts it, “low-skill foreign women circulate in zones of exception that support the citadels of [the Middle East]” (p. 196).

It has become common knowledge among us Lebanese that migrant domestic workers face gendered violence, discrimination, denigration, and racial and ethnic
violence in Lebanon under the Kafala system. The Kafala system controls and regulates the arrival and stay of migrants (mostly women) who come to Lebanon and perform “care-giving” labor. Put differently, it relegates the control of every legal aspect of a migrant domestic worker’s existence in Lebanon to the family that is sponsoring them. In this way, not only are their visas tied to their employer’s family name, but so are all their work permits and other paperwork that guarantees their legal stay in the country.

According to Kaedbey (2014), “the [Kafala] system ties the immigration status of the worker to that of her employer so that any kind of movement – of coming and going, of traveling, living situation, buying and selling and working, of changing jobs – is determined by their employer” (p. 144). Through the exclusion of migrant domestic workers from different labor laws and regulations, the Lebanese government is able to maintain migrant worker’s temporary nature so as to prevent migrant workers from acquiring citizenship or nationality.

In Lebanon, only Lebanese fathers are able to pass down citizenship to their children. Women on the other hand, are not. This is one of the many ways in which the Lebanese state prevents migrant workers from acquiring citizenship through control and surveillance of their gendered sexuality, and therefore denies claims to rights, nationality and belonging. The Lebanese government prohibits romantic and sexual relationships between migrant domestic workers and Lebanese nationals, so that Lebanese men are not able to pass on citizenship to children. In addition, and according to recent changes in labor contractual agreements, the entry to the country for a migrant domestic worker has to be approved by the General Security Council, opening up the possibility of considering these women workers as threats to national security and always as dispensable outsiders.
Even though the entirety of legal rules and controls (salary, health insurance, passport, work permits among others) is relegated to the family employing migrant workers, the government continues to surveil and monitor these women’s bodies and movements. For example, if a migrant domestic worker wants to change employers for better pay, opportunities, or to escape abuse, they would first have to ask permission from the family they are already working for and then go through governmental agencies to change all their legal documents, if the original family allows it. Among other things, the Kafala system ensures that the migrant worker’s immigration status and all that accompanies it, is directly tied to the employer for as long as their contract is in place. However, I do want to note that these employment contracts cannot be easily broken by the workers. Hence, it is usually, if not always, up to the employer whether a contract is broken or not, often times leaving migrant domestic workers in extremely precarious situations where abuse continues behind closed doors.

**Muslim Arab Transnational Feminism: Guiding Principles and Politics**

Arab women’s movements gained traction within specific historical contexts that were scrutinized locally, regionally, and internationally through Western understandings of Islam and Arabness as backward and oppressive. Some of the most influential factors in supporting the move towards Arab and Islamic feminism stem from opposition to colonization and the need for national liberation, as well as dispelling Western myths of Arab and Muslim women being oppressed by their religion, culture or their men. It is important to note that Islamic and Arab feminism are usually differentiated depending on their focus on Islam. For a text to be considered part of the Islamic feminist canon, it is desirable that it references the Qur’an or religious beliefs (Chaudry, 2017). On the other
hand, for a text to be considered part of the Arab feminist canon, it must encompass the life experiences, culture and beliefs that emanate from Arabic speaking people or Arab countries. In this way, both Islamic and Arab feminisms encompass a myriad of beliefs, cultures, and language that converge and build multiple world views. This is not to say that the above-mentioned feminisms are two opposites that never cross paths. Rather, I want to point out how they interconnect, and how, often times, they inform substance and subjecthood simultaneously in the particular context of the Middle East.

Many non-Muslim individuals and scholars trust that Islam as a religion, and the Qur’an as the written word of God, oppresses and subjugates women. Therefore, a lot of the early scholarship found on Islamic feminism is predicated on the notion that Muslim women have the need to ‘defend’ Islam and the Qur’an from Western stereotypes (see Badran, 2013; Barlas, 2002; Seedat, 2013; Wadud, 1999). A specific example is offered by Barlas’ (2002) work, where the central question demonstrates the way in which her feminist work is directed towards a Western audience in order to defend the agency and integrity of Muslim women: “First, does Islam’s scripture, the Qur’an, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression? Does the Qur’an permit and encourage liberation for women?” (Barlas, 2002, p. 1).

Defining Islamic feminism is a complicated endeavor. Chaudhry (2013) perfectly captures this conundrum by explaining how claims to know (emphasis mine) Islam and who would be able to authoritatively decide what is Islamic feminism or not (among other things) is tainted by the patriarchal interpretations stemming from pre-colonial Islamic traditions. These Islamic traditions Chaudhry (2013) writes, prevent contemporary Muslims from envisioning other interpretations of Islam, or the Qur’an that
create a more just world. It is with this piece of advice or warning that I embrace what Chaudhry (2013) calls the egalitarian-authoritative dilemma, and I depart from what is known as two approaches to the Islamic tradition, particularly white supremacy and patriarchy. Thus, I will use Muslim feminism to name the feminist flame that has been passed on to many generations of my family and my Muslim upbringing. This means that while I may or may not use direct quotes from the Qur’an, my feminist standpoint is Muslim in nature.

Abdulhadi, Alsultany and Naber (2011) in their edited collection *Arab and Arab American Feminism*, explore the intersection between sexuality, gender, race, Orientalism, Islamophobia and Zionism to contextualize Arab and Arab American experiences. They question how those who live in the diaspora navigate their sense of belonging and citizenship when the countries where they live are constantly involved in wars on their nations of origin. They seek to undermine essentialist notions of Arab Americanness by including voices of women who travel within Arab and American geographies such as that of Noura Erakat.

The authors and contributors to this text demonstrate the inescapable stereotype of the victim Arab woman when Noura Erakat (2011) narrates how she was mistaken for a Latina by a fellow law student at Columbia University. This student thought of Erakat as Latina because she has ‘attitude’ and therefore, does not abide by the passive Arab woman stereotype. In a similar way, Jarmakani (2011) is told by a bartender in Atlanta that the notion of Arab feminism is an oxymoron. It is against this context, and following Abdulhadi et al. (2011) that I understand the Arab feminism that informs this project as “a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice,
economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and trans/[non-comforming] people ‘over here’ and ‘over there’” (p.xxxv)

For the purpose of this dissertation and for Muslim feminist work to develop productive discussions on migrant lived experience, I suggest the need to attend to the ways in which religious beliefs and/or the Qur’an inform our understandings of womanhood, race, family, reproduction, and labor. What I mean by this is that we need to attend to the ways in which we understand ourselves and the world around us through the lens that we grew up in. In other words, I aim to move away from ‘defending’ my religion (to a Western audience) and focus on what matters to me as a Muslim woman. In addition, for Arab feminism, I also move away from ‘defending’ my Arabness, and instead look to how racial, sexist and gendered configurations intersect with nationalism, citizenship and immigration among others.

My intention is to not speak for migrant workers, but instead to listen to them, while being vigilant about the consequences that my assumptions and worldviews might have on their lives. By no means am I saying that I have entered this research project without assumptions (I don’t believe that to be possible, and I think we all have assumptions of some sort) but rather my strategy consists of questioning myself at every turn of the research and writing process, and to try to be as transparent as I can be. I also follow Grewal and Kaplan (1994) and in considering the connections of various women’s experiences. I try to do my best in paying attention to the specificities of time, place, history and agency that already exist within these connections. I, therefore, suggest that a shift in focus to include discussions of Blackness, and anti-Blackness within Islamic
feminist discourse and Arab feminist discourse could help us uncover hidden
assumptions about migrant domestic work in Lebanon.

Consequently, I take inspiration from Carby (2007) and insist on looking at how
racism is constructed differently in different geopolitical locations, and in turn, how it
manifests differently, or works as, say, a different technology. In her essay *White Woman
Listen* (2007) Carby tracks racism both in British and U.S. feminism and notes how this
work had to be carried differently in order to show how oppression and racism manifests
differently in different locations. She then moves to demonstrate how anti-Blackness is
the common denominator in both spaces. In a similar way, this dissertation demonstrates
how anti-Blackness also drives racist configurations in Lebanon that stem and are
informed by racial configurations that can be at least traced to the Ottoman Empire.

Racist and gendered ideologies structure capitalist logics. As mentioned above,
the gendered and racialized constructions of migrant domestic work position women
from the global south as the most available subjects to this capitalist economy (Gomes,
2018; Jones, 2008; Rodriguez, 2007). According to Mohanty et al. (1991), “[racism] is an
ideology that legitimates the exclusion of nonwhite people from particular areas of social
and economic life, simultaneously promoting a tolerance of these inequities on the part of
the ruling class” (p.23). As I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation, Mohanty’s (1991)
definition does not allow for a nuanced understanding of how power structures such as
racism operate in third world locations. By Mohanty’s (1991) definition Lebanese women
would also be included in the non-white category. However, as I hope to demonstrate
below, the reality of racialized Others in third world locations is far more complicated.
This is especially prevalent within the Lebanese context where the ruling class (Lebanese
citizens) tolerate, and often times perpetuate abuses of racial and gendered discrimination against migrant workers. Put differently, as a sign of accumulation of property and wealth, and in connection to understandings of global capitalism, Lebanese families are complicit in perpetuating racist ideologies that promote and sustain gendered and racist structures (such as the Kafala system) placing migrant domestic workers in positions of vulnerability.

As developed further in the dissertation, migrant domestic workers are not included in the Lebanese Labor Code and their immigration status has to be approved by the General Security Council. Hence, race and ethnicity in Lebanon can be said to act as regulators of immigration laws (Mohanty et al., 1991). In this way, non-Lebanese and non-white women tend to be positioned as inferior and non-deserving of citizenship or naturalization, such that even their sexuality is surveilled in order to prevent them from having children in the country and affording their children citizenship. The Lebanese government has had a tendency to adopt a rhetoric that positions both Syrian and Palestinian refugees (and in many cases migrant domestic workers) as the cause for the Lebanese economic crisis. Something that protestors today are not willing to allow. This in turn considerably reduces the possibility for migrant domestic workers and refugees to protect themselves through Lebanese laws.

Mohanty (2003) urges feminist work to understand the construction of “third world women’s work in relation to the state and the international economy […] so we can understand the systemic exploitation of poor third world women” (p. 74). However, I insist on complicating the understanding of poor third world women because the aforementioned description positions poor Lebanese women in the same ‘oppressed’
category as that of migrant workers or refugees. This is not to say that poor Lebanese women do not face any hardships or discrimination, or even abuse under a global capitalist system. Rather, I want to propose that we complicate the understanding of poor third world women, specifically in the Lebanese context, in order to account for, and complicate understandings of racial and gendered hierarchies that also exist in the Third World. Put differently, poor Lebanese women also participate in the global capital economy of domestic work, and they are also not included in Lebanese Labor Codes because of the nature of their work. However, often times they have families to go back to after a long day of work and they speak the same language as their employers (facilitating negotiations), and are not discriminated on the basis of their skin color, among other things.

I therefore suggest, that ‘poor third world women’ needs to be complicated to allow for more historically specific understandings of feminist struggles, and at this juncture, I follow Carby (2007), Holland (2012) and Sharpe (2016) and pay close attention to Blackness and anti-Blackness within Arab, Islamic and transnational feminist discourses in order to better understand the experiences of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon as different from the experiences of poor Lebanese women. Often times, scholarship on migrant domestic work within the Lebanese context de-centers Blackness, sometimes even leaving conversations on race and racism behind (see Jureidini, 2009; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Pande, 2013).

Taking into account Blackness and anti-Blackness within Arab, Islamic and transnational feminist work does not mean that we include them in a tokenistic way (Carby, 2007; Holland, 2012; Sharpe, 2016). Rather, the focus on family, hetero-
patriarchy, citizenship, religion, capitalism, reproduction, gender and sexuality, to name a few, need to be complicated in order to include the ways in which race, racism and ethnicity always intersect, and manifest differently depending on historical specificity and location.

There are many stereotypical assumptions about the ways in which Arab and/or Muslim women experience and live within society, state, and family. Western obsessions with Muslim and/or Arab women’s lived experiences, struggles and oppressions have occupied large amounts of scholarship that have positioned us in ‘need of saving.’ This is mostly evident in the rhetoric used to justify violent military intervention in places such as Afghanistan. On the other hand and demonstrated by Al-Ghabra’s (2018) work, Arab and/or Muslim women, as part of the third world, sometimes consider Western feminist understandings of secularism and neoliberalism as an example to follow (Badran, 2013; Barlas, 2002; Seedat, 2013). This can be clearly seen in discourses surrounding anti-secularism that are adopting neoliberal logics of human rights and gender equality throughout Lebanese protests. For example, journalists such as Ayoub (2019) point to the contribution of Lebanese feminists and LGBTQ+ activists joining forces across religious and sectarian divides to encourage a ‘progressive’ and inclusive revolution. Lebanese women, for example, have held separate marches to draw attention to the ways in which women are not able to pass Lebanese citizenship to their children, and how issues concerning marriage, divorce and inheritance are controlled by sectarian religious laws that result in their discrimination and oppression (Ayoub, 2019). Images of Lebanese women forming a barrier between protestors and security forces have been heavily circulated on social media under the descriptor “the revolution is feminine” while
conservative media outlets that support the current government (e.g. OTV) are arguing that the call for anti-sectarianism is in fact some kind of ‘gay agenda’ (Ayoub, 2019).

It is also important to note, that migrant domestic workers, for example Kenyan women, have also been protesting in front of the Kenyan embassy to be evacuated from Lebanon and repatriated home. The spread of COVID-19 and the dire economic situation in the country has exacerbated the precarious situation of migrant women. Employers are literally leaving them on the streets, dropping them off at the door of the embassies with no pay (some have not been paid for months), no belongings, and some have been abandoned with their toddlers. Their painful plight for help is not only being ignored, but they are also being harassed and often times detained, with little to no public attention. Even though the protests in Lebanon to decolonize politics and end sectarianism are hopeful, to say the least, they are also tainted by racist ideologies.

Hence, I am inspired by Mahmood (2011), Al-Ghabra (2018) and Abdulhadi et al. (2011) and urge that Islamic and Arab feminism in particular move away from neoliberal discourses on agency, freedom and human rights used to defend our ‘Arabness’ or ‘Muslimness’ to Western audiences, and instead focus on complicating power structures within our own communities that, for example, position migrant domestic workers as constant victims in need of saving within the Lebanese context.

A Performative Rhetorical analytic of Lebanese Popular Culture

Scholarly research on migrant domestic work in the Lebanese context has often times focused on either the state (laws and labor legislatures), the private (where particularly men are pitted as the abusers of women), or on qualitative data pertaining to the personal experiences of migrant domestic workers (Pande, 2013; Moukarbel, 2009;
Jureidini et al., 2004). However, this research has usually paid little attention to race, particularly Blackness and anti-Blackness. This is not to say that the research already available to us is ill intentioned or that it has not accomplished any transformative change. Rather, what I want to point out is the need to complicate the way in which we think about race within Arab and Islamic feminist scholarship regarding migrant domestic work in Lebanon.

Focusing on interviews or documenting lived experiences is not enough to consider the context and social relationship in which migrant domestic workers find themselves, and how these are connected to larger issues of power that sustain and inform each other. I believe that both experiences and contexts, in their historical specificity and location, are essential in further complicating migrant domestic labor in Lebanon. This dissertation utilizes a critical rhetorical analysis of Lebanese popular culture informed and guided by performance in connection to the aforementioned feminist scholarship in order to explore more ethical and collaborative ways of uncovering the gendered racialization of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, and more specifically in Lebanon.

Even though the Kafala system exists in other Middle Eastern countries under the same name, each country has different governing laws (such as labor laws) and different attitudes towards gendered racialization. It is important to pay attention to the historical-political context of Lebanon, where even the identity of Arabness is a contested one. For example, Christian Maronites wanted to separate themselves from Syrian Arab identity after the fall of the Ottoman empire, to align themselves more with the French. Additionally, some believe that Lebanese ethnicity is directly descending from
Phoenicians as opposed to Arabs. Paying attention to these contestations can help us understand the ways in which Lebanese nationals today understand themselves and Others such as migrant domestic workers in a very specific and particular way.

I cannot remove myself from the politics of globalization that have influenced my understanding of the world and lived experience. Colonialism, international relations and capitalist globalization influence the politics of the world, and the ways in which we move within these spaces. In this way, I see as a useful practice, the recognition that my feminist epistemology necessitates an Islamic, Arab, and transnational view in order to attend to the rhetorical specificity of the Lebanese context. Arab and Islamic feminist work can be guided by a performative rhetorical analysis, such that we can further complicate power relationships that might not be obvious to us as third world Lebanese women. I am inspired by Calafell (2014) and, therefore, I believe that a performance lens can help us break traditional ways of thinking about rhetoric “hoping for more complex approaches to embodiment, resistance, and cultural nuances” (p. 115). A performative rhetorical analysis of Lebanese popular culture, therefore, helps us see the connections between history, capitalism, popular culture, race, racism, and sexism that are specific to the Lebanese context, and in turn, help us explain how these inform each other to create the vulnerable spaces where migrant domestic workers exist in Lebanon.

According to Calafell (2015), “women of color are often constructed through contradiction in popular culture” in a way that representations serve to “perpetuate and ‘excuse’ histories and contemporary instances of racism, sexism, and homophobia” (p. 13). In this way, I believe that a performative rhetorical analysis, can help us uncover the ways in which historical constructions of race and gender have influenced how Blackness
is represented in popular culture within the Lebanese context, and how, in turn, these representations have an effect on migrant domestic worker’s experiences. According to Flores (2014) race “in all its messiness, ambiguity, and contestation, lies in/between discursivity and materiality in ways that are (almost) always embodied and lived” (p. 94) and adds that “race is social value become perception” (Flores, 2014, p. 94) pointing to the possibilities of opening understandings about racial configurations in Lebanon by paying attention to how these perceptions are embodied rhetorically.

In addition to a critical rhetorical analysis of staged performances in Lebanese popular culture, I also turn to performative writing as a way to hold my positionality accountable as a Muslim Lebanese woman. In order to be morally responsible with my research and with the people I want to work for, and attempt to contribute in the improvement of their lives demands that my “advocacy and ethics require that the ‘I’ of my personal responsibility to [this] work be explicitly stated in order to address what is for me a fundamental question, ‘what do I do now?’” (Madison, 2010, p. 10). Performative writing in each chapter will help me hold myself accountable in a way that questions and uncovers my stake in this project and issue. I do not suggest that my performative writing take center stage, but my intention is to put my body on the line and show where do my questions come from? Why am I interested in this? What is my moral investment in this project? In other words, small pieces of performative writing will not only hold me accountable but will also help my audience understand where my questions and intentions are coming from.

I understand performance as a form of survival within a dominant population. And at the same time, I believe that a performance ethic that informs a critical rhetorical
analysis of popular culture opens up more possibilities of uncovering positions of power that might have been overlooked before. In “Performance as a Moral Act,” Conquergood (2013) demonstrates the importance of attending to the body in order to enrich knowledge. Correspondingly, Calafell (2014) inspires us to “to put our bodies on the line and also be reflexive” (p. 115). Performance has demonstrated that embodied experiences are worth investigating. Hence using a performance paradigm to guide and inform a critical rhetorical analysis of Lebanese popular culture allows us to see how beliefs are embodied and also allows us to uncover their “dimensions of imagination and creativity, and [their] rhetoric and politics” (Madison, 2010, p.2).

Keeping Ramazanoglu and Holland’s (2002) work in mind, I acknowledge that I am in a position to make claims to knowledge and, therefore, I must also place myself at the forefront of my research. Again, by no means am I saying that I need to center myself. Rather, what I want to emphasize is that my positionality must always be clear throughout my work such that possible assumptions and biases (which I don’t think I can magically get rid of) can be constantly and consistently challenged by myself and others. In addition, I follow King, Navarro and Smith (2020) in that I do not claim having the answers to problems I uncover. Rather, I want to open up the space for us to be able to ask more questions to uncover the “political possibilities that emerge from asking these questions” (p.2). For those in marginalized positions globally, and locally, performative writing enables transformative critiques of assumptions, values and beliefs around the issues being studied.

According to Smith (2013), in order for us to realize effective organizing against systems of oppression, we must look at the ways in which systems of power are
maintained, understood and negotiated for us to build the strong alliances that
transnational feminist work hopes for (Mohanty, 2003). A performative rhetorical
approach to Arab, Islamic and transnational feminist understandings of power can help us
trace the connections between the Kafala system and historical understandings of raced
and gendered labor migration in a way that attends to the particularity of the Middle East
generally, and Lebanon specifically, and at the same time reveal the configurations of
privileges and oppressions that need to be complicated.

Following Calafell (2007; 2014), Conquergood (2013), and Madison (2010; 2012), my work related to the racialization of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon must
“do the labor of advocacy and do it ethically to inspire realms of reflection and
responsibility” (Madison, 2010, p. 12). A performative rhetorical analysis of popular
culture helps us interact with public domains critically and in an ethical way (Spry et al.,
corporeality of rhetoric and discursivity […] centering bodies and embodiment […] in
ways that […] distinguish, that complicate and reveal” (95). In this way, the rhetorical
configurations of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship and labor, must not only be
historically specific to the Lebanese context, but we must also attend to the embodiment
of these logics in order to complicate and uncover different ways of thinking about
migrant domestic work in Lebanon.

In this way, and specifically in the Lebanese context, Islamic feminism helps us
understand how racialized and gendered violence is understood in Lebanese society
rhetorically. Moreover, Islamic feminist work guided by a performance ethic adds to our
understandings by helping us uncover the embodiments of these logics. In total
agreement with Calafell (2014), I believe that women of color feminist theories (such as Arab, Islamic and transnational feminism), in combination with performance and rhetoric, helps us think about the ways in which racialized Others are constructed and represented in Lebanese popular culture.

I am primarily inspired and guided by Calafell (2007; 2014; 2015), Conquergood (2013), Madison (2010; 2012), and Corey (1998), by thinking of performance as a form of activist scholarship that also holds my body and positionality accountable to the work I do. Performative methodologies have enriched and expanded the ways in which I question the systems that exert power on me and the ways in which I participate in systems that exert power over others. Hence, this dissertation uses a social justice approach that asks that I question and check myself every step of the way. Calafell (2007) places, at the forefront, and as critical, notions of positionality and reflexivity and describes this as a responsibility to “other kinds of texts or what are termed cultural performances, which have often been overlooked” (p. 20).

When we connect theory to personal experience, we are able to hold ourselves, and others accountable to embodiments (and to the body). Calafell (2014) asks us to focus on this connection by putting “Otherness at its center, both in considering how we view texts and the communities that produce them” (p. 116). In this way, I am interested in how Arab and/or Muslim Lebanese perform and embody Otherness by relying on anti-Black rhetoric. In addition, I rely on an Arab feminist politics that focuses on “racial justice, gender justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people [globally… inspiring] us to imagine a world without oppression and think about alternatives to exclusionary heteromasculinist and xenophobic politics”
(Abdulhadi et al., 2011, p. xxxv). I therefore offer a complication of western notions of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ to uncover the ways in which gendered racism informs embodiments of anti-Blackness in the Middle East, and particularly in Lebanon, as a Third World location. A performative rhetorical analysis guides us in uncovering new frames of reference that reveal the ways in which discussions about race, citizenship, domestic labor, gender and sexuality have been constrained by boundaries of understanding, and in turn, allow us to blur these boundaries and expand our theoretical configurations. As Calafell (2014) puts it, a performance lens “embodies and drives a sustained critique of discourse […] Rhetoric needs performance to keep it critical and accountable.” (p. 116). We should aim to uncover and analyze different understandings of the intersections of power, colonialism, gender, citizenship, ethnicity race, norms and structures that rule migrant domestic labor in Lebanon, and their relationship to lived experience.

Chapter Summaries

As a self-identified feminist, I cannot avoid my relationships to power that position me as a knowing self and place me within relations of difference (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). These relations of difference are constituted against the backdrop of complicated histories that need very specific and skilled attention. Chapter Two demonstrates, through the historical account of the Middle East, that there are many conflicting views of how Lebanon constructs itself, often in relation to Western Darwinian discourses of civilizational progress (Choueiri, 2013; Massad, 2008). I expand on Lebanese values and beliefs are deeply entrenched within Western thought to the point
where irreconcilable frames of reference and obscured power relations continue to exist today (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

Chapter Three begins to uncover how Lebanese popular culture, uses music to normalize Blackface when portraying Others. These portrayals are also available to the Lebanese public during Ramadan, when television content is supposed to follow Islamic tenants of not sinning, not thinking ill of anyone, not cursing, and so on. Specifically, I focus on a music video by Myriam Fares where she uses Blackface to sing about and depict a ‘jungle-like’ world. In this instance of anti-Blackness I reveal the embodiment of racialized beliefs and how they connect to late Ottoman and European colonial understandings of race, as well as how they translate to Middle Eastern understandings of race. Chapter Four connects the analysis and historical context of chapters one and two through a discussion and analysis of performative allyship demonstrating how normalized anti-Black insistence in Lebanese popular culture acts as a contributor to, or as complicit to enabling vulnerable spaces of violence and exploitation of migrant domestic workers. I end with a conclusion that summarizes the main arguments and questions of the dissertation and I offer future paths of inquiry.
Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and the historical contextualization of Lebanon

Introduction

Attending to the historical specificities of our past can help us understand who we are as a group and how we understand the world around us. I confess studying history, questioning it, reading about it was never something I loved doing. I still recall the long evenings after school studying for exams. I hated it. I think most of my loathing was a result of the fights my mom and I had. She wanted me to be a critical thinker and I was only interested in passing the class. I remember the steamy kitchen while dinner was being cooked; that steaminess was always accompanied by angry and frustrated yelling.

My mother would get infinitely frustrated with my lack of interest and understanding of math, which was the first subject we would approach since she knew I needed extensive help. Then, on some nights, we would go over my history books. We were tested on memory, so my priority was to memorize as much as I could to just pass the test. You see, growing up in Spain, a large part of Spanish history is taught through the painting of Arabs or Moors as the savages that occupied Spanish territory for 800 years. Even though I have forgotten much of the fights, I still remember my mom saying, “This is not how it happened, but why do think it is written this way?” She was trying to make me think and question where and how we know what we know without realizing it.

In a way, I regret not thinking more about it at the time. Now, I see why questioning what we know is important. A nuanced understanding of history can help us
uncover gaps that can help explain why we are where we are today. After the Beirut blast of August 4, 2020, the French president Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon. The way in which large segments of the population came out to see him, and the desire to see France as once again the *saving mother* (terms used locally, mainly by the elder Lebanese) was depressing, to say the least. Imagine being so desperate that you beg to be under colonial rule again. The images of massive crowds coming out to the streets asking France for help inundated my news feed.

I remember posting about it on Facebook. I wrote the same sentence as above, a sentence I cannot stop repeating to myself. “I’m not going to lie, I don’t agree with Macron’s visit, imagine being so desperate that you beg to be under colonial rule again.” My great uncle responded: “Lebanese people are desperate, we don’t know how to get out of this mess.” My heart sinks every time I read this. A couple of minutes later, a friend responds: “The Lebanese cannot take care of themselves Sarah. Let’s be brutally honest. Even underneath this all, the religious divide is unfortunately too strong and too blinding… despite all this, there are still those who side with their religion and their leader. I wish we didn’t. I wish it wasn’t so but if this helps Lebanon thrive then yes please.” This is the moment I realized that we have not really understood our history, our roots and the different events that brought us to this day.

We cannot and should not forget that the religious divide, particularly in what is now known as Lebanon, was created by the Ottoman Empire, strengthened by the end of the Empire, and cemented by the French mandate. Colonial rule used these religious cliques to consolidate its hold in Mount Lebanon. Institutional arrangements such as the Kafala system, are the consequences of our colonial past. Furthermore, even our own
Lebanese constitution breathes French control, as it directly mimics the French constitution with some differences. Colonial rule is the reason why our president has to be Christian by law and it is the reason why Muslims didn’t have much political say until the 1900s. Colonial rule is what gave us the understandings of what constitutes citizenship, race, belonging and gender among others. Colonial rule cannot be thought of as the solution.

This chapter aims to retell a nuanced account of historical events specific to the Lebanese context in order to trace configurations of race, gender and citizenship that continue to situate migrant domestic workers in our country in a precarious position. My historical understanding is informed by a transnational Arab Muslim feminism in a way that recognizes the interconnectedness of the histories that have shaped our understandings of race, gender, citizenship and so forth. A feminist approach to history forces us to pay attention to the ways in which mainstream history has ignored or occluded the experiences and knowledge of the most disenfranchised communities around the globe. An Arab and Muslim perspective is important because of Lebanon’s sizeable Arab Muslim population. Hence this chapter will first outline the theoretical framework that informs this project, followed by the historical contextualization of Lebanon in regard to race and gender. Second, I will map the differential placement of Arab and non-Arab women within Lebanon in relation to migrant domestic work. Third, with the aforementioned feminist lens, I will outline the historical specificities that position migrant domestic workers in Lebanon under very particular hardships that would not disappear with the abolishment of the Kafala system.
Muslim Arab feminism through a Transnational Paradigm

Transnational feminism aims to improve dialogue between feminists around the world, such that solidarity and collaboration are fostered (Mohanty & Carty, 2018). Therefore, in addition to complicating understandings of poor third world women (a transnational undertaking), I also follow Arab feminists Abdulhadi et al. (2011) and argue that a transnational Muslim Arab feminism should move away from justifying our existence to a Western audience and instead look at the ways in which we might be complicit in someone else’s oppression within our own communities. This is not to say that accounts of Arabs being oppressed and bombed into oblivion need to be completely abandoned. However, I do believe, as this dissertation will show, that the retelling of our condition can be complicated further. Transnational Muslim Arab feminism arises as response to white feminist’s oversimplification of our experiences as third world women. I name it transnational Muslim Arab feminism because I cannot escape the fact that I was brought up as a devout Muslim for more than half of my entire life. I also cannot escape the fact that I grew up between Lebanon and Spain, and that most of the women I was closest to (specifically my grandmother and mother) are Arab and have worked tirelessly to make sure I recognize myself as a Lebanese Arab.

Thus, Muslim Arab feminism share with transnational feminism the desire to rid ourselves from false universalist understandings of women’s plights around the globe. As I see it, the focus of Muslim Arab feminism is to bring forth the multiple types of oppression and different strategies of resisting these oppressions from Arab and/or Muslim women themselves. Thus, the focus, I believe, lies on the specific attention paid to our particular national and/or religious contexts. On the other hand, transnational
feminist work leans towards a more global understanding of third world feminist resistance that moves beyond a single nation and attempts to create connections at a larger scale (see Grewal and Kaplan, 2001, p. 665-666). Hence, I take form the above-mentioned feminisms and believe that national/religious context and specificity of Muslim and Arab feminism can benefit from also seeing and creating connections at a larger scale. At the same time, I believe that transnational feminist work would also benefit from paying closer attention to nationalisms/religious specific contexts.

Feminism can be a liberatory practice, both theoretically and in practical applications. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which feminism has been complicit in colonial, imperialist and racist configurations. The transnational paradigm draws from postcolonial feminist theories that placed importance on the recognition of colonial influence in shaping political, economic and social oppressions in the non-Western world. It challenges the notion that gender-inequality is experienced in the same way by populations living in different regions of the world, and at the same time, it recognizes the notion that global capitalism and neoliberalism create the possibility of experiences being similar regardless of location. Take for example the work of Vargas (2018), who demonstrates that the common experience is anti-Blackness in the contexts of the U.S. and Brazil. At the same time, he points to the different ways it manifests and urges us to pay attention to the multilayered ways that anti-Blackness operates in different locations.

Grewal and Kaplan (1994) articulate transnational feminism as one that is vigilant of, and breaks down, modernity, offering a revision of postmodernism in the process. The authors recognize the contributions of postmodernism in critiquing modern global capital,
but add that it does not take into consideration the consequences of theorizing against the backdrop of Western thought. Hence, the lack of attention paid to the ways in which colonial history and the movement of global capital have allowed for the movement of information and influences between cultures in postmodern thought, has resulted in the portrayal of non-Western subjects as antagonistic and in direct opposition to Western subjects.

Two related but distinct concerns in transnational feminist scholarship deal with the ways in which globalization and capitalism have an effect on people in non-Western spaces, and how they are influenced by notions of race, gender, class, citizenship, immigration and sexuality (Mohanty, 2003). Within this field, we are asked to question and critique conventional feminist ideologies that stem from white, middle-class, Western feminism and consider how these critiques can bring about theoretical and practical applications on a geopolitical and sociopolitical landscape. The field focuses on “the situation of racial-ethnic women originating from the third world (or the South), whether or not they reside in the [West]” (Herr, 2013, p. 1).

In addition, Alexander (2006) encourages the foregrounding of questions of racial formation along with colonialism in order to reconceptualize accounts of modernity and heteronormativity. Mohanty (1991; 2003; 2018) for example, has played an integral role in demonstrating how Western feminism has failed to acknowledge non-Western subjects. She identified that feminism, as well as oppressions faced by women around the world were not straightforward, and that centering gender as the basis for oppressions around the world, erased individuality within their specific and historized lived experience.
Thus, discourses around human rights are based on a humanist understanding where “a Western ideological and political project […] involves the necessary recuperation of the ‘East’ and ‘woman’ as Other” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 73). This humanist understanding is, in turn, upholding the centrality of the Western/White man’s core. It is only when women are defined as Other that “[Western] Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center” (Mohanty, 1991, p.73). In other words, it is only when the third world is defined as being underdeveloped, backward, and in need of saving, that the West can conceptualize itself as the leader in freedom. For example, scholars writing about migrant domestic work in Lebanon have used humanist discourses to argue for a human rights approach to address migrant domestic oppressions (see Jureidini, 2009; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Pande, 2013). Referring to the production and circulation of texts, Mohanty (1991) argues that the positioning of third world women as a monolith in need of saving, is one of the ways in which humanist discourses become “manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the ‘non-Western’ world.” (p. 74).

I recognize that human rights discourses are valuable strategies to bring international attention to oppression. However, I want to encourage a more critical understanding of how human rights discourses often times are weaponized by the West to justify military intervention in the Middle East. In addition, human rights discourses during the protests in Lebanon have often used the binary of modern vs. backward to argue that Lebanon needs to ‘catch’ up to other modern nations. This is why in this particular context, and for this particular project, human rights discourses could do more harm than good. The way in which these discourses unfold in Lebanon, do not necessarily include the rights of migrant domestic workers. In addition, if we pay
attention to the framing, of for example, Vice News (among many other Western news sources) on the plight of migrant workers, it positions Lebanon, and as a result the Middle East as an exceptional place where these practices happen while giving Western audiences the ability to believe that institutions such as the Kafala system do not exist in Western locations under different names, descriptors and understandings.

Transnational feminist work has had different ways of conceptualizing and talking about race. According to Mohanty (2003) the construction of immigration and laws of nationality, citizenship and belonging contribute to constructions of appropriate racialized and gendered citizenship that reproduce the relationship of colonization and white, masculinist, capitalist rule (p. 66). She conceptualizes racism as an ideology that authorizes and encourages the exclusion of non-white populations from certain spaces encompassing social and economic life while at the same time supporting the tolerance of these on the part of the ruling class. Mohanty (2003) adopts Omi’s and Winant’s definition of racial formation as the process through which social, economic, and political authorities determine the importance and configuration of racial categories that shape racial meanings.

In discussions on race and racism, I think transnational feminism falls short. Even though I am very grateful for this work, and admire Mohanty deeply, I can’t help but notice that within her discussions of race, blackness, or anti-blackness, lives on the margins. She cites and uses the works of Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois and Toni Morrison, but even terms such as Black or Blackness are rarely given center stage. Transnational feminism doesn’t pay enough attention to race. It has a tendency (as a field) to leave Blackness behind. Once Black feminism gets operationalized and its
subjects found, we seem to move away from Black feminist thought. In other words, Blackness, as analytic, theory and activist praxis only seems to be adopted when it’s convenient for other fields.

It is worth noting, however, that Alexander (2006) does attend to the psychic wounds of slavery and colonialism in a way that can foster solidarity among different communities. She looks at issues of concern to African American and African Caribbean communities within and outside the academy and advocates for a collective consciousness that is built by paying attention to lived realities and post-colonial legacies of interconnected histories that are ruled by racism, sexism, heterosexism, class, xenophobia and Islamophobia (p. 275). Not only does she not leave blackness behind, but she also urges us to confront the urgency of comradery when we are in the presence of globalized, racialized and gendered inequalities.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006) Alexander discusses power in a way that also reflects moving away from binary conceptualizations of powerful versus powerless. She complicates our understanding of these dynamics by pointing out that it is not only those with official authority (say politicians, scholars, and so on) that hold power, but those in unofficial positions as well. In this way, she urges us to think of power in terms of accountability where “Those with authority who have no power also need to be held accountable, for even without power they occupy a critical role in the power hierarchy, since they guard the gates of, and for, those designated with official power” (Alexander, 2006, p. 146).

Alexander (2006) also insists on the above-mentioned demystification of power in order to achieve mobilization in activist circles by quoting Cornell West whereby we
need to closely follow the compounded dynamics of institutional power, among others, in order to discover options for transformative praxis (p. 129). In addition, and in connection to Massad’s (2008) discussion of the gay international, she demonstrates the racialized and privileged gestures of power within white gay tourism and sexual consumer practices in the third world, whereby the White gay international (Massad, 2008) results in a challenge for queer studies and activist circles to, at the same time, “imbricate shifting political economies, the politics of immigration and racial formation in these varied urban [domestic] and [touristic] landscapes” (Alexander, 2006, p. 88).

The status and treatment of Arab and/or Muslim women has been one of the central preoccupations for Western feminists, and politicians for decades. There have been many misguided assumptions and stereotypes that have informed the way in which Western women understand the lived experience of Arab and/or Muslim women and how they are treated within formulations of society, the state, family, gender and sexuality. In general, the West, and in particular, Western feminists, have portrayed Arab and/or Muslim women as oppressed, overly religious, weak and passive, configurations that are well known to scholars such as Mohanty (1991; 2003; 2018) and Alexander (2006). Through a Western lens, Arab and/or Muslim women tend to be understood outside of their historical specificity, as well as outside of their cultural, religious and local contexts.

Edward Said (1997) demonstrates through a closer look at the way in which Iran has been represented by Western media, that most of what the West (and specifically the U.S.) knows about the so called ‘Muslim’ world’ has been in relation to Western reactions to what was happening in Iran during the 1970s, which in turn, was presented in direct opposition to Western beliefs and values. He argues that the stereotypes that arise
from studying Islam or the Middle East are in shape or form not surprising. In other words, scholars writing about the Middle East do not give any thought on how insidious stereotypes of Arabs and/or Muslims continue to fester. Said (1997) demonstrates how Western interpretations are in direct connection to economic, colonial and military control interests, which in turn, position scholarship on the region as an institution that upholds and maintains misconceptions leaving little to no space for reflexivity.

It is against the backdrop of this scholarship, which can be traced to the Ottoman period that Arab and Islamic feminism arose. Arab women’s movements gained traction within specific historical contexts that were scrutinized locally, regionally, and internationally. Some of the most influential factors in supporting the move towards Arab and Islamic feminism stem from opposition to colonization and the need for national liberation, as well as dispelling Western myths of Arab and Muslim women being oppressed either by their religion, culture or by their men. Many non-Muslim individuals and scholars trust that Islam as a religion, and the Qur’an as the written word of God, oppresses and subjugates women. Therefore, a lot of the early scholarship found on Islamic feminism, is predicated on the notion that Muslim women have the need to ‘defend’ Islam and the Qur’an from Western stereotypes. It is important to note that Islamic and Arab feminism are usually differentiated depending on their focus on Islam or not. For a text to be considered part of the Islamic feminist canon, it is desirable that it references the Qur’an, or held religious beliefs, like for example, the work of Chaudry (2017).

Abu-Lughod (2013) argues, and in agreement with Mahmood (2011), that even though there are women that need help, the ways in which “the emerging Western
common sense about the plight of Muslim women” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 8) is conceptualized, largely takes the agency of these women away. In order to make her case, she analyzes a number of fiction and non-fiction accounts of Muslim women and the importance of ‘saving’ women. In this way, she is able to demonstrate that Islam and Muslim societies have been homogenized and Orientalized in a gendered way so as to justify what she calls moral crusades, which was accepted in the West as reasonable support for military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. She notes “the call for women’s rights has gone mainstream,” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 54). Abu-Lughod (2013) does not try to convince her readers that Third World women do not need help at all, but rather argues that not only is the agency of these women taken away, but that the issues of sexism and racism that women face in the West are not addressed by Western white feminist work, and are therefore often times ignored as if they were not existent, and as if these issues only happen in backward third world geographies. A move that helps Western women appear more agentic than third world women.

Thus, she brilliantly exposes the irony of those who claim to want to help, but in fact only reproduce problematic and dangerous stereotypes. She questions the role of anthropology in preserving Orientalist discourses (and producing them to start with) and insists that her intention is not to undermine the role of activism but rather to add layers of complexity to our activism by considering issues that have been previously overlooked. Hence, she urges us to listen to each other carefully in order to increase understanding about “loaded values like choice and freedom and how they actually work in the context of human lives” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 224). She demonstrates that it is
not that Muslim women don’t believe women to be oppressed, but rather that they do not think it is because of Islam.

Mahmood (2011), in turn, points to the ways in which Western feminism upholds and supports the liberal-imperial project, whether knowingly or not. She explains, as an example, how Western feminists rallied against the Taliban by focusing on the ‘oppressive’ burqa (full coverage of women’s bodies) as the symbol of their activism as opposed to interrogating the ways in which the Taliban came into power (which would reveal Western and specifically U.S. support). This assumed oppression by the West was then used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. Badran (2013), on the other hand, does not seem to question the ways in which patriarchal assumptions came to be, nor if they were being influenced by Western ideologies of secular-liberalism.

This context is important to highlight at this juncture since Western news outlets are just now taking interest in the plight of African women in Lebanon. Vice news, for example, recently used videos captured by “This is Lebanon” an activist group helping migrant domestic workers voice their experiences and hold Lebanese individuals accountable for their abuses, to highlight racial inequities in the Middle East. This entire project is meant to bring forth the complicity of non-Black women of color (in this particular case Lebanese women) in racial injustice, and particularly anti-Blackness, that exists and has been supported in Lebanon specifically for centuries. However, I want to stress that Western interpretations of racial inequities in the Middle East ignore its colonial and historical roots. Additionally, I want to make sure that the above discussion does not reinforce Western stereotypes of how ‘barbaric’ the Middle East is.
Mahmood (2011) speaks to this conundrum by explaining how Western hegemonic discourses situate secular liberalism as superior to other conceptions. She demonstrates how Islam in particular has been especially scrutinized with relation to how women are treated. In this way, Mahmood (2011) adds to Badran’s discussion by pointing to how colonial legacies continue to perpetuate this conundrum. In addition, she mentions the importance of keeping in mind that the Middle East is of special strategic interests because of its oil resources. Therefore, Western assumptions of Muslim women as subjugated and in need of saving have to be closely interrogated. In a similar critical turn of Muslim Arab feminism, Ghabra (2018) points out how Western, or rather White femininity can also be adopted and embodied by people who do not belong, nor ascribe themselves to any of those categories, by analyzing Hirsi Ali’s book *Infidel* (2007). She demonstrates the discursive performance of a “secular Western feminist” (p. 110). What I am trying to point out here is that the pieces of the puzzle have already been identified for us. Looking at the rhetoric that dominates Lebanese protesting, we can see the increase in demand of a secularist Lebanon, as if that would solve our problems and the problems we have created for African people. By now, I hope that my readers are at least skeptical of the usefulness of adopting a secularist and humanist discourse to social justice.

Alsultany (2011) for example, notes that when Muslim queers “apply for asylum as refugees, claiming they are suffering gender or sexual oppression, […] their application is premised on reinforcing the conception of the ‘barbaric’ nature of their culture to the sympathetic ‘Western ears’” (p. 58). She adds that “we should worry about activism in the West that fights to rescue Arab and African women but does so in a way that reproduces Eurocentric discourse about the Middle East and Africa” (Alsultany,
2011, p. 58). She emphasizes that in terms of human rights activism, we need to avoid “narcissistic rescue fantasies” (Alsultany, 2011, p. 58) that force us back into colonial narratives that are reconfigured to allow white middle-class Western women (and even some Western women of color) to position themselves as “rescuing brown women from brown men” (Alsultany, 2011, p. 58).

Abu-Lughod (2013) also pays close attention to the ways in which the West has been obsessed with the MENA region when it comes to human rights. She looks at the relentless infatuation the West has towards ‘honor killings’ or ‘genital mutilation’ and links these to the anthropologic field. She specifically focuses on how images of veiled women and women in burqas were used in campaigning in favor of the military occupation of Afghanistan, and, in the same way that Jarmakani (2011) and Alsultany (2011), she emphasizes the notion that signifiers of Arabness and/or Muslimness have come to represent sexual and gendered oppression and, by extension, a presumed need to be saved.

Scholarship focused on sexuality is no different. Massad (2008) shows how Westerners and Westernized Arabs (scholars and literary work) have attempted to universalize Western assumptions on sexuality causing problematic notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality in which the perceptions that Arabs have about themselves has been shaped by Orientalist discourses. He urges us to engage in critical work that unsettles Western and Arab notions about sexuality in a way that creates space for different conceptualizations and embodiments of desire, politics and subjectivities. Hyder (2011), a lesbian Palestinian woman, focuses on sex, exile and motherhood, challenging traditional Arab feminist understandings of normative sexuality by
demonstrating the diversity within Arab existence and moving away from responses to Western assumptions and stereotypes on Arab sexuality and desire.

The editors and contributors of *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (2011) urge us to consider imperialist politics that may affect women of color in different or similar ways in order to offer possibilities of feminist alliances among communities of color and emphasize the importance of acknowledging the intersections of racism, sexism and imperialism. Jarmakani (2011) points out how the imperialistic military industrial complex and imperialist Western feminist logics work together to solidify stereotyped assumptions about Arabness and Muslim womanhood being in need of saving, and insists that these stereotypes, coupled with Western interventions in the MENA region serve to maintain violence towards the women they are supposedly ‘saving.’ In addition, I argue, the focus on an imagined subjugation of all Arab women under the same patriarchal power leaves no space whatsoever to critically explore the messiness of racial configurations and how these have an effect on migrant domestic laborers in Lebanon. In other words, the adoption of liberal Western feminist thought has solidified the gap in understanding oppression and racism in the Third World or Global South. In addition, she argues that this infatuation with saving women from the MENA region only further erases the important work that feminists of the region are involved in.

Specifically, I am arguing that Arab and Muslim feminist work through a transnational paradigm would be able to offer more productive discussions if we moved away from Western binary oppositions. Mohanty (2003) argues that feminist scholarship has traditionally locked “all power struggles into binaries” (p. 39) where Western liberal thought is not only positioned as progressive, modern, and correct, but it is also
positioned as antagonistic to third world feminist work. In the same way, Mahmood (2011) shows how Western scholarship has a tendency to romanticize third world women’s resistance or way of life such that they attribute misconceptions of political thought and consciousness to third world women’s experiences. Abu-Lughod (2013) adds to this discussion by moving the concept of agency beyond the binary of resistance versus subordination and configuring resistance as an indicative of different forms of power. Arab and Muslim feminist work, endemic to the Middle East can greatly benefit from a transnational paradigm that helps us connect the issues identified at a local/national level and connect them to the larger power imbalance in a globalized world. I believe that this way, we (as Lebanese) can re-evaluate the way in which we understand our colonization and in turn, where we are today.

As summarized above, traditional transnational, Arab, and Muslim feminism seem to rely on a duality approach to research such that Othering that does not explicitly involve the west is ignored, while Western thought is positioned as the major practitioner of imperialist and colonial privilege. I began to think about how the Middle East, for example, positions itself, and is positioned by the West as the main practitioners or followers of Islam. Even though Mecca is indeed in Saudi Arabia, and Muslims around the world must make the journey to this city at least once in their lifetime, Middle Eastern Muslims account for less than 20% of the world Muslim population. Socio-economic and socio-political orders in the Middle East are very different from those in, for example, Sudan or Pakistan.

Arguably the most important missing piece in transnational, Arab and Muslim feminism is the lack of attention towards Blackness within racial conversations. For
example, when Mohanty (2003) delineates the world populations that fit in the category of third world womanhood, she includes Middle Eastern women as women of color. Even though Arab women should be included in this category, I want to stress the importance of complicating third world difference further by pointing out how, within this categorization, Blackness and Arabness are compounded. I argue that this should not be the case and agree with Carby (2007) when she notes that the experiences of Black women are not accounted for in, for example, transnational, Arab, Muslim feminism and some feminist of color work.

Basu (2000) for example, points out that in the global sphere and in transnational feminism, scholars tend to forget that critiques of universalist and essentialist assumptions of feminism were mainly carried out by African American and Latina scholars. However, we seem to have dropped them, and only count on their expertise when, and if it is convenient (Holland, 2012). Soto (2005) argues that in order to fight white supremacy, imperialism, and heterosexism, that continue to promote warfare, ‘fake news,’ capitalism, neoliberalism and environmental crises, we need to take seriously, and maintain goals of liberation within academic and activist spaces.

Transnational feminist work asks us to consider the ways in which global capitalism affects people in non-Western spaces, and how it intersects with configurations of race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship and immigration among others (Mohanty, 2003). We are asked to critique and question White, Western middle-class feminism and think about how our critiques might be able to complicate our understanding of struggles in different geopolitical and sociopolitical landscapes. This is not to say that our only focus should be placed on populations outside the West. Herr
(2013) asserts that, indeed transnational feminist work also focuses on “the situation of racial-ethnic women originating from the third world (or the South), whether or not they reside in the [West]” (p. 1).

While Mohanty (2003) shows how Western logics have influenced feminism and focuses her work on decolonizing feminism, Grewal and Kaplan (1994) argue for decentering the West, and recognizing the existence of what they call “scattered hegemonies” (p. 12) to shift our focus from the political to the influence of capitalism and culture, and the ways in which cultural productions affect women. However, I wonder if we would need to see decolonizing feminism and/or ‘the political’ as separate from influences of capitalism and culture, and I propose that a balance between these two positions can benefit research on migrant domestic work in Lebanon, where Arab and Islamic feminism should be decolonized, while also paying attention to how capitalism and culture affect women. A way to do this, for example, is proposed by Alexander (2006) who encourages the foregrounding of questions of racial formation along with colonialism in order to reconceptualize accounts of modernity and heteronormativity. According to Mohanty et al. (1991) care-giving labor is understood in capitalist societies (like Lebanon) in a way that positions women from the global south as part of an inferior class that is “constitutively dependent on race [and gender] as an organizing principle” (p. 23). Jones (2008) also insists that the inferiorization of racialized women in the domestic work market is always informed by coloniality, gender, class, ethnicity and race. Hierarchical categorizations like race and ethnicity are especially apparent in Lebanese labor and immigration laws, specifically when they relate to migrant domestic work.
In addition to surveillance of migrant domestic worker’s bodies, their inferiorization has historically served capitalist logics that place importance in the search for cheap feminized labor. Jones (2008) for example, points to how migrant domestic work reveals “implicit racialized and gendered codes […] that serve to separate out a nation’s outsiders” (p. 762) making it difficult for non-Lebanese and non-white people to seek citizenship. This is not only true for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon but also for Syrian and Palestinian refugees. For example, the government has often times cited Palestinian’s right of return as the reason for the denial of their Lebanese citizenship. In turn this has prevented Palestinian refugees (some of them born in Lebanese refugee camps) from being able to access proper healthcare, education and work in the country.

This is of special importance considering the discourse being employed by Lebanese politicians when referring to migrant domestic work. Hall’s article (2019) brings forth the ways in which Camille Abousleiman (the new Lebanese Minister of Labor) speaks of his contribution to Lebanese politics. Hall (2019) quotes Abousleiman saying “I think what I bring is a new perspective. When I come here it’s not continuing the same system – I’m coming from England, in addition to being a lawyer […] in a law firm that plays a lot of attention to [human rights].” Abousleiman comes from a global law firm based in London and asserts that changing the Kafala system should be considered a matter of human rights, and uses his ‘outsiderness’ or experience in Western international law as a good reason for Lebanese citizens to trust that he will bring about positive change and not make the same ‘mistakes’ as his predecessors (Hall, 2019). In this way, politicians such as the Minister of labor use their ‘Western influence/education’ as the solution to the oppression of migrant domestic workers, while at the same time
cementing the image of the migrant worker as perpetual victim, which in turn, infantilizes women from the global south and ignores their agency.

Mohanty (2003) emphasizes the importance of understanding the construction of “third world women’s work in relation to the state and the international economy […] so we can understand the systemic exploitation of poor third world women” (p. 74). However, as I have argued above, this positions Lebanese women in the same ‘oppressed’ category as that of migrant workers. Therefore, I note, that this notion needs to be complicated to allow for more historically specific understandings of feminist struggles, and at this juncture, I follow Carby (2007), Holland (2012) and Sharpe (2016) and argue for the close attention to Blackness and anti-Blackness within Arab, Islamic and Transnational feminism in order to better understand the unique experiences of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Much of the scholarship on migrant domestic work that is specific to the Lebanese context ignores or de-centers blackness, sometimes even leaving conversations on race and racism behind (see Jureidini, 2009; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Pande, 2013).

I also follow Carby (2007) and suggest that we look at how racism is constructed and at how it works differently depending on historical location. In her essay White Woman Listen (2007), she tracks racism both in British and U.S. feminism and notes how this work had to be carried differently in order to show how oppression and racism manifests differently in different locations. She then moves to demonstrate how anti-Blackness is the common denominator in both spaces (see also Vargas, 2018). In the same way, I hope to demonstrate how anti-Blackness also drives racist configurations in Lebanon, and how these are, in turn, manifested differently than in the U.S. and other
Western powers. For this reason, and according to Carby (2007) the centrality of our location must be of great importance to our feminist politics.

Of specific importance to my framework is Smith’s (2015) argument that in order for people of color and third world people to effectively organize against systems of oppression, we must establish a deeper understanding about structures of power and the ways in which they operate and are maintained in order to build strong alliances. This is where I add to transnational, Islamic and Arab feminist scholarship on migrant domestic work and redirect our attention to the ways in which configurations of privileges and oppressions need to be complicated by centering race (specifically Blackness and anti-Blackness), gender, sexuality, and religion at the intersections of citizenship, migrant activism and capitalism.

**Historical context**

Lebanon is officially recognized as an independent nation in the Middle East and is referred to as the Lebanese Republic. It borders what is now known as Syria to the East and North, while Palestine/Israel border it to the South. The Lebanese Republic, situated on the Mediterranean Basin, has historically had access to what we conceptualize as the West, or, in other words, European powers, as well as these having access to it, it’s people and economy. In the following pages, I trace historical accounts of the Middle East, and specifically Lebanese understandings and conceptualizations of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion and citizenship. In addition, I unearth how these understandings are, as Thompson (2000) argues, negotiated between the colonizer and the colonized while simultaneously tied to enterprises of power. In order to understand how the above-mentioned conceptualizations came to be in Lebanon, it is important to first, recount the
colonial history of the region starting with the pre-Ottoman period, followed by Ottoman rule and the fall of the Ottoman caliphate, and subsequently with the occupation by European powers. This account, I hope, will demonstrate how Lebanon’s colonial history continues to influence its social classifications and governmentality today.

One of the most important time periods of Middle Eastern contact with Europe was during the Ottoman Empire. According to Salibi (1988), the Ottomans first established their capital in Edrine (Adrianople), and in 1453 moved it to Istanbul. During the early 1500s, Ottoman Sultans turned South towards what is now known as Syria and seized territory from the Malmuks, occupying Egypt. Twice during the 1500s and the 1600s, Ottoman rulers occupied territory as far as Vienna (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014, Lewis, 1992), initiating a continuous exchange of political, social, literary and scholarly ideas between Europe, North African and Middle Eastern areas.

In 1918, the Ottoman caliphate, which had supported the Central European Powers during the first world war, was defeated by the Allies, causing it to lose control over its Middle Eastern domain (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014, Thompson, 2000). But this vacuum in power was soon filled by Europe, particularly in Mount Lebanon and the Syrian regions, as they had already started to gain a foothold even during the heydays of the Ottoman Empire. According to Salibi (1988), European influence grew in Mount Lebanon and larger Syria especially after 1840. As I hope to demonstrate below, this influence encompassed political, religious, and social controls that permeate the lived reality of the Lebanese citizenry today.
Race: Tracing Pre-Ottoman, Ottoman and European colonial racial configurations Influencing the Middle East

Categorizations of the Other for pre-Ottoman Arabs, or those who spoke Arabic were different even though they still existed before European contact. As Ahmed (1992), Lewis (1992) and Hunwick (2005) demonstrate, classifications of Otherness placed equal, if not more importance, on differences in education, religion and location than skin color. These classifications would depend on the location and who was put in charge by the Ottomans. In other words, hinging on the geographical location of the Ottoman Empire, some social categories would be given more importance than others, and these would continuously change and vary with time. Looking at Islamic law on slavery, Lewis (1992) and Ahmed (1992) emphasize the ‘rules of conduct’ available to Muslim Arabs for the enslavement of Other people. Slaves could only be owned if they were non-Muslim and had been defeated in battle. Classifications of inferiority and superiority mainly encompassed Others that were uneducated, believed in a different religion, or spoke a different language but were also mostly located in the African continent, making skin color another (but as mentioned above not the only) form of identifying difference.

Another way of illustrating the complexities of race in this time period is through the life of Omar Ibn Said. Ibn Said was a West African Islamic teacher from an affluent family (Said, 2011). It is known that he mastered the Arabic language during his Qur’anic schooling and became a teacher before he was enslaved by the West and taken to the U.S. This piece of information tells us that since he was born into an important family in the region, that happened to have extensive monetary power, and, because he was educated and mastered the Arabic language, Arabs in the Ottoman region of West Africa had not
considered him a slave (this was not the fate of all the people in his region). Keep in mind that just because this singular experience does not point to the enslavement of West Africans by Arabs, the fact that Arabic is of common use means that at some point in time West Africans were brought under Ottoman rule and studied the Arabic language. Skin color on its own did not force him into slavery up until direct contact with Europeans in 1807. He was then kidnapped and taken to the colonies of North America as a slave. Ibn Said’s story is also important because it allows us to see how the weight value of skin color as a hierarchical category changed depending on other factors such as education, language and family status during the Ottoman period. Once European contact cemented, differentiating based on primarily skin color began to gain more importance.

Hence, when looking at race and racism in the Middle East, it is important to note that the ways in which black Africans and Arabs were described by Ottomans points to the anti-Black racial logics of the time. According to Erdem (2010), the Ottoman usage of racialized difference was constructed in a way that “Black Africans were invariably and colloquially termed ‘Arabs’ and ethnic Arabs were ‘white Arabs’” (p. 140). Current views on racialization have shifted to position Anglo-American logics as the backdrop through which ‘Arabs’ classify Others and themselves. One of the ways this shift can be acknowledged is by looking at the literature and scholarship distributed by Arab publications during the end of the Ottoman Empire and continuing through European occupation (Helal, 2010).

According to Walz and Cuno (2010), there is a near consensus, looking at census records in the area now known as Egypt during the Ottoman Empire, that origin and skin color positioned Africans in a status of servitude. They found that even though slavery
was indeed conceptualized differently in the Middle East as opposed to the transatlantic slave trade associated with the U.S. (there were white European slaves, the Slavs, and other ethnicities working for the empire), Blackness and Sudanese origins were the identifiers usually associated with slavery, whereas others were considered to be more apt to serve as soldiers and commanders. In *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (2010), Walz and Cuno also show how African women would be kidnapped in Egypt and taken to Palestine to be sold as slaves because of their association with Blackness.

As mentioned above, European racial configurations were informed by pre-Ottoman categorizations of Otherness in accordance with Islamic law. In his chapter, Helal (2010) takes a close look at the autobiography of Ali Mubarak where he describes how the governor of his Ottoman province was a Black enslaved person. Ali then asked his father, how is it possible for a Black enslaved person to hold such a position? To which his father replied; because of education. Helal (2010) points out that “this conversation indicates that while it was unremarkable for a white slave to be elevated to such a high position, it was unusual enough in the case of African slaves to prompt the young Mubarak’s question” (p. 22).

One of the differences in racial classification that pertains to the Middle East is that before direct contact with Europe, but during the Ottoman Empire, the peoples of the world were classified based on whether they were educated or not (and in association with other markers such as accent, national origin and gender), with the latter being understood as more available for servitude and usually encompassing populations that had been defeated by the Ottoman Empire. According to Cuno (2010), census records found in Cairo during the end period of the Ottoman Empire classified people according
to the color of their skin; “the lighter colors white, blond (ashqar) and wheatlike (qambi) were ascribed only to Egyptians and the darkest color, black, only to Sudanese. Individuals in both groups were described as red and brown” (p. 86). What this demonstrates is that, during the Ottoman Empire, classifications based on skin color were being used in the Middle East before being colonized by European powers. At the same time, even though skin color was gaining importance, a person’s status in society would also be influenced by other categories mentioned above. Thus, it is important to note that during this period, a give and take of sorts had already started between ‘Arab’ and Western thinkers where differential categorizations of populations based on race relied on each other’s’ knowledge, which explains why skin color begins to take on more importance.

As I have stated above, not only are classifications of difference based on skin color considered one of the key identifiers of inferiority or superiority, but also Egyptians, and Mediterranean Arabs considered themselves to belong to the superior category of whiteness. Helal (2010) also points out that during the 19th century, foreign observers produced reports that ignored the multitude of skin color classifications produced within Ottoman Empire Egypt whereby “Euro-American constructions of race provided a template for their (Ottoman Empire and European powers) discussions of slavery and race in Egypt” (p. 87).

Another important aspect to thinking of race and racism within the Middle Eastern context is the way in which Ottomans described Black Africans and Arabs within society pointing to the anti-Blackness of their logics. Once again, this detail shifts our attention towards the ways in which Arabs have conceptualized themselves as white
before being occupied by European powers. In addition, race coupled with gender produced categorizations within skin color that positioned Black women especially in vulnerable positions. In other words, and as Kozma (2010) points out “gender and [B]lackness of skin added vulnerabilities that freed white slaves, and even black male slaves, did not have to deal with” (Kozma, 2010, p. 198). Hence, Black enslaved women often endured more precariousness than their male counterparts because of the intersection of their skin color and their gender (Crenshaw, 1990).

Kozma (2010) also points out that even after the abolition of slavery in the Middle East and particularly in the Egyptian area, race continued to denote skin color, African origin and perceived connection to past slavery. She notes “terms sawda (black), sudaniyya (Sudanese), and jariya (female slave) were used interchangeably to describe women who were actually freed slaves, representing the lingering image of women and men of African origins in Egyptian society” (p. 199). This naming practice can still be noticed today. For example, Black migrant domestic workers are referred to as ‘sirlankiye’ (from Sri Lanka) regardless of what their national origins are. If the migrant domestic worker is Black, that is the term used.

On the other hand, migrant domestic workers from the Philippines, who happen to be of much lighter complexion, are referred to as ‘filipiniye’ thereby reducing the significance of national origin and increasing the significance of skin color in a way that homogenizes all Black migrant domestic workers as coming from the same place. In other words, migrant domestic workers that are also Black women are all referred to as ‘sirlankiye’ regardless of their national origin. Also, all non-Black migrant domestic workers are referred to as ‘filipiniye’ regardless of national location as well. One ‘name’
denotes Blackness immediately, and the other denotes non-Black. Kozma (2010) also notes that origin and religion no longer were used to classify people but instead, and according to police and council records “more often than not they were simply described as black (aswad or sawda)” (p. 199). In addition, and for the purpose of this discussion, it also important to note the situation of white slaves at the time. She states, “white slaves, imported from the Caucasus and Georgia, were often conscripted to the ranks of the elite” (p. 201). In this way, Middle Eastern understandings of racialization thought highly of white slaves as opposed to Black African slaves, but albeit differently conceptualized than in Anglo-American categorizations. Nonetheless, it still positioned populations within a spectrum where Blackness, at one end, denotes inferiority and whiteness, at the other, denotes superiority.

Once the Middle East came under the Anglo-American domain through colonization, and increased immigration to the U.S., conceptualizations of race continued to be informed by Anglo-American understandings. Gualtieri (2009) traces migration from Mount Lebanon and larger Syria to the U.S. with a focus on not only how the Anglo-American government classified them racially, but also how they would end up classifying themselves and others. Referencing the world fairs of Chicago and St. Louis during the late 1800s, she shows how “the business men and migrant artists involved in presenting aspects of their culture did so with the goal of boosting international trade and cross-country exchanges” (Gualtieri, 2009, p. 36) where they were not merely “quaint curiosities and objects of a ‘one way white gaze’ but active subjects in an entrepreneurial undertaking that drew on their extensive experience in other contact zones: homeland port cities (like Beirut) and international fairs (such as the Paris exposition of 1889)” (p. 36).
The flow of information, or knowledge did not travel one way but was in fact a constant exchange between the U.S. and the Middle East, just as it had been between early Ottoman Arabs and Europeans. As mentioned above, this also shows how not only categorizations of race, but of gender, sexuality and citizenship shifted during the end of the Ottoman caliphate and throughout European colonization, in a bargaining of sorts, to justify Middle Eastern ‘modernity’ to the West.

Gualtieri (2009) also shows how Syrians (the term she uses to refer to people of Mount Lebanon and greater Syria) were being classified into a color continuum where some were identified as being darker and others as being lighter. This emphasis on skin color as a marker of social difference in the U.S. where “Syrian’s fit into America’s complicated racial taxonomy soon became a question whose answer was far from obvious” (p. 51) whereby Middle Eastern people had to not only understand these classifications, but attempt to position themselves and Others within them. Discussions of where exactly Syrians would be placed within this taxonomy would become very prominent in publications of Arabic language that not only circulated within Arab immigrants in the U.S. but also in literary work and publications in Mount Lebanon and larger Syria.

Gualtieri (2009) points out how Arab scholars and writers already classified humans in hierarchical classifications, as I have discussed above. She explains that even though classifications focused on learning excellences (Al-Andalusi), soon others like Zaydan would follow by attempting to ‘modernize’ those classifications. This was done by basing their hierarchical schemes on the ‘modern sciences’ (European scholarship) of anthropology and ethnology that centered ‘observation and research.’ She shows how
Tabaqat al-umam (for example) divided populations worldwide in 4 different categories ordered from lowest to highest: “at the bottom were [Black people] (al-zunuj), ‘the lowest and the most base,’ followed by the Mongolian or ‘the yellow race,’ the American [indigenous people], or the ‘red race,’ and the Caucasian, or the ‘white race.’” (p. 65)

According to Gualtieri (2009), within the last category, considered by Zaydan to be at the top of the list, he placed the Semitic peoples (Arabs, Jews and Aryans).

There are other instances where Arab scholars and writers have relied on Western taxonomies of race to position themselves and by connection, the Arab world, in ‘modern’ terms and in relation to Western civilization. Massad (2008) for example, demonstrates how many Arab scholars since the mid 19th century have placed understandings of Arab culture in direct relation to a Darwinian civilizational system where the West is understood to be the ‘finishing point’ or rather, the example of ‘modernity’ and civilization. He argues that Westernized Arabs changed and adapted history (many times through omission of information) to make Arab cultural norms and values align with those of the West. This became a standardized practice.

Gualtieri (2009) reflects on Zaydan’s writings and contends that they demonstrate how “educated, cosmopolitan elites […] were anxious to forge a modern orientation to the world by familiarizing themselves with European racial theories” (p. 65). In addition, and as I have attempted to demonstrate above, “the problem of racial classification in the diaspora engendered debates in the homeland – a reminder that emigration produces a flow across borders not only of bodies and resources but of ideas also” (p. 66). We can see how racial configurations in the Middle East shift towards Anglo-American
understandings of race, moving away from Pre-Islamic and pre-Ottoman configurations of Otherness from the 8th century onwards.

Over time, and in reference over legal battles sought by Syrians to be classified as white in the United States, Gualtieri (2009) shows how immigrants from Mount Lebanon and larger Syria challenged any comparison to Black people in the country and looked to distance themselves from any connection to blackness (p. 71) while at the same time fighting to be classified as white. The author points out

“securing status as ‘white persons’ was no longer about securing the right to naturalize; it was about distancing Syrians from Blacks and Asians in the discourse on race. Hence the argument in favor of Syrian whiteness in the Arabic language press became more and more about defending the Syrian’s status as ‘pure Caucasian,’ racially distinct from two other groups of people understood (both in the understanding of the common man and according to ‘scientific rationales’) to be emphatically not white” (p. 72)

Hence, the development of notions of ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’ as being main concerns in the West, and reaching colonized spaces, were marked by logics of modernity and non-modernity where nations were categorized under evolutionary notions of progress (Massad, 2008). Increasingly, Syrians became concerned with identifying themselves as white, not through education, origin or religiosity, as was the case during the Ottoman Empire, but rather by “generating a different definition of their whiteness, one that hinged on the question of who was ‘not white,’” or in other words, how far away they could classify themselves from Blackness (Gualtieri, 2009, p. 73).

European configurations of the African continent and its people were largely based on the work circulating within pre-Islamic and Arab societies from the 8th century up until the Ottoman rule (Kozma, 2013; Lewis, 1992; Hunwick, 2005). During this period, ‘Arab’ writers, albeit largely in geographical terms (meaning writers that used
Arabic and originated form what we now know as the Arab world), described the sub-Saharan Africa providing the base for knowledge formation on Otherness in late 18th and early 19th century Europe.

**End of the Ottoman rule, European influence and Control**

After the signing of the Treaty of Paris in the late 19th century, some of the European powers and the Ottoman caliphate, which was considered to be part of the Concert of Europe² (Salibi, 1998), met in Beirut through a French initiative to reconfigure the organization of Mount Lebanon and larger Syria. In accordance with this meeting, Mount Lebanon would be recognized as an administrative region controlled by the Ottoman Empire, guaranteed internationally under a Christian governor that was pre-approved by European powers (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014). In this instance, we can see how, even under Ottoman rule, European powers had quite a grip on sociopolitical affairs in the Lebanese region. After the first World War, which included the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, the Allies were able to reconfigure the geopolitical map of large parts of the world (Salibi, 1998). The colonies in Africa and other parts of the world that had been under German control, were re-distributed among French and British powers. It is important to note that this re-distribution, opened up the possibility of increased flow of information between the colonies, as well as between colonial citizens and European

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² The Concert of Europe is usually understood in two main phases, the first one being before Italy and Germany were consolidated and the European map re-drawn. The second phase, which is of importance to this project, was revived by Germany who wanted to make sure their power in Europe was secured. It was during the second phase of the Concert of Europe that opened up the path to strengthening colonization in Africa and Asia while keeping somewhat peace between the European powers. When the fall of the Ottoman Empire was inevitable this alliance proved to be brittle. It then separated into two, the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Russia and the United Kingdom).
powers. In other words, and as demonstrated by Arsan (2014), Lebanese colonial citizens were able to travel to West African French colonies in the early 20th century to conduct business and act as the ‘middle man’ between the French colonizers and the indigenous populations of West Africa. As a result of which negotiations of identity, race, belonging and citizenship between colonizer and colonial citizens were inescapable.

According to Salibi (1988), during the Ottoman rule, there was some sense of national consciousness. However, throughout its territories, people were mostly loyal to particular religious and sectarian traditions that were sometimes in conflict with each other. When the time came for British and French powers to partition Ottoman lands, especially greater Syria and Mount Lebanon, they did not seem to be concerned with these religious - and traditions - based tensions and divided these areas in ways that would best privilege their economic and political interest. France and Britain achieved consensus on how the territories would be distributed among them in 1920 at San Remo (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014).

As I mentioned above, these partitioned areas were strategically created to support European access to oil and communication channels. According to Salibi (1988), the aftermath of the war had cemented the importance of oil to European powers. British officials were concerned about maintaining control over oil reserves in Iran while simultaneously working to prevent Germans, who already had great investments within the Turkish Petroleum Company, from gaining access to the oil reserves in Kirkuk (Mesopotamia).

In 1916, France and Britain assigned the Ottoman provinces of Mosul to the French and the provinces of Baghdad and Basra to the British in the infamous Sykes-
Picot Agreement (Salibi, 1998 Thompson, 2000), which has been talked about in my family. My grandmother’s grandfather, Sheik Moustafa Naja, had been appointed Mufti of Beirut by the Ottomans, and was suspicious, to say the least of the European powers leading the negotiations. My great aunt recently told me how General Picot offered him to be Mufti of Lebanon, but he refused because he considered it a bribe.

When it came to Syria, France would be allowed to occupy the province of Aleppo, and the northern provinces of Beirut and Damascus, essentially leaving the rest of the country to Britain. Both powers agreed that Palestine would remain under international status and control because of Jerusalem and its importance to European Christianity (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014, Gualtieri, 2009). This international status agreement would soon be ignored by Britain as it occupied Palestine and seized complete control over this area. With this occupation, the Sykes-Picot agreement would stand rescinded, leading to new terms in a new arrangement by both European powers. Within this new arrangement, France would give up the province of Mosul in exchange for major shares in the Turkish Petroleum Company, causing the reorganization and redistribution of territory once again.

Thompson (2000) notes that “the French created new states from a congeries of former Ottoman provinces whose residents had not […] thought of themselves as Syrian or Lebanese” (p. 15). It is clear that the populations’ anxieties with how they would be affected by these divisions was not a main concern for France or other European powers. Many different sects, religions and ethnicities were distributed throughout these territories during the Ottoman Empire and at the start of European control, with little to no concern over their alliances, traditions and differences. Arabs were seen as a monolith,
and therefore attention to differences between the populations was not a priority, and possibly not even a concern at all. My great aunt talks about these partitions with a palpable frustration: “Well, my father always talked about the way they divided the country so as to ignite conflict like cutting a piece of Syria and calling it Lebanon, cutting a piece of Iraq and calling it Kuwait… he was unhappy about it.”

As briefly mentioned above, the defeat of the Ottoman caliphate in 1918 paved the path for British and French officials to partition larger Syria (which includes what we now know as the Lebanese Republic), leaving Mount Lebanon as a colony of the French mandate (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014, Gualtieri, 2009). World War II brought to the region the first class-based movements and enflamed religious tensions: “Christians of Mount Lebanon were hit hardest by famine, fueling their search for security through alliance with the French” (Thompson, 2000, p. 15). France saw itself as the protector of the interests of Christian Maronites in the area, and so, after pressures from the latter, French officials included the Ottoman provinces of Beirut and Damascus to the area of Mount Lebanon (Salibi, 1998).

When French officials and militants arrived at the shores of Beirut, they were welcomed by Maronites and other Christians who upheld the French flag while referring to France as the “tender, loving mother” (Salibi, 1998, p. 33) that was there to save them. Maronite Christians demonstrated on the streets of Beirut calling for the independence of Greater Lebanon. It is important to note, however, that they were not referring to independence from European powers, but independence from the Syrian provinces in order to be considered distinct and separate from Syrian Arabs. This historical instance in Lebanese political life helped shape the struggles between different religious sects and
nationalisms. Arab nationalists, which were mainly composed of individuals from Muslim and Druze sects, supported the unification of Lebanese territories with Syria as opposed to Christian Lebanese nationalists who were in support of French and Western partitions of the territory.

According to Salibi (1988), Maronites in Mount Lebanon threatened to immigrate to Europe ‘en masse’ if they did not get their way. Maronites, who throughout the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of European occupation were given the status of ‘elite’ in the country, would rather leave their homes to become Europeans than be associated internationally with Syria, which at the time was under Arab governance while being controlled by the British (Salibi, 1998). These instances point to the strong connection that some populations (albeit the most powerful) in Mount Lebanon felt towards Europe, and how they would rather be associated with Europeans than other Arabs. At this point in history, the population of Mount Lebanon clearly begins to associate its identity with Europe. This desire to be under ‘European’ control manifested itself yet again after the explosion of August 4th, 2020. So many people came out to the streets asking to be under French control again.

In 1926, still under colonial occupation, Lebanon saw how the French forced a constitution (with the acceptance and help of Maronites) on to its population that would mark the territory as the Lebanese Republic in world maps (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014). This ‘new Lebanon’ raised their newly acquired flag, which happened to be a replica of the French flag with the addition of the Cedar tree (still represented in today’s flag). In addition, with the enforcement of the constitution (with the full support of Christian Orthodox and Maronite groups) France created this ‘new’ state in its own
image while maintaining the colonial difference. Maronite leaders who accepted this new arrangement were rewarded with high positions in political office while the population that did not support French control were isolated, if they ever happened to reach political office, while being constantly pushed out by their Maronite counterparts (Salibi, 1998).

One of the premises outlined in the constitution was that the president of the republic ought to be Christian, and this is still true today. French officials made sure that the first president belonged to the Greek Orthodox church and appointed a Sunni Muslim to be the speaker. Christian Maronites were able to secure positions in all of the remaining offices, and eventually became the Christian leaders that the French had hoped for this region (Salibi, 1998). Having the president be Christian is still applied today in Lebanese politics as the ranks of higher office are divided between the largest religious groups of the country: the president has to be Christian, the vice-president Sunni Muslim, and the head of the military Shiite.

The French saw Christian Maronites in Lebanon as advantageous for their own political benefit and control. As a result, they were understood as socially more developed and in a better position to reach ‘modernity,’ or in other words, to become westernized (Salibi, 1998). In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon (2007) called this group of colonial citizens the colonial bourgeoisie, he adds, they can be easily “convinced that [they] can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country. But that same independence […] will oblige [them] to send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country” (p. 149) something that can still be seen today (recall the Lebanese people wanting to be under colonial rule again). Hence, France considered Maronite Christians to be deceitful and gullible native Arabs that would be
“willing and in fact eager to help the colonizers achieve their ends” (Salibi, 1998, p. 39).

On the one hand, the French categorized Christian Maronites as the least inferior of the region, which is why they made sure they secured positions of power within the colonized territory. On the other hand, they never considered any of the Arabs as embodying European values, or never saw them as equals to Christian Maronites.

French Roman Catholic, and Protestant missionaries in Syria were mostly active in Beirut and Mount Lebanon and they were the heads of many schools and institutions built in the area. It was the Lebanese Christians, more so than Muslims (even though they also participated), that attended these schools and habitually associated with European traders and politicians in ways that allowed for the adoption of European values in order to move towards ‘modernity’ (Salibi, 1998, Kaufman, 2014, Massad, 2008, Kozma, 2013). At the same time, British officials supported a unified ‘Arab’ identity in Syria that would work against the advancements of the French in Lebanon. In this, they were supported by U.S. scholars who had “a firmly established intellectual base in the area: the Syrian Protestant College, founded in 1866” (Salibi, 1998, p. 131). This university still exists today in Beirut under the name of American University of Beirut.

According to Choueiri (2013), there is a shortage of Arab historians who have not been influenced by Western historical accounts of the region. These historians adopted the literary work of Western philosophers such as Locke, Voltaire and Montesquieu to understand their own place in history as Arabs living in European mandates (Choueiri, 2013). Throughout this period, conceptualizations of nation state and citizenship were understood under the new Western creation of Arab states and the close surveillance of colonizing powers (Choueiri, 2013).
It is during this period, as Massad (2008) and Choueiri (2013) note, Arab scholars and litterateurs adopted a defensive position against Western thought in order to legitimize the existence of these newly created Arab states. Discussions that appeared during this period of time had a tendency to focus on demonstrating the paths that Arab society could take in order to move away from their ‘backwardness’ and adopt Western values. According to Choueiri (2013), “the army officer and the scholar in the Arab world share a number of characteristics: the adoption of Western ideas, [and] a burning desire to reform society” (p. 190) according to Western values, and some degree of ignorance towards their traditional communities.

It is here that I want to dwell into how the ‘burning desire’ to direct Middle Eastern societies towards Western civilizational values assembled new configurations of race, gender, sexuality, and religion in order to be able to label who belongs in our citizenry (and therefore political life) and who doesn’t in a way that mirrored European values. World War II further exasperated sectarian tensions in the region by bringing famine to communities such as the Christian Maronites of Mount Lebanon, which “fuel[ed] their search for security through alliance with the French” (Thompson, 2000, p. 15). In this way, France positioned itself as the protector of interests of Christian Maronites and started to make concessions in favor of this community such as annexing the Ottoman provinces of Beirut and Damascus to Mount Lebanon (Salibi, 1998). As mentioned above, the Lebanese constitution (upon our independence) was crafted in the living image of that of France’s, and it was not received kindly by many Syrian and Arab nationalists who were trying to avoid their separation from Syria (Makdashi, 2019).
Many of these ‘thinkers’ came to be intermediaries between the people in their communities and the colonial French in Lebanon. Gender hierarchies, for example, influenced by both privileged local and colonial men continued to be cemented in Lebanon within religious, ethnic, political and social life. French occupation officials ensured that certain privileges would be afforded to those intermediary Arabs (mainly Christians) that already held religious, tribal and class positions of power, sealing precarious arrangements that supported racial, paternalistic and religious social hierarchies. I do want to reiterate that this is not to say that gendered and racial hierarchies in Lebanon are caused by colonization, but rather, that colonized citizens, especially those already in positions of power were able to negotiate their status within society to maintain their privilege, while at the same time, negotiating the status of Others.

As briefly mentioned above, these ‘informational channels’ did not work one way back and forth. As Arsan (2014) demonstrates, negotiations of identity, racial and gendered assumptions and expectations and status in society also occurred between different colonies. For example, economically secure families in Lebanon were able to travel to French West African colonies and establish businesses and commercial relations between the colonies and Europe. At the same time, identity categorizations of difference such as race and gender were being conceptualized in the Middle East, and other colonies in North and West Africa in accordance to European standards in order to justify ‘Arab’ progress towards ‘modernity’ (Massad, 2008, Kozma 2013, Helal, 2010).

The newly created Arab states, and specifically within the context of Lebanon, therefore mimicked the social order of colonial powers whereby paternalistic elites
supported “the inequities of the colonial order [and] assured the perpetuation of the
gendered national pacts that subordinated women in the civic order” (Thompson, 2000, p.
272). It is also important to note, that colonial citizens did not simply stay in the French
Mandate territories of the Middle East and the colonies in North and West Africa
(Khater, 2001; Gualtieri, 2009). Many of them emigrated to France, Britain, Germany
and the U.S. during this period, attending schools and working in different fields. Many
of these emigrants would return to their cities and villages bringing with them Western
conceptualizations of society and the home. This created radical making changes in civic
structure and the culture of Mount Lebanon. This continues to happen today in Lebanon.
The new Minister of Labor Abousleiman, for example, has often times used his European
education and the fact that he has lived 40+ years outside of Lebanon as evidence of his
‘progressive politics.’

Ottoman imposed rules, European authority and the fear of losing the little power
and control that local elites had, reconfigured sectarianism into a stronger and
increasingly important political framework (Makdisi, 2000). This strengthened reliance
on sectarianism by local populations, allowed Europe to justify its understanding of itself
as modern and advanced while positioning Middle Eastern communities as backward and
in need of civilizing while finding allies (the intermediaries) within the communities that
most resembled their own. The emphasis by Europe on the backwardness of sectarianism
also strengthened the Ottoman’s beliefs of the need for civic and jurisprudential reform
and governmental control (Makdisi, 2000).

The privileging of one religious identity over another by European powers
allowed elite colonial citizens to reconfigure stronger sectarian limits in order to shut
down any attempts by the non-elite class of rising to power, which happened to be a challenge across all religious divides (not just Islam and Christianity). In many ways, this can still be seen today by paying attention to how the Lebanese government has responded to the protests that started at the beginning of October 2019, as well as the response, or rather lack thereof, to the explosion of August 4, 2020. Governmental officials (mostly Christian) have insinuated that Lebanon, once again, needs mother France to interfere and fix the problems, which to us, the people actively supporting the protest, can only translate to ‘needing France’ to maintain the status quo.

In tracing the development of a hierarchical colonial citizenship within the creation of Lebanon and Syria, Thompson (2000) is able to demonstrate that configurations of citizenship were mainly defined by the French Mandate social policies which were produced and reproduced by the male (mostly Christian) elite, businessmen, and landowners of the region. Ayoub (2019) agrees, but cautions us that sectarian politics manifested in the region, albeit in different ways, throughout the 1800s. According to Makdashi (2019), direct and purposeful sectarian placements of political offices in Lebanon can be traced to the 1943 National Pact, which stipulates, although not in written form (since its considered customary law, or ‘urf’), that governmental power should be shared between Christian and Muslim political elites who happened to be mostly Sunni and Christian Maronites. The National Pact of 1943 is considered to be key in the inclusion of Muslim Sunni elites into the political configurations of Lebanon, that allowed some Arab nationalists to agree to the creation of the Lebanese Republic (Makdashi, 2019). This is the same year that Lebanon gained independence from the French Mandate. More than having to do with the future physical borders of Lebanon, the
National Pact ensured the entrenchment of sectarian politics within the Lebanese consciousness by emphasizing the importance of ‘religious sharing’ of power within government.

**Gender and sexuality: Ottoman rule and European Control**

Gender hierarchies have been known to be tied to colonial paternalism as “French and [Arab] elites bargained to maintain hierarchies of privilege in colonial society” (Thompson, 2010, p. 3). The suffering endured after World War I throughout the Ottoman region, such as famine and the compulsory enrollment of individuals for military service, and later the occupation and French rule, undermined male authority as the heads of households and of their communities which also translated in changing roles for women (Thompson, 2000). In addition, identity categorizations of difference such as race and gender were being conceptualized in the Middle East in accordance to European standards in order to justify ‘Arab’ progress towards ‘modernity (Massad, 2008, Kozma 2013, Helal, 2010). Gender, therefore, became a contested site through which Lebanese people voiced their opposition to, and defense of, French paternalistic privileges.

This compromised arrangement of gendered hierarchies resulted in the emergence of resistance movements by members of the nonelites such as women’s movements, Islamic populism, and labor movements, of which women’s issues would end up being pushed out and sacrificed (Thompson, 2000). The newly created Arab states, especially Lebanon, therefore mimicked the social order of colonial powers whereby paternalistic elites supported “the inequities of the colonial order [and] assured the perpetuation of the gendered national pacts that subordinated women in the civic order” (Thompson, 2000, p. 272).
This is not to downplay the violent occupation of Lebanese territories and the repressive state apparatus enforced within the French mandates. Rather, what I am trying to convey is the complicated position that colonial citizens occupy where they must create a civic order that allows for the interaction between the French state and the Lebanese citizen to open up possibilities of negotiation with one another.

Colonial citizens did not simply stay in the French Mandate territories (Khater, 2001). Emigrants that came back to their home cities and villages would encourage their daughters to attend school (which at the time were all controlled by either French or British officials and American scholars) in order to foster ‘modernization’ of society (Khater, 2001). My grandfather is one of these men. He never emigrated outside of the ‘Arab world’ as he mainly traveled between Lebanon and the cities of Mecca and Riyadh. However, he was the greatest proponent of my mother and aunts studying and getting advanced degrees. Interestingly enough, the degrees, or the education that were most valuable to him (and to most Lebanese, for reference look at tuition prices of Western institutions compared to Arab ones) were those of French middle school and high school and the American University of Beirut: anything different was not valuable or equally as ‘educated.’ In a way, my grandfather participated in what Thompson (2000) describes as the colonial citizens creating a civic order that negotiated and created beliefs and values aligned with the West in order to survive as modern subjects.

One of the focal points debated within the civic order created by colonial citizens during the 1920s in Lebanon was women’s citizenship (Thompson, 2000). Lebanese women’s claims to citizenship as compensation for participating in war was nothing new. According to Thompson (2000), women were well versed in the literature of righteous
warfare during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic time periods. This literature in turn was used by women to advocate for the argument that they had “once been active citizens with full rights, not only as soldiers, but also as judges and teachers” (Thompson, 2000, p. 124). Even though some male elites agreed, they ended up following France’s footsteps and characterizing the military service of women as an exception. In other words, they agreed that women could enlist in the military in times of need but also supported that they return to work in the home when there was peace as opposed to having a career (Thompson, 2000).

During and after these debates on whether women should be considered active citizens of the colonial civic order, violent gender clashes arose in various cities across Lebanon led by male elites and their followers who looked to delineate the availability of public space for women through demonstrations against unveiled women’s presence in the streets, or against female elites participating in public leisure activities such as going to the movies (Thompson, 2000). These demonstrations targeting women were an attempt by different male groups across class divide to oppose as well as to reconfigure negotiations within the French Mandate.

Even though men tried to exert their influence, women continued to actively chart new directions for their lives. According to Khater (2001), they challenged the boundaries imposed by different groups of men in relation to what constituted public and private life. Women challenged the idea that men were the most capable providers in terms of business and commerce, while women were positioned as ‘home-caring mothers’ in charge of raising a family (Khater, 2001). Gender became a site where male
elites and nonelites were able to lessen, or temporarily set aside class and religious tensions.

Gender was not the only way in which European powers meddled in Middle Eastern affairs by positioning Arabs as backward and in need of civilizing. Sexuality accompanied gendered assumptions as well. Massad (2008) demonstrates that in traditional Arab societies, sexuality and sexual relations were not only relegated to relationships and desire between men and women, but that distinct sexual categorizations didn’t need recognition. As with race, configurations of gender and sexuality in the Arab world also radically shifted during the late Ottoman caliphate and throughout European occupation.

During the 19th century, the West placed civilizational and cultural value on to sexual subjectivities and practices within a scale of evolutionary progression in a larger colonial and imperialistic context such that the West positioned itself as an advanced, modern, progressive society while the Middle East is positioned as backward, savage and uncivilized (Massad, 2008; Kozma, 2013). Kozma (2013) shows how ‘Arab’ doctors who were publishing medical journals and other more popular publications like periodicals and magazines, were mostly trained in the West, in countries like the U.S., France and Germany. This Western influence on their understandings of gender and sexuality facilitated their belief that they were meant to bring their people towards ‘modernity’ through education. Both Westernized ‘Arab’ cultural reformers and medical doctors “started writing about sex in Arabic [and] present[ing] themselves as liberating their readers from the hold of custom and organized religion” in a way that “situated themselves as the vanguard of a modern and enlightened East” (Kozma, 2013, p. 432).
She notes that ‘Arab’ elites “responded, in part, by advocating reform of both the political and the domestic spheres, including the discipline of individual bodies” (p. 428). This advocating of reform was largely due to the assumptions that European powers had created about the indecency of the Middle East where a reconceptualization of gender and sexuality was constructed against the backdrop of Western values. Kozma (2013) notes “in creating counternarratives to traveler accounts that saw Ottoman sexuality as promiscuous, Ottoman writers presented their society’s morality as based on gender segregation and a heterosexual ethic” (p. 428) that mimicked Victorian understandings of gender and sexuality (Massad, 2008, Helal, 2010, Kozma, 2010).

Within the specific context of Lebanon, Kozma (2013) outlines the ways in which French medical doctors that were commissioned to investigate and document on health conditions in Beirut described the population at the time. “Boyer attributed what he saw as the backwardness of the East to the deficiency of local habits and individual bodies” where the focus was placed on criticizing “women, polygamy, and easy divorce” as well as “male bodies [who] were also attacked as lacking in self-control and consequently degenerating” (p. 428), placing discourses on gender and sexuality within colonial logics of difference. Therefore, the European conviction that Arabs and/or Muslims were inherently antagonistic to ‘modernity’ set the tone, and in fact, guided Middle Eastern discourses on gender and sexuality.

Thus, intellectuals and middle-class readers of their literary work, participated in cultural debates that prioritized the need of reform of the Middle East “to meet the challenges of modernity [imposed by] Western domination” (Kozma, 2013, p. 429). Massad (2008) also adds that Westerners and Westernized Arabs (referring to mostly
scholarship and literary work) have attempted to universalize Western assumptions of sexuality causing problematic notions of heterosexuality. Much of what the Middle East knows about itself has been shaped by Western assumption of civilizational progress adopted by ‘Arab’ elites throughout the Middle East. In this way, changing and adapting history to make past ‘Arab’ cultural norms and values align with Western values became standardized practice by Westernized Arabs.

All in all, aligning ‘Arab’ norms and values to Western configurations to achieve ‘modernity’ meant that not only political and economic logics needed to be remodeled, but that “it required modifying the very intimacy of one’s conduct, family life and interactions between spouses, clothing, and more” (Kozma, 2013, p. 429). Consequently, controlling and castigating sexuality “became part of creating a respectable modern middle class” (Kozma, 2013, p. 429) where stories of the past such as that of Abu Nuwus, were ignored, hidden or censored by the 20th century (Massad, 2008) in order to respond to accusations of sexual promiscuity by the West.

Additionally, the modifying of one’s own intimacy in relationship to others did not occur in a vacuum. In other words, changes in behaviors and in thinking in order to align with Western values, and as discussed above, also dictated the ways in which Arab understandings about race would shift to match those of their colonizers. This can still be seen today, in everyday life. For example, clothing that is referred to as ‘faranse’ (meaning French or European) is placed under the umbrella of modern, progressive and desirable dress, whereas typical Lebanese clothing is considered to be ‘traditional’ in the sense that it should belong to the past, or in theatrical representations of the past.
Through this transnational, Muslim Arab feminist recount of historical events I have shown how the struggle to maintain the status quo by Lebanese middle and upper class, or what Fanon calls the colonial bourgeoisie (mostly Christian Maronites in Lebanon) is not a new phenomenon and can be traced from the officers in charge of Mount Lebanon in the Ottoman period, to the Lebanese that were most trusted by the French. An example that can help put all the above information together is the revolts of Kisrawan in 1858 (Makdisi, 2000). These revolts troubled Christian Maronites because of the challenges it posed to the creation of a Christian Maronite Lebanon, and at the same time, they also troubled the Ottoman Empire because they feared the loss of control over some of their most prosperous provinces.

To Ottomans, Christian Maronites were the ones that could stand in the way of the aforementioned revolts, which in turn secured for the Ottomans some control in the region. French powers also ended up viewing Christian Maronites as their closest allies within the colony, which in turn would help the French in developing the territory in their own image. In both these scenarios Christian Maronites were favored, not because of who they were, but because of how they could secure the status quo. France understood that if the revolts in Kisrawan were to be understood by Christian Maronites as a class-based movement, this religious sect would end up dissolving, or breaking down into different groups which would result in the reduction of French control over the region.

French officials, therefore, ensured that the conflicts happening on the ground would prioritize sectarian difference rather than class (Makdisi, 2000; Mikdashi, 2019). With the constant intervention of France during nonelite uprisings, and with the support of Christian Maronites, Lebanese elites were able to delineate the terms of race, gender,
citizenship and belonging that mirrored European beliefs and values towards nation state building. Thus, when we focus on historical, religious and national specificity (Muslim Arab feminism) to understand configurations of race and gender, and connect it to larger scales of power (a transnational paradigm), to foster solidarity between women of color, we are able to specifically see the ways in which we (as in Arab women or other white women of color) also participate in the subjugation and commodification of Black women through the reproduction of anti-Blackness. The following chapter will expand on how anti-Blackness is produced and reproduced by Lebanese women, while connecting these anti-Black rhetorics to their colonial past.
Chapter 3: Anti Blackness in Lebanese popular culture

Introduction

Usually I walk home after teaching. However, this particular day I could not, for the life of me, walk. I took a Lyft instead. I enjoy taking Lyfts because of the different kinds of people I get to meet and talk to. This drive would be a special one, one that would give me clarity and change the questions I wanted to ask. The Lyft arrived. “Good afternoon” I said as got into the car. It smelled like sweet fruits from those air fresheners that last for months. I love that smell. “Sarah? How are you today?” The driver asked me, I immediately noticed he had an accent. He was a Black man, but definitely not from the U.S. He noticed my name and asked where I was from. I took a deep breath, “um, it’s complicated,” I said while letting out a chuckle. “I am from Lebanon and Spain, I’m mixed.” I guess he liked my response since we moved to having a lively conversation on how hard it is to adapt to a different culture. “My cousin decided to move to Dubai instead of the U.S., but he told me horrible stories about how racist people are in the Middle East.”

This was not in the slightest surprising to me, and I felt terrible for his cousin. He then followed “that’s why I moved to the U.S. things are much better here.” A flash of images of Black people being murdered senselessly rushed through my mind. BLM, the protests, Ferguson, Charlotte, White supremacy. We were getting to our destination and I
found myself apologizing profusely. Now I think about it and I must have looked so dumb, apologizing would never fix anything. I needed to do more. That’s the day I decided to change the course of my research. How can I be an ally anywhere if I am not working to dismantle oppressive structures at home? I knew the answer to that right away: I am not an ally. I have so much work to do to be one.

*Popular culture is where the pedagogy is, is where the learning is – bell hooks (2006)*

I can’t help but wonder if the image the Lyft driver had of the U.S. might resemble the image I had when I first got here. An image that obscured the injustices endured by Black people. An image that convinces outsiders that the U.S. is the “land of the free.” An image that positions the U.S. socio-political structure as something to strive for. In other words, an image that, for example, justifies violence in third world locations. Popular culture has the ability to shape the way in which we understand and make sense of the world around us and far from us. To some, this might seem obvious, but not so much to others. I believe popular culture to be one of the most insidious and subtle ways in which we understand how the world is organized. It slips into our subconscious and dictates how we classify what we hear, understand, see and experience. I came to the U.S. as an international student in 2011, almost ten years ago. Growing up I had watched movies, cartoons, TV shows and listened to music that painted a very particular picture of the U.S.

I imagined it being the literal example of perfect multiculturalism (back when I understood neoliberal multiculturalism as something to aspire for). I was wrong. Sitting in class as a Muslim white Arab woman, I experienced alienation as I was othered many times. For example, sitting in and ethnographic methods class, I was asked by a sociology
professor whether I supported ISIS or not. He asked my opinion on the brutal slaughter of people, as if that kind of violence was normal for me. My interest in identity politics, representation and how race, gender, culture, religious portrayals shape our relationship to others grew exponentially while working towards my Master degree. Most of the research I read dealt with how Arabs are represented and perceived in the West.

Fast forward to my first years of PhD classes. The more I read and the more I learned, the less I could justify talking only about my Othering or discrimination, especially given how I look. Yes, it is true that Middle Easterners are discriminated against (see Hafez, 2000; Kumar, 2012; Said, 1994; Said, 2007; Shaheen 1984; Shaheen, 2003; Shaheen, 2012), especially against the backdrop of a post-9/11 that has ignited anti-Muslim rhetoric. I have no hope that this will change for now. At the same time, our own oppression does not exempt us from upholding systematic racism and anti-Blackness. Black Muslims have long urged us (non-Black Muslims and non-Black Arabs) to pay attention to the ways in which we support anti-Blackness in and outside our countries of origin (see for example, Chan-Malik, 2018, Mugabo, 2016; Vargas, 2018).

According to Chan-Malik (2018), “The Orientalized conception of Islam that emerged out of Iran at the close of the 1970s overshadowed associations of Islam with Black nationalism or racial separatism, and forcefully jettisoned Islam into the Orient” (p. 156). In other words, the exaggerated focus on the Orient within discussions of Islamophobia, are intentionally erasing the experiences and work of Black Muslims. The socio-political climate that accompanied the events of the 1970s in Iran, and the desire of Western powers to create a visible and identifiable enemy antagonistic to democratic values to justify their military intervention in the Middle East, pushed the conviction that
Muslims are first and foremost Arab. Hence, most of the conversations on Islamophobia that are put forth by non-Black Muslims intentionally or unintentionally negate space for, and erase Black Muslims from political discourse and scholarship alike.

In addition, Mugabo (2016) speaks to this erasure of Black Muslims during a Canadian charter debate and notes, “It is important to look more closely at that erasure and think about the political implications of such a negotiation as we consider how better to organize against Islamophobia” (p. 170). It is time for Arab Muslims and non-Muslims to self-reflect and interrogate the ways in which we perpetuate anti-Blackness. We need to decolonize our minds, not only in terms of beauty standards, but also in our scholarship, entertainment and governmental bodies. I follow scholars that engage Afro-Pessimism (Hartman, 1997; Sexton, 2016; Sharpe 2016; Wilderson, 2010) and I understand anti-Blackness as essential in holding global civil society together. In other words, the capitalist social global hierarchy needs anti-Blackness to maintain itself economically, politically or culturally. Without anti-Blackness, people in third world locations (such as Lebanese) would not be able to claim power in a global capitalist world.

In *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Mohanty explores the possibility of an anti-capitalist and decolonizing anti-racist feminist framework for transnational solidarity where solidarity is seen as imperative for feminist praxis. She argues, however, that this is not a simple task precisely because of power imbalances that afford white middle-class women more space and power than women of color and third world women. Within this anti-capitalist construction, there is no specific mention of anti-Blackness and according to Hart (2018) and Vargas (2018) we can’t think of or produce an anti-capitalist society
unless we rid ourselves of global anti-Blackness. Again, and in agreement with Beldsoe & Jamaal Wright (2019) I do not see anti-Blackness as a consequence of capitalism. Rather, I understand it as the necessary precondition for a capitalist world to function, not only thrive, because “the perpetual expansion of capitalist practices requires “empty” spaces open for appropriation—a condition made possible through the modern assumption of Black a-spatiality” (Beldsoe & Jamaal Wright, 2019, p. 8).

I also follow Hart (2018) and add that there is a clear power imbalance within third world locations, and third world women. In other words, social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, gender and sexuality among others, also exist in third world locations such that power imbalances are created within the understandings of third world women. I do agree with Mohanty’s (2003) call for transnational solidarity, which she defines as “mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis of relationships among diverse communities” (p. 7). This makes space for feminist work by bringing together “communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). Within this definition, I want to highlight “accountability” because not only do we need to hold ourselves accountable now, but we need to hold our past accountable as well.

In regard to Lebanon, we cannot hide, or gloss over the fact that the word *Abeed* (slave) is still used joyfully today. For example, think of the chocolate covered marshmallow dessert called *Rass El Abeed* (head of a slave). The name has now changed to Topkuss, acknowledging the meaning and the anti-Blackness behind it. Or think of the many Lebanese public spaces such as pools and beach resorts where migrant domestic workers (most of whom happen to be Black) are not allowed. It is very important to note
that I am not trying to single Lebanon out. Tunisia, for example still separates children by race, making Black kids ride separate buses. A quick google search demonstrates the Gulf region’s anti-Black racism, with many published accounts of the brutal mistreatment of Black domestic workers.

One way in which we can understand how anti-Blackness penetrates our consciousness is by paying attention to popular culture portrayals. As Eithne Quinn (2000) notes, “Blackness’ […] has long been constructed and understood through types of performance, masquerade, and spectacle” (p. 135). Arab actors in blackface is not a new occurrence even though it is rarely spoken of. Large bodies of Western scholarship have dedicated their attention to the ways in which Blackface is used to portray Black people in stereotypical, and oversexualized ways. The reason why I am particularly interested in Myriam Fares’ video is because of the way in which Lebanese people defended her choices as showing appreciation for African cultures and wanting to showcase their beauty in connection to Arab cultures. In Myriam Fares’ new video Goumi (get up), the singer and her team homogenize different African cultures, turning clothing of cultural significance into meaningless fashion statements. In a way, it reminds me of how Westerners dress up in Arab cultural clothing to denote terrorism in Halloween parties. The singer also wears an Afro wig and dresses in Blackface, all in less than four minutes of content. Inspired by Callafel (2014) I believe that “we must meet texts on their own terms” (p. 115). Rhetorical texts do not only exist in written form, but are an amalgamation of context and historical specificity, visuals, sounds, smells and experiences among others that can reveal cultural nuances that have not been uncovered before (Calafell, 2014, p. 115). In order to do so I need to start by contextualizing the
historical roots of racist depictions in Arab media. In the following pages, I will first give a short overview of the detrimental significance of blackface in popular culture throughout colonial times (minstrels) and their connection to Lebanese colonial citizens. Second, I will offer a rhetorical criticism analysis guided by a performance ethnography ethic of Myram Fares’ video to argue for the need to pay attention to the normalization of blackface in Lebanon. I end with envisioned strategies for its eradication.

**Racism in Arab media a short overview:**

Communication studies has a lot to say about racist representations in media. However, most of this scholarship focuses on how these portrayals are created in Western mediated platforms, and against the backdrop of white supremacy. This chapter aims at disrupting this pattern; hence, I focus on a piece of media - a music video - made by and for Arab listeners and viewers. I do not suggest that the aforementioned scholarship is not useful. Rather, what I want to achieve is opening up spaces for more nuanced questioning of how race, racism and oppression work so we can create better transnational solidarity. My goal here is to look into how non-Black individuals (a Lebanese artist and her team specifically) perpetuate anti-Blackness in the Arab world.

Even though it is well known that Black West Africans and Black Arabs have been an integral part of the Middle East for centuries (for example see Arsan 2014; Choueiri, 2013; Massad, 2008), Arab media traffics in racist language and imagery. What is truly troublesome is that the way in which race and racism are discussed in the region occludes our complicity by presenting racism as a uniquely European and American problem (Downing & Gamil, 2020) since some Black people have historically reached positions of power in the MENA region (see previous chapter). We have mastered
attempts to hold Western nations accountable for the appropriation and misrepresentation of Arab culture, clothing and language. But it is long overdue that we also acknowledge our complicity. We need to confront our history. Just because many of our families and ancestors have suffered because of white colonialism (see previous chapter) does not mean we have had no part in the enslavement of African people. In addition, much of our scholarship has ignored the ways in which we have excluded the Muslim Black subject in discussions of Islamophobia (Mugabo, 2016; Chan-Malik, 2018). As I hope to demonstrate below, a nuanced understanding of anti-Black racism in the Middle East can help us improve our commitment to transnational social justice issues (Abdulhadi et al., 2011).

The representation of Black people in media through ridicule and disparaging language is nothing new. It has been going on for decades in the Arab media and it reaches its pinnacle during the month of Ramadan when television shows and movies are meant to be family friendly (see Downing & Gamil, 2020). Arabs in general, including Lebanese in this particular project have an incommensurable anti-Black problem yet it is mostly ignored. Recall the word Abeed (slaves), which is still used nonchalantly in everyday conversation to talk about Black people and, even worse, it is not at all considered taboo. A simple google search will show the microaggressions and racism that Black Arabs and Black people of African origin face on daily basis. Challenging blackface in Arab media can be one of the ways in which we start the introspection of our complicity. Even though I am focusing on a single artist and a single music video, Myriam Fares is not the first, nor the last Arab entertainer using blackface.
In Arab media characters with darker skin tones have been typically cast as unintelligent, lazy, hypersexual and as thieves among other stereotypes. For example, actor Samir Ghanem did blackface to portray a poor man with dreadlocks that was made fun of by a non-Black Arab and called a slave in *Azmi We Ashgan*. Another example is actor Hasan Al Ballam who does blackface while pretending to speak in a Sudanese accent. Both of these performances were seen in 2018, which is to say that this problem is not of the past and it is not a uniquely Western issue but a global one that has been able to hide in third world countries such as Lebanon by manifesting itself in different ways.

**The Colonial path to Racism in Arab media**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, understandings of identity and social hierarchies were formed through a bargaining of sorts. Therefore, it is not farfetched to say that the production and reproduction of anti-Black performances travelled transnationally in the same way. Take for example the minstrel theatre. According to Lott (1993), performances of blackface were “rooted in an intimate process of cultural exchange and cultural commerce that negotiated and reified the structural dominance of whiteness” (p.19). Even though Lott (1993) positions the cultural commerce of blackface in a Black and White binary, I hope I have convinced you of the importance of looking at how non-White non-Black colonial citizens also participated by deploying blackface as a way to differentiate themselves from Black people and, in turn, attempt to get closer to Whiteness or just assert our perceived “superiority”.

For example, Pellegrini (1997), within the context of the U.S., points to how “hyperbolic attempts to be [B]lack […] constitute an ambivalent acknowledgement of the conditions under which minority cultures [in this case Lebanese] become visible to
‘mainstream’ – which is to say ‘white’ [or in Myriam’s case Anglo-European publics] – America” (pp. 132 – 133; parenthesis mine). As we will see below, Myriam Fares’ portrayal of different African cultures positions them as stuck in time by pushing our attention towards the traditional (aka backwardness) attires that are grossly misrepresented. Accuracy in representation is not a concern since these traditions are meant to be stuck in the past.

There is no doubt that the transatlantic slavery laid the foundation for minstrelsy in the U.S. and Europe through “popular images, songs, vaudeville, and various kinds of print material. (Reyes, 2019, p. 526). At the same time, these images and songs did not exist in a vacuum for Western audiences to consume. As Gualtierri (2009) demonstrates, images, songs and other popular materials travelled from the U.S. to the Middle East, adding to racial configurations outside of the West. I put forth the example of Syrian immigrants (these include people from Mount Lebanon at that time as well) going to court to argue to be classified as white (see for example Gualtierri, 2009). In these cases, the arguments that Arabs used did not reference their closeness to whiteness. Rather, their arguments were built to demonstrate that Arabs were nothing like Black people. In other words, instead of arguing in terms of their closeness to whiteness, they argued in terms of how they could never be like Black people.

At the same time and as mentioned in the previous chapter, the slave trade is not unique to Anglo-European contexts. In fact, enslavement can be tracked in the MENA region up until the 20th century with Oman, for example, making it officially illegal only in 1970. But legally prohibiting slavery does not necessarily mean that it no longer happens. Recall the recent images of different African refugees being bought and sold in
Libya on their way to seek asylum in Europe. In addition, Arab scholars, writers, poets and musicians have amplified understandings of enslaved and free Black people throughout the centuries (Arsan, 2014; Choueiri, 2013; El Hamel, 2012; Hunwick, 2005; Luffin, 2010; Massad, 2008; Segal, 2002). In addition, Hunwick (2005) points towards Arab geographers and how they described African territories as only useful for providing slave labor.

Notions of the use of violence as the only way to force African peoples to do work “draws upon histories of African enslavement by Arabs, and early Muslim scholars’ characterization of Black Africans as primitive, unclean and lazy” (Fabos, 2012, p. 222). According to Downing and Gamil (2020), “Antar Ibn Shaddad, a legendary pre-Islamic Arab poet and warrior whose mother was Ethiopian, pushed back, writing that black skin is akin to a cloak, not revealing it’s wearer’s military prowess, eloquence or religious virtue” (p. 3). Even though many Arab writers agreed and followed, I would like to point out the anti-Blackness in the above statement. I want to make very clear that Blackness is not the problem; the problem, rather is us and our anti-Blackness. It is our perception of Blackness that continuously dehumanizes Black individuals, not Blackness itself. We force a ‘cloak’ onto Black people, and it is we who refuse to see them as fellow human beings. We must be honest. In order to connect the ‘past’ to the present, I return to the definition of the word Abeed. Abeed in Arabic language translates to slaves, but it does not necessarily mean Black enslavement (recall how in the Ottoman period even white Slavs were slaves). But throughout the centuries, it has evolved to exclusively refer to

Black people in a demeaning way. The fact that Abeed does not refer to white slaves anymore points towards anti-Blackness in Arab culture.

**MENA’s media and anti-Blackness**

Growing up in Spain, the accessibility of Arabic speaking channels was very limited. In the late 90s, however, my parents bought a satellite dish that would give us access to hundreds of Arab channels. Not all of them were free of charge, but I do remember the vast majority being free. Particularly, I remember news channels, music channels and cooking channels being accessible 24/7. According to Della Ratta et al. (2015) and Kraidy and Khalil (2009), the late 1990s was when the Arab media market grew exponentially not only at a local level, but also within the diasporic community scattered around the globe. The TV industry is largely financed by the Gulf. However, most of the people working in these channels, producing entertainment are Egyptian or from countries in the Levantine region such as Lebanon, Syria and Jordan (Della Ratta et al., 2015; Kraidy and Khalil, 2009).

Downing and Gamil (2020) note that Saudi Arabia owns Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), the largest network in the Middle East. However, just like the authors mentioned above, they also point our attention to the fact that “the media products are almost always from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait” (p. 5). As Downing and Khalil (2020) correctly point out, this means that the above-mentioned countries are mostly responsible for the type of content that is produced and distributed in the Arab world. In other words, understandings of racialized Others, mainly Black people, are heavily influenced by the distribution of their content to the rest of the ‘Arab world’ as well as Arab communities living in the diaspora.
In my introduction chapter I put forth the idea that skin color was not the only category that produced a social hierarchy in Ottoman and post Ottoman period. Categories such as religious affiliation, language, national origin, education, gender and clothing also played a role in positioning people within the social hierarchy. I also pointed to how with increased European and later Anglo-American contact, skin color began to gain more importance in positioning people within a social hierarchy. Downing and Gamil (2020) give us an example by showcasing how Al-Qasabi has continuously represented Sudanese individuals through “issues of color, tribalism, language, accent, nationality, immigrant worker status, and lack of education” (p. 6) and how, at the same time, the show Tash Ma Tash heavily relied on skin color. According to Reyes (2019) “thus blackface, personifying stereotypical antics of the subservient black body with its lack of intelligence and language agility, is an imposed conceptualizing representation that has moved across cultures and continents. Unlike in the USA, the locus of those blackface origins is often unrecognized in other transnational cultural traditions” (p. 525).

In a different study, Shafik (2007) points towards how Nubians are represented in Egyptian media. She takes a much more specific approach to her analysis by focusing on one marginalized identity appearing on Egyptian screens. She writes: “the Nubian is sometimes carelessly called barabri […] and moreover confused with the Sudanese” (Shafik, 2007, p.67). Barabri is a term used in Egypt to differentiate people of sub-Saharan origins, but it is also a word used to refer to someone who has not mastered the Arab language, misuses the Arabic language or speaks it with a heavy accent (Shafik, 2007).

We can also look at Reyes’ (2019) work to understand the importance of paying attention to blackface in musical performances, which have its historical roots in the
minstrel shows of the 1820s where white actors “portrayed, usually in mocking or racist stereotypes, African-American fictional characters or real individuals through dance, comedy, and musical performances” (p. 524). After pointing out the significance of blackface for nurturing racist ideologies in the U.S., she moves to connect how representations of blackface in Iran (using Haji Firuz as an example) should also be conceptualized within a shared colonial history of enslaved African people. Haji Firuz is a traditional Nowruz character that is recognized and celebrated in Iran and within diasporic Iranian communities. Reyes (2019) also points to the denial of wanting to connect the existence of Haji Firuz to historical and cultural texts that pertain to the African slaves in Iran. She argues that “the longevity of the unspeakable and unspoken African presence in Iran informed the performativity and representation of Haji Firuz as a blackface character” (p. 524). In the same way, I follow Reyes and argue that Lebanese people also reproduce the global denial of anti-Blackness (as used by Vargas, 2018) by representing a homogenization of different African communities and reducing their rich cultures to a representational mockery.

The comedic nature of blackface has been thoroughly discussed (see Downing & Gamil, 2020; Reyes, 2019: Pellegrini 1997). At the same time, I believe it is important to look at the ways in which blackface operates within images that the artist believes are meant to showcase the ‘beauty’ of culture. This is the case of Myriam Fares’ video. After it aired in 2018, Myriam received plenty of backlash for her careless representations and her donning blackface. One of the responses from Myriam that struck me the most is the notion that her intention was to portray the beauty of African cultures and their connection to Arab cultures. However, appropriation is not appreciation, and this is why I
want to focus on her video, Goumi. In the following pages, I start with the Lyrics of the music video. Then, I include screenshots of the video, taken by me to help navigate my analysis. Third, I end the chapter with concluding thoughts and ways to move forward.

At this juncture, it is important to note my analysis focuses on performer, performance and spectator, all in one. The reason for this is that I cannot separate them from each other as the choices made in order to create this video are influenced by not only what the artists ‘understand’ of other cultures, but also by the historical and colonial connections to those understandings and the power imbalances that produce them. Hall (1992) for example, sees media as carrying the racist undertones that we tend to recognize elsewhere. The undertones that Hall (1992) talks about, are representations of an:

“alien culture and peoples who are less civilized than the native ones; of a people who stand lower in the order of culture because they are somehow lower in the order of nature, defined by race, by color, and sometimes by genetic inheritance” (p. 13).

Hence, Lebanese audiences and performers need to consider Myriam’s music video not only as shared authorship but also shared responsibility. In other words, the performance itself, the performer and the audience do not exist in a vacuum, rather, they share a particular context that involves a complex webbing of historical understandings, spectator participation and desire, performance and performer. Following Calafell (2007) I also see this analysis as “part of the commitment of a performance project – social justice” (p. 8). Hence, what spectators are expected to consume is not only tied to the products being consumed (e.g. ‘it is not our fault that these images, narratives and videos exist’) but to the overall global cultural hierarchy that we place ourselves and Others in.
Reyes also points to this notion and urges us to see “Blackface performativity and representation [as] mutually inclusive of performer, performance, and spectator [and that] this triad defined by performativity is not equally powered” (p. 525).

The aforementioned quote got me thinking even further. I had a conversation with a Lebanese cousin about my research. He asked what exactly was I writing about so I briefly explained that Lebanese need to confront our anti-Blackness. He responded by saying that he thought my research was interesting, and he would like to discuss further but he did not believe racism existed in Lebanon. I proceeded to give evidence of course and pointed to the many TV shows and images where Arab actors in general, and Lebanese actors in particular, used blackface to represent African cultures through a lens of ridicule. “Oh, but that’s just Lebanese dark humor, it has nothing to do with discrimination or racism” I let him know that we cannot separate blackface from its racist history, and he ended the conversation. This interaction got me thinking, again, that the way in which we popularize conceptualizations of what is racism or race, or what does it mean to be racist, is primarily linked to a Western behavior.

For example, thinking that racial injustice is just an ‘American’ thing. However, and as I pointed out in the previous chapter, knowledge and worldviews (in which I include mass media, and popular culture) travelled back and forth, and were spread throughout Europe and the colonies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and other ‘post-colonial’ and settler colonial regions. The reproduction of Other cultures through colonial tropes in Lebanese media and the connections it has to representations of Others in different locations tells us that Lebanese people share responsibility in the “seizure and possession of the [B]lack body for the other’s use and enjoyment” (Hartman, 1997, p. 100).
32). What I argue is, that Arab commodification of Black African cultures (among others) serves to maintain anti-Blackness by privileging Arab superiority and allowing Arabs to participate in a global capitalist world that necessitates the subjugation of Black people in order to function (see Vargas, 2018).

**Audiovisual analysis: Goumi by Myriam Fares**

**Lyrics**

Stand up, Stand up, Stand up
Stand up, stand up and dance
Show them your beauty

Stand up, Stand up, Stand up
Stand up, Stand up and Dance
Show them your beauty

Stand up
Come on Dance

How beautiful you are when you dance
How beautiful you are when you dance
You’re like a queen when you sway

How beautiful you are when you dance
How beautiful you are when you dance
You’re like a queen when you sway
You’re like a queen when you sway

Come on, Come on, Come on
Beautiful like the moon
Show me your beauty

Come on, come on, come on stand up
Come on dance

You made everyone crazy about you
You made everyone crazy about you
All the beauty around the world and the henna in your hands
All the beauty around the world and the henna in your hands

You made everyone crazy about you
You made everyone crazy about you
All the beauty around the world and the henna in your hands
All the beauty around the world and the henna in your hands

Come on, come on, come on
Beautiful like the moon
Show me your beauty
Stand up
Come on dance

Goumi, The Video

(Figure 1: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 1)

The video begins with the resounding roaring of a lion, frogs and toads croaking, birds chirping and a quote that reads “Enjoy your life... every moment is a blessing.” The background looks as if it is taken out of a mystical land created by Disney. In fact, the lion roaring against a tropical (I can only guess) background is often associated with the continent of Africa. An association that was especially bolstered through the production of The Lion King (see for example Artz, 2002; Cappiccie et al., 2012; Tait, 2010). The video presents a mismatch of rainforest, jungle and savannah, apparently all one and the same to the singer Myriam Fares and her creative/production team. The lack of nuance towards, location, history and culture is evident throughout the entire video. In addition, those who are Black presenting always appear silent and still, without voice or movement and are only used as mere extras.
Goumi is some kind of Gulf-African style song that is confusing to say the least. The entire continent of Africa and its people are homogenized. Myriam and her dance team appropriate headwraps, ankle cuffs, neck rings and body paint, clearly ignoring their significance and how they are now perceived in their own locations. As the video progresses, Myriam is smeared in black and brown paint as she dances in blackface and stays in this costume for the remaining of the video.

So far, I have offered a loose translation of the lyrics to show the disconnect between lyrics and imagery. This disconnection can help us better understand how the African continent is depicted in Arab imagination. In addition, this disconnect also points to the thoughtlessness when creating the video and song, which in turn points to how African cultures are commodified and appropriated for the sole purpose of becoming part of the mainstream capitalist music industry. In other words, I point towards the continuous and relentless desire to commodify Black African cultures for the capitalist participation and gain of other POC such as Lebanese artists. I have also described the initial reaction to watching the video for the first time. Now I want to move towards a more detailed understanding of specific scenes and themes.
Neck rings

(Figure 2: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 2)

The neck rings portrayed in the video cannot be attached to a singular culture and location. Looking for the neck rings pictured above and attempting to connect them to a particular culture, or a particular location with confidence proved to be almost impossible. I narrowed it down to two groups of people that use similar looking adornments. One of them was the Kayan women in Myanmar and Thailand who use the neck rings to create an optical illusion of elongated necks as a beauty practice that dates back centuries (Mirante, 1990; Rose, 1995; Theurer, 2014). I am uniquely interested in the Western discourse on this practice, mostly to show how Lebanese artist Myriam Fares and her team share the same prejudices and stereotypical perceptions of indigenous Black African people. In this way, we can point to the ways in which the ‘Arab world’ (and in this case Lebanon) share similar understandings of the Other that stem from colonial period, as well as sharing similar strategies of Othering. I do not suggest that the strategies of white supremacy and Arab superiority are exactly the same, but that their similarities and differences deserve more nuanced attention.
The most common Western discourse on Kayan women forces them into a never-ending victimhood, of not only the Western gaze and toxic tourism but also as victims of their own ‘backward culture’ and their men (Mirante, 1990; Rose, 1995; Theurer, 2014). Western discourses on third world women have been heavily studied (for example see Mohanty, 2003), but we haven’t paid enough attention to how Othering also takes place in third world locations. Al Wazni (2015), for example, notes how the vision of third world women is incompatible with “the West’s assumed superior model of democracy, freedom and ‘liberated women’” (pp. 326-327). In this way, Middle Eastern views of, for example, Kayan and Ndebele women follow the same pattern and view them as inferior, less educated and stuck in time etc.

Using neck rings is positioned as harmful to women without taking into account their significance to local women. Notwithstanding this understanding, I did find a study were the author actually spoke to Kayan women. According to Dewilde (2020), Kayan women are considered an “ethnic minority originally from Myanmar” (p. 19) and “ring wearing Kayan girls usually start at the age of four or five” (p.20). There is not much information about the Kayan community, so I heavily relied on Dewilde’s (2020) study as it directly asks Kayan women for their experience.

Dewilde (2020) notes that it takes a highly skilled person to handle the rings (made of a single large coil) and that only some women “are endowed with this skill and have the power to do so” (p. 20). The coils can be different in size and more than one set of coils can be worn at a time. These rings also have the ability to signal wealth or lack thereof since some are more expensive than others (Dewilde, 2020). This is of significance because clearly the neck rings seen in Myriam Fares’ video do not even hint
at the rich history and multiple variations that exist for the Kayan women who wear them. Completely wrong understandings of this practice have claimed that women die when the rings are taken off, or that the neck changes and becomes elongated (Rose 1995). Dewilde (2020) through interviews with Kayan women, notes that the neck does not change its shape and it is the shoulders that are pushed down. There is also no danger whatsoever when they are taken off and Kayan women do not die from this practice.

Ndebele women who also use similar neck rings are actually from the African continent. The Ndebele people of South Africa use varying neck rings that are sometimes larger and sometimes looser than the rings used by Kayan women. Because of apartheid and colonization, the Ndebele people are forced to assimilate to Western culture which means leaving their traditions behind in order to make a living (Smith & Dlodlo, 2018). There are no real similarities between these two groups of people located in different continents, with different beliefs, histories and experiences. The Ndebele women, for example, use more than neck rings (dresses and adornments) to express their marital status, age and social status among others.

It is important to note though that the use of rings by Ndebele women are not only worn on necks but also ankles and arms (Smith et al., 2018). On the one hand, neck rings for Kayan women signify social status and wealth primarily and on the other hand Ndebele women the rings are used to appear bigger in size than what they are (Smith et al., 218). I think it is important to point out that the Ndebele people are also an ethnic minority in their location, which, so far, seems to be a prerequisite to be grossly represented by Fares. This makes me think of the ways in which tourists operate in third world locations and how these inform popular culture and vice versa. For example, I
remember an American tourist in Beirut complaining that there were way too modern buildings in the city and that he was disappointed that in all the pictures of destroyed buildings he took were contaminated by the sight of modernity and re-building. I guess he was expecting Beirut to be a large refugee camp since the most perverse image that Westerners have of the Middle East is war and conflict. The same thing happens with ethnic minorities in the African continent (see for example Mirante, 1990; Rose, 1995; Theurer, 2014).

Looking at Said’s (1994) work on Orientalism we can see how tourism, specifically Western tourism, continues to perpetuate the primitive ‘othering’ of third world countries all the while making these third world locations antagonistic to modernity and civilization. It is not surprising then, that both the Kayan women and Ndebele women have become important ‘attractions’ to outsiders where tourists are able to capture images that explain the African continent in a nostalgic way reminiscent to a colonial past (Mirante, 1990; Rose, 1995; Theurer, 2014). With the above explanation of both these different cultures, and in connection with the image taken out of Myriam’s video we can see how Lebanese artists also act as Western tourists in that the only way they can apparently represent the beauty of African cultures is through images that represent African women as primitive by only showcasing traditional customs practiced by ethnic minorities. The fact that I cannot confidently point to the culture that the rings were appropriated from also shows the homogenizing carelessness, and all out disregard from the artists involved in producing Goumi.
In this next image, Myriam has her arms and forearms painted red. According to Ghandi and Trevidi (2018), the Himba “are indigenous to North Namibia […] and they are well known for their women applying a paste of butter fat and red ochre known as otjize to their skin and hair (p. 116). The red pigment in ochre comes from dehydrated hematite or ferric oxide (Ghandi & Trivadi, 2018, p 116). The authors note that other than this red paste having symbolic and cosmetic uses, it is also used to repel insects and for sun protection (Ghandi & Trivadi, 2018). Furthermore, the practice of using earthly given materials as insect repellants and for sun protection extends well beyond Namibia to Ethiopia, Angola and other southern African areas. But the pigment of the materials used changes depending on location, which is why the Himba women are the ones particularly known for the red hue of ochre. Just as with the minoritized cultures above, the Himba are:

“currently engaged in a struggle with the majority-led government, which has long been accused of ignoring the rights of Namibia’s indigenous groups […] arguing that it violates their rights under the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, which Namibia has adopted” (Cole, 2012, p153).
In other words, Myriam Fares’ costume is culturally appropriating from yet another ethnic minority. Cole (2012) also notes that the Himba people are forcedly represented to the world, always under the Western gaze, in “primordialized, essentialized, and feminized images” (p. 154) which in turn set the “ongoing reinscription of indigeneity – an ‘antimodern’ way of life – as a prerequisite to […] global recognition” (p. 154).

The imagery used in Myriam Fares’ video positions Himba, Kayan and Ndebele women as always stuck in the past by only showing their traditional adornments or clothing in an oversexualized and exoticized way, not unlike the same way in which Western popular culture essentializes diverse Arab communities (see Said, 1994; Said, 2007; Shaheen, 1984; Shaheen 2003; Shaheen, 2012). Myriam’s video demonstrates that Arabs also continue to uphold colonial social hierarchy strategies that position others from the global south, or other third world cultures, as inferior, uncivilized and stuck in time. For example, Cole (2012) demonstrates how Western constructions of the Himba “have the effect of freezing the Himba in time (as “out of time”) and place” (p. 154) as well as bearing “an uncomfortable salience […] with colonial stereotypes” (p. 154).
Myriam Fares and her back up dancers also paint their faces with white and gold dots. This body paint and, more normally, face paint tradition has been known to belong to the Ethiopian Karo tribe. The way it is represented in the music video is, however, more reminiscent of an EDM festival aesthetic or Coachella than a particular and intricate cultural tradition. According to Hack and Salgado (2020), the Karo people use specific and complicated body paint designs to differentiate themselves from other tribes indigenous to Ethiopia. Just as the Himba community, Karo people use local earthly materials to create new and specific designs that change daily. These designs are not just dots as portrayed by Myriam but can be more complicated, composed of stars, lines and handprints (Hack & Salgado 2020).

One way of thinking about these designs (as well as the above mentioned adornments) and what appropriating them means in relation to power imbalances is by thinking of intimate relationships. What the designs mean to the Karo people is intimate, meant for people belonging to the same group. Grossly appropriating these designs and misrepresenting them is akin to a violent breach of intimacy. What got me here is
thinking of Sharon Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012). Now, you might think this is a long reach but bear with me for a moment. Holland (2012) suggests that when focusing on issues of desire we pay close attention to its connection to racism. If we look at the way the Karo designs are depicted in Myriam’s video we can notice a desire for conventional attractiveness. The designs don’t really have meaning other than what mainstream culture considers ‘beautifying’ or making it ‘hot’ which is why they are more reminiscent of a music festival ‘look’ than anything else.

Holland (2012) also proposes that we understand encounters between White and Black people in the U.S. as always tainted by a violent history of race and racism. I want to show that encounters between white-passing third world women like Lebanese women and third world Black women are also burdened by historical racist expectations and misreading. What is important here, and as Holland (2012) suggests is that these encounters do not necessarily need to happen in the same plane of space and time “because the [B]lack subject is mired in space and the white subject [or Lebanese in this case] represents the full expanse of time” (p. 18). In other words, the appropriation by the creators of *Goumi* should be understood as a breach in intimacy, a kind of unwanted ‘touch’ that violates the intimate meanings cherished by an ethnic minority in Ethiopia. The personal choices made to create the music video in an oversexualized imagery is a testament to how the personal is political, and why race matters in third world locations. Holland (2012) urges us to see our intimate choices, preferences and desires in our everyday life whether erotic or not as spaces to critique racism. Hence, something as quotidian as popular music, and basically our creativity and imagination (what we think
is beautiful or desirable) cannot be separated from the history that placed us where we are.

**Blackface**

(Figure 5: Myriam Fares, Goumi, 2018, Youtube screenshot 5)

Goumi’s most outrageous and visible form of anti-Blackness spotted in her video is that of her wearing blackface. In this scene, Myriam is seen in a gold ‘mini’ dress and a headwrap with her body painted significantly darker than in any other scene. As she poses, standing still, surrounded by some kind of foliage that attempts to stand for a tropical and distant land, she is literally freezing Black African ethnic minorities in time. As mentioned above, popular culture has historically followed the tradition of commodifying Black people in order to please the white gaze (hooks, 1992). The scene pictured above, falls into the category of using racialized fantasies of overly sexualized Black bodies, particularly Black feminine bodies (hooks, 2004). hooks’ words resonate with me. I know she is talking about whiteness, white supremacy and how white people uphold it. But I would like to show that other racialized communities, such as the
Lebanese (and other Arabs), also participate in the same practice of commodifying Black people.

In order to participate in a capitalist world, we need labor which, in turn, allows us (third world women) to seek better futures. This is better explained by Ong (2006) who argues that “concerns of the wealthier nation to secure middle-class entitlements depend on the availability of foreign others, creating an environment of class privilege and bias that tolerates slave-like conditions” (p. 198). In this particular case, Lebanese women (for example) necessitate the Othering of other third world women, mainly ethnic minorities, as uncivilized and backward, stuck in time, to cover up our colonial complicity whether consciously or unconsciously, and to position ourselves above them in a global social hierarchy.

To my Lebanese fellow citizens and diaspora, think of the times that we have even seen some communities in our own country as stuck in time (Druze in Sawfar, for example) and how we, in the city will refer to ourselves as modern as opposed to religiously tribal. Going back to Myriam’s video, the imagery of nature and tropical plants points towards the way in which tradition and backwardness is represented through wilderness and lack of infrastructure. None of the cultures mentioned above were accurately portrayed in any way. The reason for this is that there was no desire to appreciate the cultures, but the goal is to sexualize, fetishize and exoticize ethnic femininity.

Third world audiovisual artistic processes of commodifying Black people help us understand how race can be understood as technology (see Chun, 2009). According to Chun (2009), understanding race as technology can help us see it as “a technique that one
uses, even as one is used by it – a carefully crafted, historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity” (p. 7). It is through the commodification of Black people in Myriam Fares’ video that Lebanese people consciously and unconsciously maintain power and privilege in their everyday lives. I want to make clear that I am not only referring to Lebanese that live in Lebanon but also to those of us in the diaspora, who for the most part pass as white 100% of the time.

We need to have a nuanced approach to how technological platforms are complicit in upholding a colorblindness that perpetuates abuse and discrimination in the Arab world (Brock, 2009; Gray, 2018; Nakamura, 2014; Noble, 2018). As mentioned above, the exoticization, erotization and therefore subjugation of Black Africans and Black Arabs through spectacle and play can be traced to the 19th century’s blackface minstrelsy (Lott, 1992). Minstrelsy performances reinforced racist stereotypes that overly sexualized Black people, something that is carried on in Myriam Fares’ video. Myriam and her back up dancers are always wearing costumes that reveal more skin than not. In Arab media (which remember is not only broadcasted in the Middle East), Black people are “animated” (Ngai, 2004, pp. 94-95) by white Arabs, using technology to digitalize blackface (Ernin, 2019). In this way, minstrelsy is not so much something of the past, but has transformed and changed to adapt to our time.

Scholars are naming this phenomenon “digitalizing minstrelsy” (Roberts, 2016) or “racialized animatedness” (Ngai, 2004). The point here is that just as historical scholarship, historical colonial accounts of Others and knowledge needs to be thought of as always moving. So does popular culture. Minstrelsy has now become digitalized, and it is easier to propagate reaching more people than ever before. Even more troublesome,
digitalized blackface is not usually considered hate speech by media platform policies (Roberts, 2016), which in turn, gives ‘card blanche’ to other third world people that deem African diverse cultures as inferior. Myriam Fares’ use of blackface is meant to be subtle. As mentioned above, the singer defended the decision to use blackface and wear a hodgepodge of misrepresented clothing and adornments by claiming that she wanted to show the ‘beauty’ (as she claims the song says) of African and Arab cultures. It is important to note that other than the language used and maybe a couple of dance moves, there’s not much ‘Arabness’ in this video or the music that accompanies it.

This narrative of ‘appreciation’ is really a response of dismissal or denial of our complicity in the subjugation of Black people and our unwillingness to see how our desires (Holland, 2012) are connected to a racist and colonial past. The obliviousness of Arab people in general, and for this project Lebanese in particular, to the politics of race is not only evident in imagery like Myriam’s video. As mentioned above, the word for slave (Abeed) is most commonly used to disparage Black people, even though the word was used to refer to all slaves during the Ottoman period. What this means is that blackface and anti-Blackness is engrained deep in our popular culture, and it mostly passes unnoticed. Mainstream Arab media has definitely played in important role in the commodification of Black people, but I do not believe we can fully understand it and dismantle it until we realize the colonial history that has brought us here. In other words, it is not media alone, but historical specificity, geopolitical specificity and cultural specificity. I believe that a more interdisciplinary approach can help us start conversations that open up the doors for more meaningful questioning.
“It’s not appropriation it’s appreciation” and erotic desires of multicultural neoliberalism in Lebanon

For more than a year, Lebanese nationals and those in the diaspora have been protesting on the streets, online and from balconies of major cities in Lebanon demanding the resignation of the entire political system and advocating for a reconfiguration that adopts an anti-sectarian, secular government and liberal market system. This has become a key moment to look at the ways in which the Other (from an Arab perspective) is represented in Lebanese popular culture against the backdrop of a country that wants to see colonial influences in their socio-religious-political climate be erased.

During the ongoing protests in Lebanon, an Ethiopian Airlines flying from Beirut landed at the Addis Ababa’s Bole International Airport, bringing home seven dead Ethiopian migrant domestic workers that had passed away in Lebanon. According to journalist and activist Ayoub (2019), this story was not really paid much attention to in Lebanon and we have no way of knowing the causes of their deaths. He asserts that if Lebanese people are fighting for their rights, then it would hold to reason that we include migrant domestic workers in our fight, a view that is also shared by other activist circles such as Kafa, This is Lebanon and the Anti-Racism Movement of Lebanon. Worker’s rights are some of the main concerns being brought up by Lebanese protestors today. However, there seems to be a disconnect between the Lebanese working class at the protests and anti-racist activists. Even though the issue has been raised throughout the protests, there seems to be a conflation of the meaning racism with xenophobia and with anti-refugee sentiments. According to Ayoub (2019), the Kafala system has been brought
up in marches lead by anti-racist chants in order to draw attention to the circumstances affecting not only migrant domestic workers but also Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

While the fires of summer 2019 were going on, Lebanese politicians participated in a blame game where they essentially accused Syrian and Palestinian refugees of causing these fires in order to move into abandoned homes of Lebanese nationals. This xenophobic narrative, according to Ayoub (2019), also contributed to marches being organized by Lebanese and non-Lebanese feminist organizations (both Lebanese and non-Lebanese) that are convinced of the importance in bringing issues of discrimination and the Kafala system to light and the ways these are connected to heteropatriarchy, racism and sectarian politics. Kafa (2019), for example, released a statement in support of the ongoing protests and included with it an analysis of what they term ‘racist tactics’ that the government is using to support their blame game by accusing ‘foreigners’ of Lebanon’s crisis.

Against this minor awareness of race and racism, I propose complicating our understanding by realizing that anti-refugee sentiment is not the same as the anti-Black racism that migrant domestic workers experience. Following these logics may result in the obscuring of potential emancipatory solidarities by placing, for example, the experiences of Syrian refugee women as equal to the experiences of migrant domestic workers. By no means am I suggesting that one experience is more important than another, nor am I suggesting that one experience is worse than another. However, I do think it is important to realize that these experiences are not the same and that we need a more complicated and nuanced understanding of race and racism in the Lebanese context.
Author bell hooks (1995) points to the power of images and imagery, which cannot be separated from historical memory. She not only shows how imagery comes from memory but also demonstrates that images have the power to change and construct memory. Even though hooks mainly refers to the emancipatory potential of imagery, I am moved by her notion of how imagery moves and encourages memory, in a somber way. What I mean is that Myriam and her team utilize imagery to create a ‘memory’ that allows us to forget our contributions to colonial notions of race. She says she wants to celebrate the beauty of African cultures, yet presents them through a colonial gaze that has normally been attributed to Anglo-Europeans.

This is why I have brought forth Myriam’s video, because I understand it as a mix of subtle and outrageous examples of anti-Blackness, to show how our historical understanding of Othering plays an important role. In this way, and as elaborated in the previous chapter, the experiences that Palestinian and Syrian refugees have, are very different contextually and historically than those of migrant domestic workers. There are still large Lebanese sects that consider themselves closely connected to Palestinian and Syrian refugee workers whereas migrant workers can, for the most part, only rely on themselves, and even this is regulated by institutions since they are not allowed to assemble with others like them. By no means am I trying to suggest that life in refugee camps is a path of rose petals and butterflies. What I am trying to point out is that Arab refugees in Lebanon at the very least are given the chance to build community and a social support system however small it may be. Migrant workers on the other hand, are literally forbidden to do so through the outlawing of meetings between migrant women.
As mentioned above, Myriam claims that her video should be considered an attempt to bring attention to African culture and “Black beauty.” She has pointed to the meaning of the lyrics (offered above) to support her claim. However, and as Madison (2010) suggests, intentions do not matter, especially when the outcome is overtly racist. Blackface has been and will always be a form of spectacle and ridicule that is deeply rooted in anti-Blackness. We cannot separate blackface from its racist history. Even though the practice was designed by white performers, Arabs, and in this case Lebanese people continue to use anti-Black practices against the backdrop of a racist society that continuous to abuse, discriminate and exclude Black people from our citizenry. In addition, and in specific reference to this video, the depiction of oversexualized and desired Blackness, meant for the pleasures of Lebanese and other Arab viewers facilitates the normalization of sexual assault and exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Just as the bodies in the video are easily available to fulfill the erotic desires of Arabs, migrant domestic workers can also be understood as sexual laborers in service of Lebanese sexual needs. A quick google search will bring forth the thousands upon thousands of sexual assault and violence accounts that migrant domestic workers make public. These anti-Black practices can easily be accessed in our everyday popular culture. It is also worth noting that most Arab countries do not criminalize racism, which in turn supports normalizing blatant anti-Black representations and violence.

Bringing up this issue in Lebanon has never been easy. I’ll never forget a conversation with a family member who said that migrant workers are “exaggerating” or simply playing victim when they denounce their abuse. Racism is not a uniquely U.S. problem, and we need to pay attention at how it manifests in particular third world
locations. Otherwise, we risk missing how anti-Blackness has also (emphasis mine) shaped cultural moments and cultural practices around the globe. Therefore, “Clarifying the intersections of imperial languages, behavioral expressions, intellectual ability (or the lack of it), national identity, and a defining worldview helps us to recognize the identifying features of blackface in its transnational representation and performative contexts. (Reyes, 2019, p. 526). I propose that non-Black and non-Indigenous people of color look at the ways in which information has travelled during colonial times and how it has transformed the way in which anti-Blackness manifests itself in a capitalist world depending in geographical location.

Artistic projects by Arab artists need to take into account the historical specificity and the unbalanced relationship of power between Arab and African nations. We must rid ourselves of our colonial hang ups. We protect racist attitudes when we deem darker skin as less attractive or valuable. I remember my grandmother once said, “aren’t you dark enough? Avoid the sun so you don’t get darker”. I also recall a friend always sitting under huge parasols when we went to the beach to stay as pale as possible. Ironically there’s also so many Lebanese people that love to tan and char their skin under the sun. We need to face our anti-Blackness head on, as well as our appropriation of other cultures. Keep in mind that slavery didn’t end in some Persian Gulf countries until the 1970s. The imagery we see on TV and online has an effect on the everyday lives of Black migrant workers. According to Reyes (2019), “blackface is not just a face, rather it serves as an analytical category that interrogates and critiques colonial, postcolonial, and migratory partisanship of racialized embodiment” (p. 524).
In addition, there is hardly any place on the globe where anti-Blackness does not manifest. Reyes (2019) puts forth the example of Zwrte Piet (a Dutch ‘tradition’ of using blackface for a Christmas character) and Haji Firuz, also a ‘traditional’ character of Iranian celebrations. I add to this the example of the Three Kings in Spain, where one of the kings bringing gifts to Jesus Christ is Black and is always represented through blackface. What I am trying to point out is that in these very different locations, with different histories and connections to colonialism, one thing prevails, and that is the commodification and subjugation of Black people. As Reyes (2019) points out, “the Indian Ocean world of commerce, slavery, European exploration, Christian evangelism, and Islamic military operations unavoidably impacted racialized constructs of African descended people” around the globe (p. 527).

In *The Oppositional Gaze*, bell hooks (2003) points to the importance of paying attention to the ways in which we look, stare, or produce what ‘needs’ to be looked at because of the connotations of power that it carries. In this way, non-Black women who come from third world locations need to come to terms with the strategies of Othering we use (such as Myriam’s video above) that continue to place us in positions of power, which in turn push Black women down in the global hierarchy. In this way, Lebanese people use Black people as a reference to define what we are not, against the backdrop of colonial configurations of race that also affect understandings of gender, citizenship, immigration, labor among others. In other words, and in connection with the discussion on Arab perceptions of African territories as only useful for forced labor, we deny subjecthood to Black people by merely reducing them to far from human serving bodies (Winant, 2018).
Chapter 4: Appropriating Black pain for personal gain: Complicity and forceful forgetting.

Introduction

I can’t remember when I started to care about social justice issues. I know my mother brought me up with some sense of socio-political awareness because she needed me to understand where we came from, how we got here, and specifically how blessed we were. A lot of the people my mother maintains contact with, in Lebanon, are involved in improving the lives of those around them and beyond. So, in some way, I have grown up with a sense of responsibility in caring about the most disenfranchised communities and thinking about transformative change. Now, I can’t say that this passion has always been the same or directed at the same issues. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I started complicating my understandings of identity, belonging and politics in my first years of graduate school. At this juncture, and for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on a couple of short experiences that informed the critique in the pages bellow.

One of the scariest parts for me about moving out of state to start a Ph.D. was the daunting idea of having to start and work on new relationships. I consider myself to be an extrovert-introvert who is becoming more socially awkward as years go by. I no longer have the energy for fake niceness. At the same time, I long for a friendship that can relate to my experiences as a mixed immigrant. During my second year of Ph.D. I finally had the chance to develop such a friendship. I was genuinely excited. Not only was I able to
use at least two of the languages I speak with this friend, but they also knew about the foods I loved! It is truly magical not feeling alone, or out of place. I will refer to this person as friend #1.

The exciting feeling of finding someone like me, however, slowly started to chip away. Little encounters started to feel like little daggers of betrayal. One afternoon hanging out at the graduate student offices, I found myself showing videos of Lebanon and Beirut to friend #1. I remember asking, “Will you come visit me when I move back?” She looked surprised at my question and immediately responded with “oh I don’t think I can, it can be very dangerous for a woman.” Wait a moment, I paused. I was so confused with her come back that I could say nothing. Rarely am I left speechless, and at that moment I was.

We weren’t alone in the office and the other colleague I shall call friend #2 offered to give me a ride home. I accepted and packed my things. The subject changed and the tension could be felt in the room. At least for me, the tension was thick, so I continued to say nothing. Once I got into the car with friend #2, they asked me if I was ok. I looked at them while thinking ‘I’m really good at hiding my feelings, no one knows.’ I replied “Yes, why do you ask?” Friend #2 said, “Well, when friend #1 said they wouldn’t visit you, you looked gutted.” I took a moment. While looking down at my shoes, all I could verbalize was “Lebanon is not home to dangerous people, and that reaction reeks of anti-Arabness.”

Fast forward a couple of months, the department has organized a workshop with a visiting scholar where we used art and performance to dig deeper into ourselves and work toward re-imagining a socially just future. Before starting with the activities, we went
around the room and talked about some experiences with teaching through a social justice–oriented pedagogy. A Black woman talked about the pain she endured teaching in a predominantly white institution and how some white students at the University felt very comfortable using the ‘n-word’ to talk to her. Literally none of us students in that room could ever begin to fathom what it is like to be at the receiving end of anti-Blackness, yet friend #1 kept snapping her fingers and saying mhm (sounds appropriating AAVE – African American Vernacular English) at the end of every sentence. These were not quiet snaps or sounds of support, at least not in my view. They were loud, and forcefully broke into every sentence. I could tell several people in the room were noticing.

When it was their turn to talk, friend #1 kept using the term ‘people of color’ to talk about their experiences all the while linking these to the experiences of our Black colleague as if they carried the same violent consequences. As non-Black women of color, we need to recognize that our experiences are different, mostly, because we will never experience anti-Blackness, even when some of its technologies of Othering are exported by dominant cultures around the globe to racialize religion, sexuality and ethnicity among others. For example, think of non-Black people with darker skin in Western spaces and third world locations, or think of colorism in communities of color around the world.

Performance studies pushes us to prioritize social justice and undoes the barriers set by traditional rhetorical critiques. It forces us to step out of our comfort and asks us to complicate our analysis and understanding by contextualizing every step of the way, by putting our bodies on the line and by helping us reflect on our responsibilities (Calafell, 2007, 2014; Conquergood, 2013; Corey, 1998). As I demonstrated in the previous
chapter, racial typologies are linked to a historical and localized colonial past that continues to have grave consequences today, particularly for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. I’m not the first one to push for this analysis as postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1978) and Malek Alloula (1986) have shown how colonial power and control was not only achieved through military occupation and public policy, but also through different avenues of knowledge production such as art and science (see also Massad, 2008).

For this chapter, I examine photography, (performative) allyship and stolen social movements, to show how the colonial gaze is internalized and used in third world locations such as Lebanon. I use a performance ethic in that I do not isolate the photographs from their contextual and historical location but include everything that makes the existence of the photograph possible. In other words, photographs do not exist in a vacuum and are directly connected to history and power imbalances. Hence, the historic specificity and the circumstances surrounding the photographs are just as important as the photographs themselves. What I am attempting here is to show how anti-Blackness works in Lebanon such that artists and citizens alike feel they can connect with Black Americans under an umbrella called oppression, all the while ignoring and erasing the experiences of Black migrant domestic workers and Black Lebanese citizens. I also want to show how, particularly Lebanese people understand racism and structural racism in uniquely U.S. and Western terms, which in turn allows for the dissociation from our complicity at home and abroad.

First, I want to start by making my case for a critical rhetorical analysis of photography under the guidance of a performance studies ethic that sees social justice as
the principal objective for inquiry (E. Patrick Johnson, 2003). Second, I offer a brief history of the Black Lives Matter movement along with an explanation of performative allyship to further contextualize the critique below and demonstrate the intimacies of global histories (Lowe, 2015). Third, I will offer photographic evidence to demonstrate how Lebanese people deny anti-Blackness and consider racism a uniquely western problem all the while appropriating one of the most visible social movements for racial justice in our time. Lastly, I demonstrate how all this information contributes to the erasure of visibility for Black Lebanese people and how it also erases experiences of migrant domestic workers by paying attention to a photographic exhibit called *Mixed feelings* produced by a Black Lebanese woman Nisreen Kaj. I also show how this erasure, in turn, has grave consequences in terms of health, immigration policy, job search and housing among others.

**Lingering Colonial Photography and Third World Racialized Subjects**

One of the ways in which we can think of how colonization and empire building has influenced racial and gendered constructions in the Middle East and vice versa, is by paying attention to photography. According to Said (1978) and Alloula (1987), colonial cultural photography can be understood as a colonial strategy or tool that continuously produces the Other as stuck in time, barbaric and in need of civilizing. With colonial photographic evidence, narratives of civilizing or bringing colonial locations such as the Middle East into modernity justified the violence through which these objectives were achieved. Hence it is not far-fetched to say that the historical and geopolitical contexts that made the photograph possible is just as important as the photograph itself (E. Patrick Johnson, 2003). According to Azoulay (2008), photography initiates a “civil contract”
that produces a connection of mutual responsibility between the viewer, photographer and those being photographed. This connection, Azoulay (2008) argues, is made possible by the production of an image that should always be seen as the result of a confrontation that is not owned by a single author, and therefore is capable of producing several meanings. In other words, because the photograph is a product of complex relations, we must always think of it showing more than what is visible at first sight. Additionally, we can understand photography as a medium of objectification where the ‘object’ is literally held still for its consumption, for it to be constantly desired, appropriating the subject in a lingering glare; this condition in photography then, is part of constructions of gender, race, class, citizenship and belonging (Alloula, 1986; Lalvani, 1996).

It is therefore important to keep in mind for this particular project that there are existing connections and relationships outside of the object, producer and viewer triad. In other words, connections exist outside the afore mentioned triad that when included in analysis have the ability of uncovering and challenging the interpretation of an image. According to Azoulay (2008), focusing on the above-mentioned triad is “patently insufficient” (p. 19) because they “elide the gaze of the photographed subject [and their] demand for participation in a sphere of political relations within which [their] claim can be heard and acknowledged” (p. 20).

The spreading of colonial knowledge production has been made possible, in part, due to the fabrication of colonial citizens as childlike, barbaric and uneducated, among other things (see Said, 1978; Massad, 2008; Thompson, 2000). Therefore, it is worth noting that once we see full European control of former Ottoman colonies, education and the arts become one of the ways in which colonial citizens can be forced into ‘colonial
modernity.’ I remember my uncles, aunts and mother telling stories of how education was approached at the College Protestant du Liban, where France was seen as the educating power. If you spoke French you were considered educated, if you only spoke Arabic you were considered uncivilized and uneducated. We can similarly see this attitude play out today, think of the ways in which we ask whether we are French or English educated to find out more about people’s background and possibly social status.

This is exemplified beautifully in one of my favorite movies of all time, *West Beirut*. At the beginning of the clip (around minute 4 or 5), we see one the main characters, who ironically happens to have my family’s last name, being punished by the schoolteacher who is French:

**Teacher:** How is ‘monsieur’ spelled? Go ahead, Mon…sieur

(Tarek keeps misspelling the word on the Blackboard)

**Teacher:** You’re a certified illiterate. Who are you mocking Monsieur Noueiri? France? It is yes or no, yes I am mocking France, or no I am not mocking France.

**Tarek:** (smiling): It’s no

**Teacher:** No?

**Tarek:** (smiling) Yes, I mean no no no.

**Teacher:** Oh I see. I am mocking the country that is educating me

**Tarek:** (giggling) No… I mean yes… no no no.

**Teacher:** It’s funny?

(she asks him to raise his hand and hits it with a ruler as punishment)

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4 The scene can be found in this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV3GYUgrlM8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV3GYUgrlM8) the full movie can be accessed through Netflix.
**Teacher:** Monsieur Noueiri, you are a dunce, an ill-mannered boy. Your insolence has no limit. An academic zero, Monsieur Noueiri. You belong in the jungle. Get out!

(Tarek exits the classroom)

**Teacher to the rest of the class:** Keep it in mind, ladies and gentlemen, the French Highschool of Beirut is the embodiment of the French mission. Let us not forget that France created your country, gave you your borders and taught you peace. We created your civilization and your constitution. Let it be known that education, especially French education, is the only way out of your primitive customs.

The education that France established in Lebanon and other colonies reflected this conviction that the Middle East needed to be brought into modernity. In other words, colonized citizens would fare better depending on how much they adhered to French standards and understandings of history, sciences and arts, among other things. Therefore, not only were subjects such as math or French taught, but education involved a full cultural indoctrination on gendered and racialized convictions that carried with them ruminants of an Ottoman past. Within this forced cultural education, western photography and visual culture become an avenue through which colonial citizens can make sense of the world around them. Imagery of the Other, whether in written, spoken or visual format, is therefore internalized by colonial citizens, where you adhere to western ways of knowing and representing the other Others as always foreign and outsiders.
Drawing from Muslim Arab and Transnational feminism we can discern ‘hidden’ conversations within visual culture that can open up new conceptual avenues on racialized and gendered subjects in Lebanon. New conceptual avenues can then open up new epistemologies on Lebanese migrant domestic work scholarship. By paying attention to the nuances that surround racialized and gendered photography, “something else can be read, some other event can be reconstructed from it, some other player’s presence can be discerned through it, constructing the social relations that allowed its production” (Azoulay, 2008, p. 12). According to Kozol (2005), studies “of the role of visual culture in the production of national identity have primarily examined mainstream media and have been less attentive to alternative representational practices” (p. 238) which often results in the erasure of underrepresented populations. In addition, these examinations of mainstream media are rarely connected to the current geopolitical and historical context that made their existence possible.

I am most interested in the ways in which Lebanese artists’ photographs tell unintentional (or intentional) stories of (un)belonging and citizenry. Azoulay (2008) asks us to consider the ways in which visual representation is restricted, and to acknowledge, or think about their political ramifications, which could have violent consequences for Afro-Lebanese and migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. A rhetorical analysis of photography through a performance ethic as exemplified by E. Patrick Johnson (2003) allows us not only to pay attention to the image itself but also gives us the opportunity to expand visual rhetorical analysis to include the politics and power relations that made them possible. Photographs have the ability to open up possibilities on civic negotiations in relation to the subject, which in turn opens up avenues of expanding and complicating
notions of citizenship and belonging. It is also a compelling visual format of disseminating information and it has the capability of making visible, and of documenting what is not readily available to the human eye at a first glance in order to unmask unknown conditions of our world.

We need to pay attention to the multiformity, contradictions, assemblages and overruns that underscore colonialism, empire building as well as their tools and strategies. In other words, European and American colonialisms do not exist in a vacuum where the rest of the world is not involved in one way or another (see chapter 2). Lisa Lowe (2015) speaks to the interconnectedness between colonizer, colonized and colonial spaces, and allows us to complicate binary understandings of colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed. Coupled with understandings of visual culture as a tool of empire building, we can attend to different strategies of racialization and power relations that put forth the conditions that set the stage for the below photographs to exist.

Lebanese photographic projects that attempt to expose the politics of inaccessible spaces to Black Americans ignore the structures of life under the Lebanese state for migrant domestic workers and Afro-Lebanese people. This, in turn, exposes questions on visibility, participation and the relationship between the aesthetics of an image and its relation to the political powers and relationships that enable the particular to be captured. In other words, I argue that the aesthetic of all images is always ideological and informed by socio-political relations. When we only pay attention to the image, we run the risk of ignoring the nuanced and complex lived experiences of Black Lebanese people and migrant domestic workers. The visual rhetoric of photographs guided by a performance ethic has the potential to uncover political relationships of power that allow third world
women such as Lebanese women to claim allyship in combating anti-Blackness in western spaces all the while ignoring the experiences of Black people in Lebanon.

**Hopping on the Allyship Trend Train**

I want to first start by offering my understanding of performative allyship as the dramatization of caring. Theatrical solidarity is motivated by some sort of reward of being seen as a ‘good’ person as opposed to an ‘evil racist’ or being on the ‘right side of history’ for example. Simply put, it is a show. We cannot care about racism and oppression when it is convenient or popularly ‘trending.’ As non-Black people of color, we must ask: if my allyship does more for me than for the people I supposedly support, then I am part of the problem. In this way, Tania Saleh’s post and the stolen hashtag, although stemming from different intentions and sociopolitical positions, continue to excuse us from having difficult conversations that are imperative to address root causes of the problem.

Adding to blocked conversations, staging and publishing professional photoshoots using hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #SayHerName when no direct action is being taken (for example Tania Saleh not even mentioning Black people in Lebanon) only serves as declaring publicly that you ‘are not racist’ meaning it only serves the individual posting the picture or the hashtag. According to Bernstein (2005) and Elbaz (1997) popularly well-known or influential ‘activists’ tend to think highly of themselves, they usually focus on their understanding of the problem (co-opting it) as opposed to paying attention to the needs of the most vulnerable. This is clearly evidenced in Tania Saleh’s post below.
Phillips (2020) offers us recognizable signs that expose performative allyship, particularly online. These posts are usually very short in content or have no content at all, the content is not complex, it does not add anything of value to the conversation, is accompanied by an image and the trending hashtags and positions the ‘perpetrator’ of the injustice as someone or something that has no connection to them whatsoever. According to Kelley (2020) performative allyship posts online are, for the most part, well received, with praises and admiration for the one who is posting. This can also be seen in the ways that people who identify with the poster will aggressively come to their defense (for example, Tania Saleh’s fans, or think about the sentence ‘why are you alienating your allies’ when they are in fact checked).

According to Elbaz (1997) and Breinstein (2005), social movements such as the LGBTQ+ have historically been appropriated by allies for their own benefit as opposed to actually improving the lives of people they advocate for. In addition, dominant groups are also known to weaponize their allyship. Nuru and Arendt (2019) for example, analyze 526 Facebook posts and four Facebook chats within supposed feminist allies’ groups. They unsurprisingly found that white ‘feminist’ allies used three different types of microaggressions towards women of color (tone policing, expecting to be educated, and attacking and defensive posturing). In this way, they demonstrate how supposed allies can reinforce oppressive structures when activism is understood as a posturing of sorts that brings ‘woke status’ rather than realizing that personal sacrifices must be made and acting on those. Ghabra (2020) points to the aforementioned behavior in terms of white feminism and notes, “with the act of ‘naming’ or ‘calling out’ Whiteness, especially today as audiences have become more aware, Whiteness becomes even more invisible”
In the case of Arab women, and in particular Lebanese women, our colonial inheritances and contributions are cloaked in performative allyship, serving as justification for the denial of racism and racist structures back home. In agreement with Ghabra (2020) I believe that “allyship becomes a form of denial of […] colonialism” (p. 4) and the ways in which non-Black people of color, like Lebanese, can forget our complicity in the reproduction and maintenance of colonial structures such as the Kafala.

Returning to the historical context offered in the preceding chapters, we cannot address sectarianism and colonial legacies without acknowledging that anti-Blackness is the necessary condition for the global arrangement of oppressive systems. Imagining Lebanon as a society where racism does not exist, particularly anti-Blackness, is a colossal undertaking that continuously erases the lives of Black Lebanese and migrant workers. Even though non-Black Lebanese have had Black neighbors since the beginning of European colonization at the very least (see Arsan, 2014), Black people are still always constructed as outsiders. An example, is offered by Reyes (2019) where in Iran there is no recognition of the presence of enslaved Black people. This shows how in Iran, too, Black people are seen as outsiders not citizens.

**Black Lives Matter and Social media, a Brief Contextualization**

At this point, I want to turn to the Black Lives Matter movement in order to further contextualize the discussion below. In 2013 the murderer of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman was exculpated in Florida. Three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi⁵, inspired the movement that continues to encourage

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⁵ [https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/](https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/)
youth of color to fight for racial justice. The hashtag gained more visibility in 2014 when a Black child, Michael Brown, was murdered by police in Missouri and protests for racial justice were renewed. The movement is now known worldwide with protests sparked in different countries (Marquez & Rana, 2017; Watson et al., 2020) speaking to the powerful visibility of the hashtag itself. The authors of *Herstory* note how they used the BLM hashtag not only as a way to raise awareness, but also as a tool that would help mobilize the entire country with protests taking place in different cities simultaneously. According to Watson et al., (2020) “Black Lives Matter is about recognizing Black people’s humanity and cooperating in the dismantling of white supremacy” (p. 1365).

According to Risam and Josephs (2021) “Black people have always been intimately familiar with technologies, both repressive and emancipatory” (p. ix) and social media is one of them. In addition, Taylor (2021) notes that “language and signifying are the tools of relationship and relational belonging. Signifying marks belonging in the diaspora” (p. 138). In this way, we need to think about the BLM movement and its hashtag as way of “creating codes and meanings that are socially, culturally, and intellectually significant and tangible to describe [Black] lived experiences” (p. 138). The ability to think that using the BLM hashtag to increase one’s own visibility is not problematic is by design. The remains of colonization that are experienced today, such as capitalism, give non-Black people the illusion that ‘Black’ is to be consumed or owned. As Taylor (2021) contends, “laws and policies [in countries where Black people live] were put in place to ensure subjugation through language, shared public and private spaces, and ownership of bodies” (p. 138). These laws and policies might change appearance throughout time, but they continue to have the same
effects. Non-Black people, for example, continue to force ownership over Black culture and Black social movements, such that Tania Saleh believes it is not problematic to appear considerably darker in a picture ‘supporting’ BLM and Lebanese activists do not see the problem in coopting the BLM hashtag all the while ignoring the experiences of Black people in our countries. In other words, these events seem to be understood as up to grabs. This commodification of social activism, as argued below, in turn, serves to maintain the system we are supposedly trying to fight.

Another side to the same coin, is the ways in which predominantly white people have responded to the call for Black lives to matter. The movement has been labelled by conservative pundits as anti-police or anti-white people in the U.S. Similarly, academic discussions on race, colonialism and white supremacy that have occurred in France, for example, have been labelled as an Islamoleftist agenda that has, as the main objective, the destabilization of French civilization. What these two responses, in two different parts of the western world, tell us is that the fight for racial justice is directly tied to the colonial control that the west has over the rest of the world. One of the cases that I want to focus on for the purpose of contextualizing the analysis below is the “AllLivesMatter” discourse that circulated as a response to Black Lives Matter.

Switching Black lives with All lives, forwards the rhetoric of color blindness and so does switching Black lives for Lebanese lives. Omi and Winant (2015) define colorblindness as the notion that people should be understood “as individuals only, not as persons or groups whose identities or social positions have been shaped and organized by

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Those who believe in #AllLivesMatter tend to see the world as a post racial and post-colonial place by disconnecting the histories that literally dictate global social hierarchies. As demonstrated below, Tania Saleh does not believe in the racist connections to blackface, and doubles down by arguing that ‘we all come from Africa’ and that there is only one race, the human race. We have heard and seen these arguments ad nauseum over the years. They allow Tania Saleh to ‘oppose’ racism ‘elsewhere’ while ignoring the ways in which race and racism continue to play a huge role in the lives of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. At the same time, they allow Lebanese activists to coopt the hashtag of a Black liberation movement to draw attention to our plight after the Beirut explosion, all the while migrant domestic workers are being abandoned on the streets and under the ruble.

Lebanon is in its worst economic crisis since the civil war of the 1970s. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation and the explosion of August 4, 2020, left Lebanese people without an ounce of hope for a safe peaceful future. After the explosion, Lebanese people continued the protests that started in October 2019 to call for international attention and, for some, international intervention. At the same time, the world was watching while in the U.S. Black men and women were being murdered indiscriminately by police, and the BLM protests gained international attention such that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was placed at the forefront of social media.

7 More information on international attention can be found here: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53273381
Analysis Discussion

The following analysis takes a similar approach as the previous chapter in that I not only include the triad of photographer, photographed and audience but also focus on the ramifications that these images have in connection to a colonial past that Lebanese people want to see erased. I want to first start with the image that was circulated on social media by Lebanese artist Tania Saleh, in which the language of Black Lives Matter is appropriated. According to Patrick E. Johnson (2003) “some sites of cross-cultural appropriation provide fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other” (p. 6). These new epistemologies can help us break away from what Lisa Lowe (2015) identifies as the binaries of colonized vs colonizer, Black vs white and oppressed vs oppressor. These images were shared in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and subsequent protests. The photos and their captions have been removed after well-deserved backlash; however, no one can escape the wonderful archiving capabilities of the World Wide Web. The _Middle East Eye_ online publication, for example, kept a record of the images, captions and the defense conjured by the artists to avoid responsibility.8

I want to first start by recognizing that the artist in the image below is wearing blackface. Most, if not all of the backlash that the artist received, was in reference to blackface but little attention was paid to the content of the photograph and the contexts that made it possible. I follow Holland (2012) and turn to the overlooked instances of racism that uphold anti-Black structures such as the Kafala system in Lebanon.

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8 The images and information can be found here [https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/arab-influencers-under-fire-blackface-solidarity-blacklivesmatter](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/arab-influencers-under-fire-blackface-solidarity-blacklivesmatter)
Therefore, for this chapter my focus is centered on connecting the captions, justifications and reasonings of the picture to the ways in which non-Black communities of color take advantage of Black American social movements aimed at racial justice, all the while protecting and benefiting from anti-Blackness outside western spaces. I also include a discussion on the appropriation of Black Lives Matter language by Lebanese people after the explosion to show how Black Lebanese lives or migrant domestic workers’ lives are a non-issue or non-existent in Lebanon. There are material consequences to this and so I end with a discussion on *Mixed Feelings*, a photographic project made by Black Lebanese people to call attention to their invisibility.

(Figure 6: Tania Saleh BLM Support Photo)

Lebanese singer Tania Saleh is wearing an afro hair style and has considerably darkened her face. Her caption reads;

I wish I was black, today more than ever… Sending my love and full support to the people who demand equality and justice for all races anywhere in the world. #nojusticenopeace #GeorgeFloyd #blacklivesmatter #policestate #whitesupremacy
Anti-Blackness is systemic, structural, and global, even though it might function differently around the world and take on different strategies to cement social hierarchies. In the case of Lebanese people, it seems that it is easier for us to see anti-Blackness and racism as uniquely western. Tania Saleh exemplifies this since her performative allyship does not mention Black people in Lebanon at all. Let us start with ‘I wish I was black.’ Anti-Blackness forcefully and insistently connects Blackness with death. The possibility of detaching oneself from the historical events that brought us to where we are today is a privilege rooted in violence. Christina Sharpe (2016), for example, asks us to see Black suffering within a long history of anti-Blackness that frames Black life as always connected to death (p. 15).

Hence, a light skinned Arab wishing to be Black is wishing death upon oneself. I am not only referring to police and state violence, but rather a conglomerate of structures that include immigration services, education and health care, among others. I want us to think of the uncertainty that migrant domestic workers experience. Not only is Lebanon on the verge of total economic collapse (as I write this minimum wage has reached 68$/month and continues to depreciate), but COVID-19 has also hit the country with a firm whip. We are close to the first-year anniversary of the explosion of August 4th, and we still don’t have a clear count of how many migrant workers have died or disappeared.

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9 The reports of missing victims can be found here [https://armlebanon.org/content/beirut-blast-solidarity-tainted-racism](https://armlebanon.org/content/beirut-blast-solidarity-tainted-racism)
Before the blast, migrant workers were being abandoned without pay at the doors of their embassies, and that too during a global pandemic.  

As Sharpe (2016) points out, Black women tend to have less access to necessary resources for living such as health care and safe housing, as well as being more likely to suffer from mental health issues in what she calls “the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death” (p. 13). Saleh is, therefore, not only ignorant of the real material consequences that being Black in the U.S. brings “in its wake” (Sharpe, 2016), but she is also simultaneously erasing the existence of Black people and the material consequences they face in Lebanon. In other words, race and racism is understood as a uniquely American or European issue such that conversations on the Kafala system are reduced to a question of law and abolishment of a system without taking into account the connections to a colonial past that has profited from the subjugation of Black people.  

At this juncture I turn to the work of Saidiya Hartman (2008) who stresses the importance of paying attention to “a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (p. 6). This is also shown in my historical account of the Ottoman and European colonial constructions of race in the Middle East, where racial and gendered ideologies (among others) were formed through a bargaining of sorts between colonizers and colonial citizens. She terms this calculus and arithmetic the “afterlife of slavery” a notion useful to challenge the idea of a post-racial society in Lebanon as well. Recall the conversation I had with a family member where he tried to argue that the use of blackface in Arab popular culture was more a result of ‘dark humor’

10 Reports of abandonment can be found here https://armlebanon.org/content/prosecute-employers-who-abandon-domestic-workers-now?fbclid=IwAR1RqwhvaWmxMfj9i82-Pihq6xTGGO7hUA3FTZLtyYYg1rCFx0Vwu-X7phg
than racism (since you know, racism only exists in the U.S.). Saleh’s post reflects this post-racial, or in the Lebanese case, ‘slavery never happened here’ mentality that ignores the afterlife of slavery and its consequences embedded in our geopolitical existence.

I want to now focus on the second part of Saleh’s post in connection to the above discussion. She writes: “Sending my love and full support to the people who demand equality and justice for all races anywhere in the world.” Yet, when looking at the hashtags she uses, it becomes clear that she is only referencing racial injustice in the U.S. Her outrage draws on the language of one of the most visible movements for racial justice of our time. In this way, she is taking advantage of Black pain for personal gain and her post overall reeks of self-promotion. She was able to insert herself through trending hashtags in a conversation that Lebanese people are not willing to have at home. E. Patrick Johnson (2003) contends that “[o]nce a cultural good (a trending hashtag for example) has been declared authentic (as in this is the path to fight racism and therefore be a good person), the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value” (p. 5).

As a result of the effectiveness of #BLM as a transnational movement, Saleh’s post figures as a marketing strategy that would insert her into a conversation turned international. How can we fight anti-Blackness anywhere if we are not even willing to recognize its different iterations at home? In order for us to be able to stand for Black lives, we must be actively anti-racist. This means that we need to question the anti-Blackness prevalent in our daily lives and recognizing how we benefit from it so we can come up with strategies to destroy it. An anti-racist stance is not revolutionary when it is exercised along some lines and not others and, in fact, some of Saleh’s fans pointed this
out to her in reference to the above post. Social media was quick to let her know that appearing in blackface is extremely offensive and violent, however, she brushed angry requests of deleting the post by noting that a musical passion of hers is to showcase Black music culture and that her intention was one of celebration not of mockery. Tania Saleh is quoted in Albawaba saying that “all of humanity started in Africa, which means that all humans are black” pointing to how ‘Africannes’ and ‘Blackness’ is tokenized when it’s convenient. Tania Saleh’s response was captured by the Daily Mail:

(Figure 7: Tania Saleh’s Response to Backlash)

Wishing she could present the rich and great Black music culture reads as commodification for personal gain. Why does she have the need to represent ‘black music culture”? Furthermore, why is she implying that Black music culture is monolithic? The defensiveness with which she tries to defend her choices shows the ways in which we are conditioned to recognize some instances of racism more than others. In addition,

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11 Reactions and replies to Saleh’s post can be found here https://www.albawaba.com/node/i-wish-i-were-black-lebanese-artist-under-fire-blackface-meant-show-solidarity-black-lives

she reinforces the commodification of Black artistry (see for example, Griffin, 2012; Walker, 2000) by emphasizing her claim to ownership of cultures that are not hers to own. In addition, and according to Emelie Townes (2006), in reference to selling products in a capitalist world that “the commodification of bodies is mutated into the commodification of identity – Black history, Black culture, Black life – Black identity […] This manipulation merges race with myth and memory to create history” (p. 44). Hence, she ‘performs allyship’ in order to achieve ‘role model status,’ which in turn would increase her popularity and hence her chances for better income and recognition. In addition, and in reference to Tania Saleh’s response, we can see how the commodification of Blackness (in short) has travelled throughout history, with for example minstrel shows, such that stereotypical representations become factual in our memories.

Tania Saleh is by no means an exceptional example. She is, however, a good example of how non-Black people of color can perform allyship all the while ignoring the death of Black people in Lebanon. Not just as in bodily death, but also as in death of existence. According to E. Patrick Johnson (2003):

“when white-identified subjects perform ‘[B]lack signifiers – normative or otherwise – the effect is always already entangled in the discourse of otherness; the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily engenders a tense relationship with its Others” (p. 4).

This critique also applies to non-Black people of color, especially those with fair skin. One way of doing so is by paying attention to the appropriation of a U.S. racial justice movement after the explosion of August 4 that ignored affected non-Lebanese
people, particularly Black migrant workers. The neighborhood where the explosion took place, is mostly inhabited by migrant workers, so many of them were left with nothing.13

**Online Movements and Stolen Hashtags**

When protests for racial justice appeared in the international stage, I started to see many Lebanese posts with the hashtag #LebaneseLivesMatter. The reasoning behind them was that they did not want to undermine the BLM movement in the U.S. but wanted to bring international attention to the high number of deaths in Lebanon as a consequence of our corrupt and sectarian government. However, for this section, I want us to think about how Saleh’s post was in actuality a reinforcement of global anti-Blackness. In the same way, changing the identifier of one of the most visible movements for racial justice also ignores how anti-Blackness operates around the world and reinforces it. Regardless of intention, #LebaneseLivesMatter undermines the Black Lives Matter movement and dismisses the murder of Black people as symptomatic of larger historical systems of power that also operate in Lebanon. According to the Black Lives Matter Website, the movement is “working for a world (emphasis mine) where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment; blacklivesmatter.com). Therefore the cooptation of the BLM hashtag needs to be considered as always informed by a cunning anti-Black rhetoric that permits non-Black people to insert themselves in spaces that were not created for them.

As demonstrated so far, anti-Blackness also exists in Lebanon. So, the above hashtag reads more as a ‘what about us’ cry than a call for media attention to our dismay.

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13 At this point I wonder if there is something to be said about the unequal positions that Black people themselves inhabit based on nationality, religion among others?
Now, I want to make very clear that I am not dismissing the very material, physical and psychological consequences that being Lebanese carries. The fact that when the explosion happened, many scenarios, with different world actors wanting to hurt Lebanese were plausible, speaks to the precarity of our existence. At the same time, the toll of living in Lebanon is compounded with anti-Blackness for Black Lebanese and migrant workers. And so, to the hashtag shared by many Lebanese I, ask: do Black Lives Matter in Lebanon? According to This is Lebanon, 2 migrant domestic workers die in Lebanon every week.

The appropriation of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag for non-Black social justice movements not only takes necessary attention away from a movement that is specific to fighting anti-Blackness, but it also suggests that whether Black lives matter or not is a non-issue in Lebanon. In addition, the stealing of the hashtag also suggests that the fight to eradicate anti-Blackness is a uniquely U.S. issue and therefore the cooptation of the hashtag is ‘not’ related to anti-Blackness but is rather a strategy to mediatize oppression in non-western spaces. Reducing the Black Lives Matter movement to a uniquely western issue ignores what Lisa Lowe (2015) calls the intimacies of four continents where configurations of anti-Blackness necessitated its reproduction by colonial citizens in order to thrive.

According to Corey (1996), “the production of identity, negotiation of meaning, arbitration of power, and definition of self are constructs, to be sure, but these constructs are produced, refined, and re-produced through performance” (p. 148). Digital performances of allyship and activism then, have political and social implications that create the social world we live in (E. Patrick Johnson, 2003). In this sense, the post by
Tania Saleh, for example, continues to put forth the notion that racism does not exist in the Arab world. Additionally, the appropriation of the BLM hashtag can also be understood under the notion that racism does not exist in Lebanon. While anti-Blackness is a complicated systemic historical structure, it can be found within the repetition of seemingly unimportant acts that escape our grasp.

Both of the performances in this chapter, albeit very different from one another, do more than simply demonstrate a single person’s or small group’s understanding of identity and racial injustice. They also help to produce and reproduce configurations of a racial global hierarchy while hiding our own implication in oppressive global structures (such as the Kafala system in Lebanon). So, while both performances advocate for anti-racist and social justice positions in different locations, they performatively work to maintain systems of advantage and disadvantage. It is also important to note that as the Lebanese lives matter hashtag was being circulated, Lebanese people also put together a document with strategies of defense against the brutality of the state to send to Black Americans and the BLM protests happening as a sign of solidarity. Advocating for the lives of Black Americans while simultaneously ignoring anti-Black structures is a performance in and of itself. Performative activism or allyship is a theatrical ‘make believe’ that stops as soon as the scene is over.

I chose to link the actions of a single individual to the actions of a large group of people as having the same consequences because reducing historical structures such as race to single individual actions inevitably obscures our personal gain from anti-Blackness. It also forces our critical attention towards intentions, which, and in agreement with Madison (2010;2012), intentions do not matter but the consequences of
our actions do. Both Saleh’s post and the stolen hashtag prevented necessary and important conversations on how Lebanese structures continuously reproduce Black death in different ways. The ripple effect then is that the experiences of migrant domestic workers and Black Lebanese people are erased. They are continuously seen as foreign and outsiders. This is not only exemplified by the lack of coverage on migrant domestic workers after the explosion and the fact that we don’t know how many have died, but also by a photographic exhibit produced by African and Asian Lebanese people.

This exhibit is called *Mixed Feelings*\(^4\) and it collects stories about their African and Asian heritage and the struggles they face in Lebanon. The project was envisioned and created by Nisreen Kaj (Lebanese Nigerian woman, researcher and activist) and produced with Marta Bogdanska (Polish woman, photographer and artist). The main objective of the exhibit is to showcase the lived realities of Lebanese mixed people of African or Asian descent because their experiences are often ignored. Those participants who contributed to the project with photographs and quotes mainly spoke to the issues of race, racism and belonging. *Mixed Feelings* is made up of two parts. The first exhibit\(^5\) showcased portraits of mixed race Lebanese alongside quotes from one on one interviews that Nisreen Kaj conducted. The scene reveals the ways in which Black and mixed-race Lebanese people are continuously and consistently positioned as outsiders in an ‘us vs. them’ binary. Ataman (2015) quotes Nisreen Kaj saying “[P]eople say they’ve never seen

\(^{14}\) More information on the exhibit can be found here: [https://hummusforthought.com/2014/10/18/mixed-feelings/](https://hummusforthought.com/2014/10/18/mixed-feelings/)

\(^{15}\) More information on both exhibits by Nisreen Kaj, the quotes and photographs I use as evidence, can be found here: [https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/hidden-plain-sight-life-mixed-lebanese](https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/hidden-plain-sight-life-mixed-lebanese)
a mixed-Lebanese, yes they have, they just don’t who we are or they must assume that we
can’t be [Lebanese]” pointing to how they are foreigners in their own country.
Furthermore, I want to add, that as a mixed-Lebanese myself, my experiences are
completely different. When Lebanese strangers find out I am mixed, I get treated to
drinks, they offer to take me out. So, what makes my experience different? Being seen as
white in the literal sense. Nisreen Kaj’s work, and the exhibit participants’ experiences
expose the ways in which anti-Blackness affects Black Lebanese citizens (emphasis
mine) on a daily basis. The second exhibit, offers a nuanced connection between past and
present by showing family photo albums and community donated pieces.

This project started showing in different areas of Beirut and other cities in
Lebanon in 2012. Meaning that Black Lebanese people where already speaking to racial
injustice in our own country before the Black Lives Matter movement became visible
internationally (keep in mind that BLM movement started to be internationalized after the
senseless murder of a Black child called Michael Brown). So, I ask: where was the
outrage then? I believe the answer lies in that the subject of race and racism was not
trending internationally. This is one of the many dangers of performing allyship, as it
causes a lot of harm more often than not.

One of the quotes that struck me in Ataman’s (2015) interviews, was that of Saab
who notes that “[T]hey’d say to each other, how can a dark be in the Lebanese army with
us?” when speaking to his experience joining the army as a Black man that had been
raised in Congo. I immediately remembered the story of Ali Mubarak who is surprised
that a Black enslaved man could become the governor of an Ottoman province (Helal,
2010). Lebanese racist assumptions today, are not different from racist assumptions
before European colonial rule and during the Ottoman empire. Take for example the photographs taken from the *Mixed Feelings* exhibit album\(^{16}\) below:

![Photograph of the exhibit](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1482050072050036/media/photos)

(Figure 8: Mixed Feelings Exhibit 1, Portraits)

The first quote starting from the top in the above image reads; “So in Ghana you have your own Lebanon. But when you are in Lebanon you are the non-Lebanese coming from Ghana to Lebanon so you lose your sense of ‘Lebanese-ship’ because people look at you in a different way.” The second quote asserts “no, it was about my colour [sic], big time.” In a separate, Mashallah News reporting\(^{17}\) of the exhibit, Nisreen Kaj is quoted saying “[L]iving in Beirut as a black Lebanese has always made it blatant to me the hierarchy of skin colour [sic] and ethnicity here” pointing to skin color and ethnic origin as the main identifiers of difference in our society. My existence shopping at the mall in Achrafiye, for example, elicits no reaction from strangers other than the occasional smile.

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\(^{16}\) Photos of the ‘making of’ of Mixed Feelings and final exhibits can be found on their Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/1482050072050036/media/photos](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1482050072050036/media/photos)

\(^{17}\) Mashallah news report on Mixed Feelings: [https://www.mashallahnews.com/mixed-feelings-race-lebanon/](https://www.mashallahnews.com/mixed-feelings-race-lebanon/)
when making unintentional eye contact. On the other hand, Black Lebanese people do not have that luxury, such is the case of an exhibit participant who noted how a non-Black Lebanese approached them and asked “[S]orry I want to ask you: We need a maid to clean the house, can you... are you free?” What this quote\textsuperscript{18} demonstrates is that not only can Black Lebanese women particularly be harassed for simply being in a public space (I have never been approached with solicitations of domestic work as a mixed Lebanese), but also shows the direct connection between racist attitudes in Lebanon and migrant domestic work.

Further complicating this relationship, Nisreen Kaj\textsuperscript{19} notes that when speaking about racism in Lebanon, we tend to focus only on migrant domestic work, and she is absolutely right. When I first started thinking about this project my initial understanding comprised of primarily migrant workers. However, as life had it, COVID-19 hit, travelling was no longer an option and I was forced to think differently about the subject. I say forced because I cannot claim with certainty that I would have seen the same connections I see now. Hence, instead of only focusing on the Kafala system in its historical specificity during the Ottoman period and beyond, I expanded my focus to include broader historical and colonial conversations on race, gender, and citizenship. It is the changes I had to make to my questions that directed me to what Nisreen Kaj points

\textsuperscript{18} Direct quote can be found here: https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2012/Jul-05/179419-the-mixed-feelings-of-national-identity.ashx

\textsuperscript{19} Nisreen Kaj interview: https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2012/Jul-05/179419-the-mixed-feelings-of-national-identity.ashx
to. Discussions of race and racism in Lebanon need to be connected to larger colonial structures that affect Black Lebanese citizens as well.

Centered in the discussions around race and racism in Lebanon is the notion that two separate groups exist: us vs. them/Other/Outsider/foreign. Those who are not understood as Lebanese are always Othered and, therefore, not considered in conversations around nationality and politics, as well as being hyper exposed to violence, physical and psychological. Additionally, this stance prevents any meaningful conversation around how race and racism operates in our country. Consequently, conversations on race and racism are seen as foreign as well, or related to a single issue, as opposed to a collective responsibility. Or, in other words, it happens elsewhere, not here, only a small number of families mistreat migrant domestic workers.

Lebanese people of mixed heritage are cast as subaltern and are also victims of racist structures and ideologies that will continue to persist in a ‘post-colonial’ Lebanon if we do not complicate our understanding of how race functions globally. I do want to make very clear, again, that even within mixed Lebanese, experiences are not the same. I put myself as an example, I am mixed, but I have never experienced racism. I am white-passing and even though yes, I am felt to feel like an outsider sometimes, like when I speak Arabic or if I want to talk politics, the color of my skin does not impose barriers to my existence, ever. In addition, the fact that I am a mixed Lebanese Spaniard (emphasis mine) and therefore mixed European, positions me as a desirable relationship to pursue and maintain.

In closing this analysis, I want to point to the Lebanese protests that started in October 2019. Recall that one of the demands of Lebanese citizens is in changing
patriarchal control over citizenship and rule of law. What is known as the Nationality Law, dictates that only Lebanese fathers can pass along citizenship. Ataman (2015), for example, illuminates an important detail of the exhibition’s second ‘scene’ (family albums). He points to how in the family album photos of mixed Lebanese couples, only women are Black or Asian whereas the men tend to be Lebanese which ensures that the mother is always foreign born. Ironically, Ataman (2015) also points to how the state still expects these mothers to raise future Lebanese generations. Additionally, recall that migrant domestic workers are not allowed to engage in sexual and romantic relationship with Lebanese men. I argue, and in connection to the above analysis, that Blackness is seen as always foreign and not desirable, so the expectation that a Lebanese man would fall in love with a Black woman is very low.

This is exemplified by Saab’s20 story where he points to how his fellow soldiers would ask “[H]ow could his father marry a Black woman?” So, forbidding migrant domestic workers from sexual relationships with Lebanese men also assumes that in no way would a Lebanese man fall in love with a Black woman in a foreign country, rather, the law relies on stereotypical assumptions of seduction and entrapment of Lebanese men by Black women. In a different interview Nisreen Kaj21 notes that racism in Lebanon has a “negative impact […] on all communities in relation to cohesion and integration.” What she points to, is the already cemented divisiveness in terms of sectarianism and different

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20 Quote can be found here: [https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/hidden-plain-sight-life-mixed-lebanese](https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/hidden-plain-sight-life-mixed-lebanese)

21 Interview can be found here: [http://www.barakabits.com/2014/10/meet-full-spectrum-lebanese](http://www.barakabits.com/2014/10/meet-full-spectrum-lebanese)
political groups, which is also something the protests want to destroy. Kaj\textsuperscript{22} also notes that addressing racism in Lebanon can ultimately “help foster strong and positive relations between different sections of the community and support community cohesion” something, that as a Lebanese, I know we desperately crave. At this point, it is imperative for us to complicate racial and gendered hierarchies in colonial spaces. We need to stop performing allyship, as Tania Saleh does by using racist tropes to ‘show support’ and, in reference to the stolen hashtag, we need to stop seen Black people as ‘them’ in the ‘us vs. them’ binary.

**Allyship, Solidarity and Other Made-up Stories**

Performative allyship seems to be a worldwide practice that touches upon a range of subjects such as race, gender, disability and sexuality, among others (see for example Kluttz et al., 2020; Hadley, 2020). It not only concerns the act of faking solidarity and support, but it also includes its historical and situational context of the performance itself. Palestinian – American feminist Dana Olwan (2015) calls these theatricals “assumptive solidarities” in which we dangerously assume a clear stage all the while ignoring how complicated power and violence structures are. One sentence that really stuck with me from her piece is:

> This form of solidarity is comfortable; it is felt affectively but never experienced materially, situationally, or historically. While enticing, this form of solidarity does not move us closer to those whom we wish to be in alliance with, nor does it directly confront of transform the conditions under which we come to encounter one another.

(from Abstract)

\textsuperscript{22} Quote can be found here: http://www.barakabits.com/2014/10/meet-full-spectrum-lebanese
Are we, as Lebanese, willing to place font and forward race discussions in our search for political liberation? If we don’t, I fear, we will never get rid of the political system that continues to blow our existence into oblivion, literally. We need to complicate and be critical of the ways in which we approach allyship and solidarity. In order to do this, we need to realize our own complicities in different structures. While Saleh’s post is understood as ‘I support Black people over there because Lebanese people are not Black,’ and the stolen hashtag shows how Black U.S. movements are commodified, the photo exhibit of mixed Lebanese people draws our attention to the complicated nature of global social hierarchies and notions of belonging. We need to move away from romanticized ideals of allyship that make us comfortable in not challenging our own complicity. Saleh is a perfect example of how ignoring our complicity in Lebanese structural racism serves to center ourselves as a public figure of resistance without having to change ourselves.

Arabs, and for the purpose of this project, particularly Lebanese people protesting anti-Blackness and oppressive systems in western spaces need to come to terms with the ways in which we erase Black Lebanese people and completely ignore the cries for help from migrant domestic workers. Complicity is multifaceted and we must account for all its parts. I return to the writing that started this chapter. Friend #1 is the perfect example of performative allyship while ignoring complicity. Ghabra and Calafell (2018) speak to this problem and demonstrate how “[a]sking them to be reflexive about their own spaces of privilege is challenging, while marking moments of disempowerment comes quite easily” (p. 44). In other words, and within the context of this project in particular, even though we advocate for Others, go to protests and label ourselves as anti-racist and as
people who fight for social justice, we continue to uphold obscured oppressive structures. Take the stolen hashtag above as an example; within our demands for justice we need to be very careful that we are not contributing to the lived injustice of another.

Black people in Lebanon are always seen as foreign, outsiders and therefore, non-citizens which leads to not having access to the resources that white Lebanese do. I turn to the movie scene offered above. Lebanese people were essentially indoctrinated (or as the French say educated) by a colonizing power to the point where we feel like we are tied to them in some way. Like Stockholm Syndrome, masses of people surrounding Emanuel Macron begged for France to take over again. This does not mean that Lebanese people do not resist, as the protests that started on October of 2019 demonstrate otherwise. At the same time, the resistance to our colonial legacy has prevented us from realizing that as a population, we are upholding colonial legacies that do not affect us in the same way as they do to Black Lebanese and migrant workers. We will not be able to liberate ourselves while holding the liberation of others hostage. In this sense, we are limiting our possibilities for transnational, intersectional feminist solidarities (Ghabra & Calafell, 2018).

Thinking of Lebanon as, or wanting Lebanon to be a post-colonial space is in itself a colonial narrative that ignores the entrenched racialized and gendered structures we uphold on a daily basis without thinking much about them (take for example the Kafala system). Anti-Blackness is global, structural and it is stealthy because it manifests differently around the world (see for example Vargas, 2018, Mugabo, 2016, Reyes, 2019), giving people in third world locations, like Lebanon, the opportunity to deny its existence. When the BLM protests in 2014 spread to some countries such as England, I
came across a Facebook post made by a Lebanese acquaintance. She was frustrated that in London BLM protests were excluding non-Black people of color in the fight against white supremacy. Lebanese diaspora living in western spaces who participate in social justice issues need to recon that we have reproduced anti-Black structures at home and abroad for centuries. Take for example the way in which in the early 1900s Arabs from Mount Lebanon travelling to the U.S. argued in court to be understood as white by trying to demonstrate how far away from Blackness (Gualtieri, 2009). It is therefore not our place to insert ourselves in the conversation (like Saleh), it is not our place to appropriate language that speaks to Black struggles (like the stolen hashtag), and it is certainly not our place to tell Black people how or what to do. We need to stop using Black pain for personal gain.

Many Lebanese in the diaspora will argue that they are more understanding of racial issues in western spaces than those who never left Lebanon. However, my friend, who adopted the neoliberal multicultural notion that people of color are all in the same predicament against white supremacy, ignores the fact that Lebanese people took their customs, religions and understandings of race and gender among others with them. This is nothing new, and not particular to Lebanese diaspora. For example, Patel (2016) points to how South Asians who settled in western spaces also took with them religion, customs such as caste and she urges us to pay attention to how people of color uphold anti-Blackness through different structures. In Patel’s case and for South Asians, one of them is caste, for this project and Lebanese people one of them is the Kafala.

Colonial and Empire building photography continuously contributes to reproduce the notion that the Other needs saving from their own uncivilized nature. As illustrated
through the above movie scene, colonial knowledge was imposed from the start of one’s education, hence, ways of ‘picturing’ the world around us resemble the colonial gaze such that colonizing powers are maintained. We see this with Saleh’s picture, as it carries a vintage essence that contributes to the notion that the Other is a subject of the past. I follow Lisa Lowe (2015) and suggest that in terms of our solidarity with Black people everywhere, we need to pay attention to the complicated cultural connections and differences of worldview making that are a result of colonial influence across continents.

Photographs also have the ability of challenging the ways we participate in, and understand the world we live in. An example is the Mixed Feelings exhibition which allows ways of “seeing” and “being” that are ignored in Lebanon. These photographs and the background that accompanies them, can perform as mirror that reflects, reveals, and sometimes conceals the socio-political connections ingrained in ourselves. In other words, images form part of a larger structure that organizes people, ideologies and objects (Campbell, 2009) and through images we are also able to disrupt organizing structures.

The notion that we can interpret and analyze a photograph for its meaning on its own, draws away from the conditions that allowed for the photograph to be taken in the first place. Focusing only on the aesthetics of a photograph may run the risk of ignoring material realities and the nuances of lived experience that must happen before the photograph is even conceptualized and taken. The environments, socio-political relations, and issues of power that are not depicted in an image, or that are considered external to that image should be understood as drenched with meaning so that we can engage in a meaningful political critique. In other words, we can say that photographs can serve as
evidence of larger power relations that connect and intersect the private and the public, the past and the present. What I mean by photographic evidence, is that a photograph can be thought of as a corridor in which multiple doors can open that reveal unexpected, different, and at times opposing information. It is therefore important to consider the image articulations that refuse or allow, visual socio-political representation which requires us to think past the image itself and includes the aforementioned contexts and socio-political relationships.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

From Shared Complicity to Shared Accountability

It has been a year since quarantine for COVID-19 started and 8 months since the explosion at the Beirut port. The explosion precipitated the health crisis as thousands of injured people needed immediate care. Many had to be treated on the streets because of how packed the hospitals had become after the pandemic hit and because three hospitals had been destroyed by the explosion. I remember being on the phone that entire day and night, waiting for friends and family to respond. The news that loved ones were injured, windows in our building shattered and the death of a friend all compressed in ding, ding texting sounds. Many videos were being shared through Whatsapp including bodies covered in dust and ashes. Dismembered bodies… the camera can be seen looking around… it seems the arm we just found does not have a body… I am still in shock. In many ways, I feel like I continue to be stuck in that exact same day… As if my life has become a loop of silence and tears that keeps repeating itself. When will enough be enough? How much more can we take?

Frightened voices linger in my head. My heart is in pieces. At the same time, I cannot help but think of the situation that non-Lebanese people in Lebanon are going through.

23 Al Jazeera news report: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wb1SHDwOQQ

160
through. Lebanon has the highest concentration of refugees per citizen in the world\(^{24}\). In addition, there are about 25,000 migrant workers from African and South Asian countries and most of them are trapped in the Kafala system. It is worth reiterating that the Kafala system ties the legal status of a migrant worker directly to the employer (usually an individual in a family). It is not only the worker’s visa that is tied to the employer, but things such as healthcare, housing, clothing and food security are too. The kafala system allows employers to take advantage of migrant domestic workers by keeping their passports and restricting their movement. The ongoing October Revolution demands the abolition of the Kafala system. Even though I believe that ending this system is long overdue, I do not think that abolishing the Kafala would end the abuse and erasure of Black Lebanese and Black migrant workers. Yes, the laws need to change, yes, migrant domestic workers need to be included in our Labor Code, and absolutely yes, abuse of workers needs to be persecuted. At the same time, we seriously need to think about how the Kafala came to be, and most importantly how it has changed over time.

I remember talking about this with my mother. In this conversation I found out a piece of the puzzle that, I believe, perfectly illustrates why abuse and discrimination would not change. It is only recently that I learned that my grandfather, Osman Noueiry, and other family members sought work in Saudi Arabia through the Kafala system. So, I asked myself, when did the Kafala system shift to only include non-Arab countries from

the Global South? According to the Council on Foreign Relations\textsuperscript{25}, the system first grew in popularity during the 1950s since newly oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia sought laborers to work in their ever changing and growing infrastructure. This, however, does not mean that the Kafala system was developed during the 1950s. Zilfi (2010) points out how during the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire switched from a slave-based army to a compulsory state service enlistment, and in response to outside pressure the Ottomans attempted to make the case that enslaved girls would be given the best treatment and education, eventually positioning them in a higher category within the social hierarchy. Zilfi (2010) also notes that enslaved girls would be taken to big cities of the empire and sold for domestic and sexual labor. The families or men that would buy them would be their ‘sponsors’ and would be entirely responsible for the girls’ livelihood. What I want to point out is that the kafala system does not appear all of a sudden in the 1950s, but that it is rooted in complicated historical events that need to be taken into account.

My grandfather was a civil engineer and he developed the first road that connected Mecca to Riyadh. One of the things my mother pointed out is that he needed a Saudi Arabian sponsor who would essentially vouch for his legal ability to conduct business in the country. He was not the only one, other family members also invested in the move to Saudi Arabia. I was told by my great aunt that my grandfather wasn’t the only one taken advantage of, it was fairly common under the sponsorship system for Lebanese people to risk it all and come back home with empty pockets. For example, my grandfather’s sponsor ended up taking over the business and leaving him with nothing,

\textsuperscript{25} Council Foreign Relations: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system
even though he was the primary investor. In fact, Saudi sponsors were not required to invest their money in order to benefit from it, and many didn’t, including my grandfather’s sponsor. The Kafala system then did not have provisions for sponsors to be held accountable for their abuses, which continues to this day.

Lebanese people know how the Kafala has affected many Lebanese families when the oil surge was taking place. According to the Council of Foreign Relations, the Kafala used to prioritize Arabs seeking work, however, because of the oil boom of the 1970s preference shifted towards cheaper labor, particularly from South Asia and Africa. The monarchies in the Gulf saw a threat in Arab nationalist movements and sought to protect their hegemony by restricting entrance from other Arab countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. This change also came to be because of the myriad of conflicts in the Middle East, and the rivalry between Gulf countries and Iran, which is still palpable today, particularly in Lebanon, where different sectarian factions are supported monetarily and ideologically by Iran or Gulf countries (see Arsan, 2018). What this tells us is that the Kafala system used to apply to all foreigners regardless of job, education, nationality and class. If it is no longer an acceptable system through which Lebanese people seek work in other Arab countries, why do we believe it to be acceptable for migrant domestic workers seeking work in Lebanon? How can we complain of our mistreatment in western countries when we uphold systems at home that allow migrant domestic workers to be abused?

I know that this question is going to make so many Lebanese people at home and in the diaspora uncomfortable. I am also sure this project will be met with responses such as “not everything is about race,” or “racism does not exist in Lebanon, its only our dark
humor.” However, we need to unpack the developments mentioned above and connect it to our historical context. As I have shown in the previous chapters, race does matter in Lebanon, and it plays an important role in how we understand Others and hence how we treat them. I have, so far, complicated the ways in which we think and talk about gendered racial oppression in third world locations so we can better grasp the precarity that we force on migrant workers.

**Protests, Kafala, COVID-19 and A Country in Turmoil**

On October 17, 2019 protests in Lebanon started. Many attribute the initial spark to the fact that taxes were going to rise as a measure to get the country out of its financial misery. Lebanese people took to the streets all across the country demanding corrupt politicians be held accountable for their actions, calling for a rehaul of sectarian politics and the resignation of the then government. Even though some cabinet members resigned, the politicians that have been in control for decades continued to govern. By January 2020 a new government was appointed, however, it was clear that none of the protesters’ demands were being addressed.

With that realization, protests continued to take place around the country. Around March the world watched horrified as a global pandemic was taking place. COVID-19 further exacerbated the already unfathomable economic crisis. More people lost jobs, hospitals were overcrowded and, for a moment, we thought “this cannot get any worse.” As Lebanese, however, we unfortunately know all too well that our situation can always worsen so our hope did not last long. On August 4, 2020 an explosion razed half of the city of Beirut. Almost 3000 tons of ammonium nitrate burst in the second largest non-
nuclear explosion in history. The blast was so devastating it was felt in Cyprus all the way across the Mediterranean.

This tragedy added to the economic crisis, political corruption and a global pandemic, which in turn reignited the protests. On top of all of this, we continue to have the Kafala system in place. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, some of the protests that took to the streets of Beirut and other cities in Lebanon also included demands to abolish the Kafala system and amend the Labor Code. Some of these protests were organized and carried out by migrant workers who make the compelling case that we cannot successfully carry out a revolution in Lebanon without paying attention to systemic racism in the country.

COVID-19 placed Lebanese systemic racism in the spotlight after reports surfaced that more than 70 migrant workers had been left at the doors of their embassies by their employers before June 2020.26 This abandonment has dire consequences for women who are being forced to live on the streets. I want to point out that the legal status of a migrant worker in Lebanon is directly tied to the employer, hence, if the migrant worker is forced to leave the sponsor’s home they can be deemed an ‘illegal immigrant.’ Furthermore, this sudden and forced change in legal status means that security forces can arrest them and place them in detention until they are deported. Deportation proceedings can take days, months and even years.

Protest campaigns for the abolishment of the Kafala have mostly focused on raising awareness at the individual level and challenging labor laws, as mentioned above.

26 Anti-Racism Movement, migrant workers left on the streets: https://armlebanon.org/content/prosecute-employers-who-abandon-domestic-workers-now?fbclid=IwAR1RqwhvaWmxMf9I82-Pihq6xTGG07hUA3FTZLtyYYg11rCFx0Vwu-X7phg
However, the problem is much deeper, historical, structural and connected to a colonial past in connection to what Sharpe calls the wake (Sharpe, 2016). Not that the Kafala is part of the wake. Rather, what I want to highlight is that the enslavement of people in the Middle East and North Africa also has an aftermath that needs to be accounted for. It is for this reason that I conclude with a critical account of the connection between popular culture, world politics, history and Lebanese social movements. I believe we need to account for the connections in our differences. For scholarship this would mean engaging in critical conversations with other fields. As Massad (2008) and Choueiry (2013) demonstrate, even medical journals were being influenced by configurations of race, gender and sexuality meaning that even STEM sciences need to be carefully critiqued to account for the gaps in our understandings. Additionally, we cannot ignore that the study of geography is the study of man-made borders and ownership of natural resources among others, as a consequence of power imbalances and colonization.

In the previous chapters I have attempted to undertake historical and colonial configurations of race and gender in a more nuanced way to uncover what Flores (2014) refers to as the messiness, ambiguity and contestation of race. Racial configurations of anti-Blackness, traditionally understood as specific to the U.S. and other western spaces or settler colonies were being adopted by, and had contributions by Arabs from greater Syria and Mount Lebanon (see Choueiry, 2013; Gualtieri, 2009; Massad, 2008). Hence, colonial citizens in what we now know as Lebanon, were negotiating ways of understanding their own identity during colonial times against the backdrop of U.S. and European racial logics. These negotiations of identity were part of the development of culture, civilization, modernity and progress that were focal points of concern to the west.
As a result of colonization, Lebanese colonial citizens adapted these measures of civilization to either maintain and protect their identity, or, reform their culture, notions of civilization and modernity in order to resemble those of the west.

The staged performances of anti-Blackness in Lebanese popular culture offered in this dissertation serve as a small example of how we can better understand the attitude towards migrant domestic labor in its historical and local specificity which complicates our understandings of capitalism, race, gender, sexuality, heteropatriarchy and colonial influence. Inspired by Carby (2007) I insist on the importance of looking at how gendered racial configurations are constructed differently in different geopolitical locations. Following Carby (2007) and Vargas’ (2018) work, I hope this dissertation has shown how anti-Blackness also drives racist configurations in Lebanon, and that they can be traced to, at the very least, the Ottoman Empire.

The performative rhetorical approaches offered in this project demonstrate that there is a connection between the Kafala system and historical understandings of raced and gendered labor migration in Lebanon. Complicating these connections in the future will be necessary for us to build better transnational relationships of solidarity (Smith, 2013; Mohanty, 2003). In this way, I have used a performance rhetoric that is inspired by Calafell (2007; 2014), Conquergood (2013), Madison (2010; 2012), and Corey (1998), seeing performance as primarily a form of activist work and devoted to social justice. The stories I have shared throughout this work have served to keep me accountable and show where my concerns and questions come from.

In addition, I have used a Muslim Arab feminist approach because I cannot ignore the ways in which I was brought up, and the ways in which I was taught to distinguish
good from bad and everything in between. I can also not escape the fact that I grew up between two very different countries and cultures that have both heavily influenced the ways in which I understand the world around me. Hence, this project has been informed by a Muslim Arab feminist standpoint guided by a transnational desire to complicate women’s plights around the world.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing* Alexander (2006) complicates our understanding of power dynamics by pointing out that it is not only those with ‘official’ authority that maintain power relations but also those in ‘unofficial’ positions as well (see Myriam Fares’ video and the stolen hashtag). In other words, those in lesser power positions, such as colonial citizens (in this project artists and activists) are also responsible for reproducing and translating colonial structures in a way that further marginalizes some communities and not others. I believe this to be true at an individual and global level. Take for example how people from Mount Lebanon and Syria negotiated their classification in the U.S. within a color continuum where some were identified as darker and others lighter. Arab attempts to classify themselves as close to white as possible gave them the power to “guard the gates of, and for, those designated with official power” (Alexander, 2006; p. 146). In other words, discussions involving power imbalances where translated and reproduced in the Middle such that the ‘Americas’ and Europe (the official colonizers) were positioned as example to follow by Arabs learning about these discussions back home. Those Arabs that travelled, wrote historical accounts about their voyages and studied in western universities, served as ‘gate guards’ of western knowledge imposed in the Arab world. Take for example the movie scene from the previous chapter. If the student was serious about ‘French education’ they would not get
in trouble. In the same way, in order to prove our whiteness in western spaces, we adopted and adapted knowledge to resemble that of the west.

The arguments through which Arabs positioned themselves as (close to) white were also being used in popular publications in the Middle East (Gualtieri, 2009). Arab writers and thinkers already had established a social hierarchy classifications that included, education, mastery over language (Arabic), religion and so on. Those classifications, however, were later ‘modernized’ in order to follow western configurations as European and U.S. contact increased. Gualtieri (2009) points out how this was done by adopting ‘modern’ (read western) sciences such as anthropology and ethnology. The adaptation of these concepts of civilization and modernity, seen as main concerns to the west (Massad, 2008), by Arab writers and thinkers, resulted in the need for them to place themselves within western racialized concepts. What this means is that not only political and economic logics needed to resemble those in the west (brought to modernity) but it also required that each individual modify their conduct (how they dress, the music they listen to, the movies they watch), family life and interactions to resemble ‘modern’ societies (Kozma, 2013). It is important to add, that the modification of one’s conduct and relationships with others did not, and do not, happen in a vacuum. These are informed by historical relations of power and a colonial aftermath that continue to influence Lebanese people today.

Through my transnational, Muslim Arab feminist retelling of history, I have shown how desires to maintain the status quo in Lebanon by the ruling class and sectarian factions (what Fanon calls the colonial bourgeoisie) can be, at very least, traced back to officers in the Ottoman empire. Take for example how in the 1800s Christian Maronites
in mount Lebanon were seen as the ones who could secure control in the region for Ottomans (see Kisrawan revolts) and how the French also ended up seeing this group as their closest allies. Christian Maronites, therefore, were one of the groups in Lebanon that was privileged since the Ottoman period. At the same time, privileging one religious group (regardless of class differences) would help the French cement a sectarian politics in the region and maintain control (Makdisi, 2000; Mikdashi, 2019).

It is within the context of these pushes and pulls that configurations of gender, sexuality and race (among others) were being negotiated with the supervision of the colonizer. We need to further study our historical, religious and national specificity in order to understand how our understandings of, race and gender are connected to a larger scale of power and a shared history, such that Arab women (as third world women) also participate in upholding global anti-Black logics. In no way is my historical recount entirely exhaustive. In other words, I have tried my best to trace notions of race and gender in order to explain the situation of migrant workers in Lebanon today. However, I also believe that there is so much more to uncover. Below I offer the connection between the previous chapters and the Kafala system in Lebanon.

**The Hostage Taker**

For us Lebanese people to be participants of the capitalist world we live in, we need cheap labor which in turn would allow us to seek better futures. Ong (2006) for example, notes “concerns of the wealthier nation to secure middle-class entitlements depend on the availability of foreign others, creating an environment of class privilege and bias that tolerates slave-like conditions” (p. 198). We cannot classify Lebanon as a wealthy country; however, class differences are stark such that a middle, middle-upper
and upper classes exist. In other words, there is something to be said about the ways in which middle and upper class status in poor countries is secured by importing labor from other Global South locations. The economic and social status improvement and ability to work of Lebanese women necessitates of cheaper labor. In other words, Lebanese women benefit from the Othering of other third world women (like the ethnic minorities in Myriam’s video) for the purpose of positioning ourselves above them in a global social hierarchy.

The ways in which the Lebanese state classifies migrant domestic workers trickles down and is entrenched in our inner consciousness such that our popular culture reflects our world views and the connections between our past and our present. However, I do not believe this to be a one-way road, the state is also informed by regional and national cultural understandings of the world. In this way, and taking Ong (2006) as inspiration, I argue that sectarian politics, the family, the personal and popular culture interact with the state in a moving continuum that relies on exclusion and inclusion (p. 197). The Kafala system (or sponsorship system) in Lebanon is built upon a variety of administrative regulations, legal stipulations and cultural enactments. Kafala in Arabic translates to ‘take care of,’ ‘look after’ or ‘to guarantee.’ In Lebanon, it is a legal, widespread and accepted system that operates through the surveillance and control of the arrival and stay of migrant domestic workers and that ties their resident and work permits to a single sponsor, usually the head of the household (see Beydoun, 2006; Jureidini, 2009; Kaedbey, 2014; Pande, 2013).

Migrant domestic workers are not accounted for in the Lebanese labor law (they are therefore not protected under minimum wage laws either), they are usually not
allowed to associate with other migrant women, and, most of the time, they are not afforded freedom of movement within, and outside of Lebanese borders. This is common knowledge for us. Lebanese people have heard and read reports on cases upon cases where the migrant domestic worker would be locked at their employer’s home in order to have their every move controlled. Many believe that migrant domestic workers easily ‘get in trouble’ and when they do, it is the sponsor that has to deal with the consequences. However, I must admit I have never heard of sponsors or employers being held accountable for anything related to migrant domestic work. I remember a family member (who knows that I research the condition of migrant domestic labor in Lebanon) looking at me while watching the news and saying: ‘See, if the government didn’t place the burden of controlling migrant domestic work onto its citizens, you wouldn’t hear stories of women being locked up in our homes.’

The way in which the sponsor system is arranged in Lebanon opens up possibilities of exploitation (see Beydoun, 2006; Jureidini, 2009). Migrant domestic workers are required, by law, to have a sponsor that oversees their legal status in the country. Most of the time, if not always, their sponsors are also their employers (there are cases, where migrant domestic workers have been hired by enterprises such as hospitals). In any case, however, the sponsor is presumed to be in charge of all financial, medical and legal authority for migrant domestic workers as long as they are residing in Lebanon. This financial responsibility doesn’t necessarily mean making sure women are being paid full wages on time, but it is mostly understood as the responsibility a sponsor holds in providing housing, food, clothing and healthcare. Many Lebanese, including myself, have heard countless accounts (whether from the news, family, friends or gossip) where
employers have denied monthly or weekly salaries. It is also well known, popularly, that
governmental agencies advice sponsors to keep, locked away, migrant domestic worker’s
passports. Sponsors are also responsible for keeping the worker’s permits (of residence
and work) up to date, contacting immigration authorities if they ‘run away,’ and making
sure that the migrant domestic worker returns to her country of origin once her contract
has ended or if the sponsor does not want to employ them anymore.

As demonstrated in this brief description of the Kafala system in Lebanon,
sponsors of migrant domestic workers in the country are able to wield unimaginable
control over the women that work for them. Hence, migrant domestic workers are in a
precarious position open to exploitation and abuse by state agencies (such as police,
immigration and labor agencies) on a structural level, and by their ‘sponsors’ at an
interpersonal level on a daily basis. Taking into account that current protests against the
Lebanese government have as one of their issues of concern, migrant domestic labor in
the country, there is an urgent need to develop different approaches to understand the
Kafala system as rooted in historical specificity and informed by Muslim Arab
transnational feminisms in a way that complicates our understandings of colonization,
race, gender, sexuality, capitalism and nationalism in Lebanon.

**History, Popular Culture, Politics and Lebanese Social Movements**

Popular culture, which refers to the stories told through the mass media (movies,
music, photography), plays an important role in social life. Popular culture not only
reflects and shapes our realities, but also reflects the imagery we conjure of Others. As
Arabs, we know this all too well. We have seen how depictions of who we are, what our
cultures are like, and what our religion practices are like, dictate public and private law in
western spaces. For example, Emmanuel Macron has recently given importance to a conspiracy theory arguing that left-wing academics and Islamists are taking hold of French government and has asked Universities to hold those who ‘spread this ideology’ accountable for their actions27.

There is vast scholarship on how popular culture shapes the ways in which we perceive the world and how, in turn, this affects world politics. I also believe that popular culture can be seen as a constellation of a set of representations through which society constructs identity configurations such as race, gender, citizenship, belonging and sexuality. This set of representations exposes how meaning is constructed and the power imbalances that produce it. In writing this dissertation, I have come to understand popular culture as a sort of time machine that allows us to move between past, present and future. In other words, through popular culture we can see how day to day experiences are connected historically.

My interest in how race is represented in Lebanese popular culture is what drove the historical texts that I have examined. It is what has allowed me to make connections that help me better understand what we need in terms of political change in our country. The popular culture artifacts offered in this project, show how “Blackness […] has long been constructed and understood through types of performance, masquerade, and spectacle” (Quinn, 2000, p. 135). One of the consequences can be seen in how Black Arabs continue to be understood as always foreign even though we know that Black


174
people have been an integral part of the Middle East for centuries (see for example Arsan, 2014; Choueiry, 2013; Massad, 2008; and Reyes, 2019).

According to Downing et al. (2020), Arabs have a tendency to understand racism as an exclusively western problem, particularly the U.S. As a result, our scholarship has mainly focused on the ways that our clothing, culture and language is misrepresented in western spaces and how this has affected us, all the while putting aside our complicity in how we represent Black people and how this, in turn, has a dire effect on the lives of Black people in Lebanon and Lebanese foreign policy towards African countries. This in turn, and in connection with the ways in which the 1970 Iranian hostage crisis and its representation in western popular culture, forced Black Muslims out of conversations on Islamophobia (Mugabo, 2016; Chan-Malik, 2018). The vilification of Islam as exclusively a Middle Eastern practice came from western imperialistic and militaristic projects with entrenched interests in oil rich territories. At the same time, Arabs that have come to the defense of Islam and their identity as vicious terrorists, inevitably cemented the notion that Islam, as a threat to western civilization, comes from the Middle East.

As a consequence, we have further pushed Black Muslim people from the conversation. Take as an example Mugabo’s (2016) account of Canadian charter debates and how Islamophobia was positioned as affecting Arabs first and foremost (see previous chapters). The erasure of the existence of Blackness in our consciousness as forming part of a global shared history prevents us from decolonizing our scholarship and our worldview. We cannot rid ourselves of sectarian politics and the economic collapse (and our desire to participate in global economics) without acknowledging that the capitalist world we live in relies on anti-Blackness to function (Hartman, 1997; Sexton, 206;
Sharpe; 2016; Wilderson, 2010). When we consider Myriam’s video, Tania Saleh’s post, and the stolen hashtag, we can see how anti-Blackness works to maintain a capitalist structure that benefits Arabs, consciously or unconsciously, whether it be in terms of popularity (Tania Saleh), monetary gain (Myriam Fares), or visibility. In other words, race can be seen as a tool or “a technique that one uses, even as one is used by it – a carefully crafted, historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity” (Chun, 2009, p. 7). It would have been hard to reach this conclusion if I had followed a traditional rhetorical analysis were text is prioritized (Conquergood, 2013).

Following a performance ethic has allowed me to expand my rhetorical analysis to include the “noise” that surrounds the performer, audience and performance itself. Popular culture does not exist in a vacuum and it is not a ‘modern’ product. As I have previously shown, entertainment, just like other forms of knowledge and storytelling, travelled, changed, and were influenced by conjuncture in which it was produced. According to (Dasgupta, 2005) operations of power filter down to our own bodies (physical and mental selves) which is central in order to understand the ways in which power and labor relations work that are so imbedded in capitalism. Challenging blackface in Arab media and popular culture can be one of the ways in which we start the introspection of our complicity.

Popular culture is a compelling textual and audiovisual format of disseminating information and it has the capability of making visible, and of documenting what is not readily available to the human eye at first glance in order to unmask unknown conditions of our world. It can perform as a mirror that reflects, reveals, and sometimes conceals the
socio-political connections and power imbalances ingrained in the act of its production and reproduction. The previous chapters attempt to exemplify the call for “more complex approaches to [...] cultural nuances” (Calafell, 2014). I have shown how paying attention to Lebanese popular culture reveals the connections between history, capitalism, popular culture, race, racism, and sexism that are specific to the particularity of a location and yet are connected to a larger global shared history of colonization, violence and power relations. According to Kozma (2013), middle class and intellectual Middle Eastern literary work point to the ways in which a competing bargaining of information was being produced between the Middle East and Anglo-American powers, whereby “Arab” writers saw themselves as having to justify their ‘modernity’. I have also shown how this push towards ‘modernity’ (read western values) is still prevalent today by politicians, as mentioned above, and the general population. This push towards ‘westernness’ is not only evident in scholarship but also in the arts and popular culture.

Take for example how minstrel shows travelled back and forth from colonies to colonizers’ spaces. During the period of the Ottoman fall and European seize of control, army generals, scholars, and artists tended to focus on how to make their knowledge, or materials resemble that of western scholars, army generals and artists (Choueiry, 2013; Massad, 2008, Thompson, 2000). The desire to leave Arab ‘backwardness’ behind and demonstrate how ‘modern’ (read western) we could become is still palpable today. The calls for secularism and political change are necessary, and at the same time we, as Lebanese, continue to see western nations as an example to follow.

According to Elsaket (2017), film producers in Egypt have worked relentlessly to prove that Egyptians are not as Europeans imagine them to be: backward and uncivilized.
She also demonstrates how the film makers’ strategy to do so was to convince Europeans of how different they are from people in central Africa. In the same way, Gualtieri (2009) shows us how in fighting for the recognition of belonging to whiteness, Arabs from Greater Syria (including Mount Lebanon) argued that they were different from Black people as opposed to how similar they were to white Anglo-Europeans in court. What I want to point out at this moment is that there are strong connections between Othering strategies in popular culture (Egyptian jungle themed movies) and Othering strategies in including or excluding from national laws. Both these examples show how Arabs worked relentlessly to separate themselves from Black African people. Elsakat (2017) further explains that within this strategy “we can glimpse the connection between race, cinema, and claims to modernity”, and she adds “Central Africa was the antithesis of the modern […] to be modern on screen entailed a visual disassociation of Egyptians from Africans” (p.10).

It is not hard to see, then, that Arab understandings of race were influenced by European racial classification starting from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, during European occupation of the Middle Eastern region, and to this day. Skin color gained importance and became one of the main identifiers that positioned different people within a social hierarchy in the Arab world. Myriam Fares’ video is one example of how Arab media and popular culture continues to place Black people as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘backward.’ The mismatch and misrepresentation of a conglomerate of African culture demonstrates our desire to keep people from Africa and African descent as outsiders and ‘traditional.’ I believe this is why we don’t recognize Arab signifiers in the video other than the language used, because to bring Arab perceived ‘modernity’ to a video
supposedly depicting African nations could not possibly match with the jungle theme (sarcasm mine).

Assumptions on social hierarchy that were developing during pre-colonial and colonial periods also included notions of gender and sexuality as well as citizenship and belonging. Once European control took over Ottoman territories, some identities were further privileged over others. For example, French occupation agents made sure they could afford certain privileges to those in intermediary positions within Arab society that benefited from tribal, religious and class privilege, creating a precarious arrangement that supported paternalistic social hierarchies. This is not to say that gendered and racial hierarchies in Lebanon are caused by colonization. But what this shows is that colonized citizens, especially those already in positions of power, were able to negotiate their status within society to maintain their privilege. At the same time, the negotiation of status entailed positioning the Other in subordinate positions or as inferior.

This continues to happen today, albeit differently. I want to go back to Myriam Fares’ video. Not only is the conglomerate of representational absurdity offensive, but when paying closer attention, we realize that the imagery of Africa and its nations for Arabs continues to be stuck in time, continues to be ‘backward’ and ‘traditional’ in colonial western understandings. The cultures she appropriates all belong to ethnic minorities in their own locations. She did not focus on the big city skylines of African nations nor the rich art and artists. Rather the video consistently uses the jungle theme. According to Rhee (2013) race always finds a way of “re/generating different kinds of categories and meanings, yet also continuously drawing upon old categories and meanings, to effect and rationalize social arrangements of power and exploitation,
violence and expropriation” (p. 561). The jungle theme is one of such social arrangements that relies on historical tropes all the while re-inventing itself.

Ifdal Elsaket (2017), describes the ‘jungle theme’ as a racially charged genre that served to strengthen the relationship that Hollywood has with coloniality and the production of empire. Elsaket (2017) also points out that the ways in which “colonized or occupied people, struggling for independence and fighting against colonial stereotyping, reacted to and adapted this genre” (p. 9) needs to be addressed. She demonstrates that paying attention to how colonial citizens represent the Other disrupts the “binary of colonized and colonizer in a way that exposes the political realities of […] empire building in Africa, especially in relation to Sudan” (p. 10). Even though with different words, Arsan (2018) exposes the Lebanese economic empire building in African nations because of how many Lebanese people made their fortune by conducting business oversees and building mansions back home. Hence, I follow Elsakat (2017) and Patel (2016) and argue that we need to pay closer attention to how Global South populations represent the Other.

An important note is that representing the Other is not only in the audiovisual realm. As I mentioned above, representation also happened during court proceedings in the early 1900s. It is also important to note that these representations do not exist in western spaces, detached from past, present and future. Pierre (2013) points out the comments made by Ali al – Essawi after resigning from his position as Libyan Ambassador in India. His comments reveal the contortions that Arabs engage in to convince the world of how different we are to Black people. They also reveal the ways in
which African nationalities and languages are used to denote inferiority or not. Her
analysis needs to be quoted in full:

Ali al-Essawi, who had resigned as Libyan ambassador to India, seemed to have
created the sensation when he said the following on Al Jazeera: [The mercenaries] are
from Africa, and speak French and other languages . . . People say they are black
Africans and they don’t speak Arabic. They are doing terrible things, going to houses
and killing women and children. Western mainstream media outlets quickly seized on
the image of “African Mercenaries.” On seeing these accounts of “African
mercenaries,” I was befuddled. In response, I repeatedly tweeted, “Libya is in
Africa.” But the charge against Gaddafi’s “Africans” and the alleged savage acts by
“African mercenaries,” including raping women and murdering (non-African?)
Libyans, just grew louder. By late spring Human Rights Watch published a report
disputing the existence of “African mercenaries,” arguing that the alleged
mercenaries “were all black Libyans of African descent” and were “from the south of
the country and not African mercenaries as claimed in the international media.” But
the damage had already been done—hundreds, if not thousands, of black Libyans
were lynched and black towns such as Tawurgha were destroyed.
(Pierre, 2013, p. 547)

In the above recount of events Pierre (2013) shows how Black Libyans are not
considered to be part of Libya and are second class citizens. In the same way, I can’t help
but think of the many Afro-Lebanese people that participated in *Mixed Feelings* and the
ways in which they are erased from Lebanese political and social life. It stems from the
same place. Our histories are connected and intertwined; we cannot see anti-Blackness as
the solely responsibility, nor the solely creation of the west. We are complicit as well and
we need a reckoning in our Muslim Arab feminist practices so that we do not continue to
erase Black people from conversations around Islamophobia (Mugabo, 2016; Chaudhry
2013), or political and social life in third world locations (Elsaket, 2017; Pierre, 2013;
Patel, 2016). The way in which domestic labor is defined and understood in capitalist
societies (and Lebanon) positions women form other Asian regions and African countries
as part of an “underclass” which is “constitutively dependent on race as an organizing
principle” (Mohanty et al., 1991, p.23). This inferiorization is marked by colonially, gender, class and specifically by ethnicity and race (Jones, 2008).

Race and ethnicity therefore act as regulators of immigration laws (Mohanty et al., 1991) where non-Lebanese and non-white women are considered as inferior and non-deserving of citizenship and the “rights” that accompany naturalization laws. In addition, this inferiorization has historically served economic agendas that prioritize the search for cheap feminized labor (domestic and care giving work). Jones (2008) argues that the way in which domestic migrant labor is understood exposes “implicit racialized and gendered codes […] that serve to separate out a nation’s outsiders” (p. 762) making it difficult, or arguably impossible for domestic migrant workers to seek citizenship in countries such as Lebanon and therefore considerably reducing, or completely erasing the possibility of protecting themselves through Lebanese laws or laws from their countries of origin.

Within the Lebanese context, and following Ghabra’s (2018) footsteps, it is important to look at the ways in which people of color (i.e. Lebanese Arabs) and specifically women of color, choose imperial forms of knowledge production, and identity formation in order to set themselves apart from Others in the Global South. Even though Lebanese citizens still remember colonized days where speaking Arabic was considered “dirty,” (recall the West Beirut Movie scene offered in the previous chapter) now they are able to mimic and perform the superiority of their colonizers and inflict dominance over another group of people, women of color as well.
Conclusion

*History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.*

(Michel-Rolph Trouillot)

I want to end with a call to ‘un-silence’ the past (Trouillot, 1995). Engaging in this project has taught me that understanding history in past terms or as finished events prevents us from seeing the bigger picture. While writing this chapter, I came to understand that the Ottoman classification of white Arab was not in wanting to be Caucasian but rather to differentiate oneself from Black people and Blackness. What this means is that whiteness came to be after anti-Blackness was a common practice in Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. Recall, for example, that a Black Ottoman officer was a rare and surprising occurrence. However, it is important to note that anti-Blackness did not operate in the same way that it did after European colonization (think of Omar Ibn Said’s story). According to (Trouillot, 1995) “Colonization provided the most potent impetus for the transformation of European ethnocentrism into scientific racism” (p. 90). Consequently, identity markers such as religion, education and class, which factored in the Ottoman civilizational hierarchy lost importance. Take as an example the anthology of essays edited by Nikki Khanna. In the book *Whiter: Asian American Women on Skin Color and Colorism* (2020) understandings of skin color in different Asian countries (China, Japan, Cambodia, Philippines and Bangladesh among others) are the focus in order to show how preference for lighter skin precedes European colonization. Khanna (2020) contends that this does not mean that different Asian communities wanted to come
close to Caucasians, rather, darkness of skin was devalued (denoting mainly field workers and the poorer class) such that light skin became valued.

In order to deconstruct oppressive structures globally, we must be willing to dig deeper and venture into the nuances that make us who we are in relation to others. We must be willing to look at how we (as globally understood women of color) are capable of perpetuating Anglo-Saxon structures of privilege that exert power and dominance over other women of color. In order for us to create meaningful connections of solidarity within our activism, we must search within ourselves and honestly explore how we keep each other at bay. According to Ghabra (2018), when “marginalized identities begin to embody privileged identities, they do so through concept of the self in relation to the Other” (6).

Women’s status in the Arab and/or Muslim world has been of main focus in Western feminist discourses. As outlined above, there are many stereotypical assumptions on the ways in which Arab and/or Muslim women experience and live within society, state, and family. On the other hand, and as demonstrated by Ghabra’s (2018) work, Arab and/or Muslim women, as part of the third world, sometimes consider Western feminist understandings of secularism and neoliberalism as an example to follow (see Badran, 2013; Barlas, 2002; Seedat, 2013). Hence, in this project I have avoided the defense of my Arabness and Muslimness and instead I have focused on complicating power struggles and issues of inequality regarding migrant domestic work within the Lebanese context.

Lebanon has never been safe for migrant domestic workers, and even though their situation was dire before with the economic collapse and the spread of COVID-19, the
explosion has made everything exponentially worse. Migrant workers have also lost homes and jobs, many have been abandoned on the streets, and others have been evicted because of the inability to pay rent. After the explosion and the ensuing protests, the government approved a military state of emergency. According to Azhari (2020) the state of military emergency gives the Lebanese military and riot police full power and control over the streets. This means that they are able to curb free speech, impede assembly and freedom of press. They are also allowed to enter anyone’s home perceived to be a threat. Hence the situation that migrant workers have been forced into, also opens up the possibility of them being arrested and detained. I know of countless Lebanese nationals that have not survived Lebanese prisons, so it is not far-fetched to say that migrant workers have a much slimmer chance of survival.

Many migrant domestic workers in Lebanon had been asking their embassies to repatriate them once COVID-19 hit. Some activist organizations such as This is Lebanon and Anti-Racism Movement have been able to collect some funds and send a number of workers home. However, many of them are still being held hostage in an increasingly unstable country where their livelihood is not a priority and where they are continuously dehumanized in the media, and in private and public spheres. For migrant workers, returning home may not even be an option at this point in time. The PCR tests required by all international travel, added to the lack of mobility (since migrant domestic workers cannot get a driver’s license and drive, which is the main, and possibly only form of transportation in our country; (see Arsan 2018) which makes reaching testing centers almost impossible. Additionally, many of the migrant workers being abandoned on the streets are left without their belongings. This means that even if they are able to get a
PCR test, they still need to go through airport security, and without their passports they could automatically be detained even if they have documentation from their embassy stating that they can travel home legally.

What I want to point out is something as simple as leaving the country becomes daunting task for migrant domestic workers because of our colonial history and the Kafala system itself. Even if this system is abolished, which, in all honesty does not seem to even be a priority for the current government, migrant domestic workers would still be held hostage in a country where they barely get any wages (because of the economic collapse and banking restrictions) and where they are continuously considered outside of political discourse and citizenry. If we, as Lebanese are living through yet another deadly crisis, think of what migrant workers are having to deal with.
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188


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