Transnational Dialogues and Community Making in the Syrian Digital Space
by
Christina Saoud

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways diasporic and transnational Arabs, and particularly Syrians, utilize and engage in the virtual space to voice their experiences and engage in transnational dialogues, while overall taking part in the (re)construction of their homelands. This brings forth the discussion of borders and how they are practiced in relation to identity, sociocultural performances, and kinship relations. Borders are not limited to their physical territories but are continually performed and embodied, one the one hand through the memories, kinships, and networks of diasporas and refugees, and on the other through their hardships of being limited to their nationalities. My data will show that diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs engage in dialogues pertaining to their racial, national, and historical identities, in addition to showing the creative expressions of Syrian artists in relation to their memories and displacement. Altogether, this thesis presents the ways diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs use the digital space to express their identities and experiences and in effect shape their homelands.

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Introduction

Syrians have endured plenty within the past decade. In 2022, the most displaced individuals worldwide were Syrian nationals, numbering 6.8 million (UNHCR 2022). The ongoing Syrian civil war that began in 2011 continues to be a harsh and relentless force that is affecting both its citizens and nations worldwide, the latter due to the large numbers of those being displaced and seeking refuge in foreign spaces. In addition to the twelve-year civil war, as of writing this paper Syria recently suffered a devastating earthquake on February the sixth of this year. Two earthquakes of 7.7 and 7.5 magnitudes struck southeastern Turkey that also devastated northern and northwestern Syria, claiming the lives of over 50,000 people, of whom over 6000 are in Syria (Al Jazeera 2023) and affecting the lives of 20 million people, of whom 5.3 million are within Syria (UNHCR 2023).

As opposed to Western scholarship's past of Orientalist trends when exploring Middle Eastern subjects (Said 1978), the Middle East in Western literature today is not viewed as a homogenous entity. Instead, the region and its peoples are increasingly being explored in their unique local, regional, gendered, religious, and (trans)national contexts (Abowd 2007; Pandya 2012; Dağtaş 2018; Abu-Lughod 1986; Ghannam 2013). On the other hand, Arabs in Western public discourse continue to be viewed as a homogenous entity that is violent, oppressive, sexist, and Muslim in nature (Shaheen 2001; Abu-Lughod 2002). Refugees, which are majorly Arab (UNHCR 2022), were more increasingly showcased in the Western public spotlight following the Arab spring uproars of 2011 that created a wave of refugees trying to reach European lands in search for safety. Within this context, they became even more feared, seen this time as an invasion to Western lands.

In this thesis, I am focusing on the Arab diasporic and transnational digital space, with a particular focus on Syrians. Engaging with this aim, my thesis explores the ways Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs use the digital space to voice their experiences and engage in transnational dialogues, while overall taking part in the (re)construction of their homelands. In doing so, we get a glimpse into how borders are practiced, performed, and conceptualized in everyday life (Barth 2000; Yuval-Davis and Wemyss and Cassidy 2019; Iossifova 2020). The essence of borders lies in the categorization of identities and/or entities, and "any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies" (Douglas 1996, 40). The anomalies that contradict or 'infect' the neatness and rigidity of national identity are challenged more heavily in their exploration of Self-identity and become marginalized communities. All nations create national histories to legitimize their naturalness, existence, and overall sovereignty. National histories emphasize some communities over others, and overall shape the hierarchy of identities. Some communities' histories and place within the land become excluded entirely from the national zeitgeist (Hobsbawm 1987, 150), even if they existed before the national borders. Studying national tensions and dialogues can include looking at a community within a physically defined space, or, such as in the case of this thesis, within a transnational space. A transnational subject includes "a person who creates familial, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties across national borders" (Gualtieri 2009, 17) and thus a transnational approach requires looking at the everyday lives of (im)migrants. A transnational space includes that which is not physically and geographically defined, mirroring the concept of national belonging no longer only meaning residence in the territorial bounds of the nation-state (Yu 2004, 533). A border is performed and embodied, especially in anomalous subjects, affecting their behaviors, beliefs, relationships, perceptions, and everyday living. By looking at how diasporic and transnational Syrians and

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non-Syrian Arabs use the digital space to voice their experiences and engage in transnational dialogues, we see how the perception of their Selves (as individuals and community) influences the concept of their homelands.

A *homeland* has traditionally been viewed as "bounded by a territory and historicity away from its emigrants, who reside "over there" in other nations." (Gualtieri 2009, 15). However, (im)migration and the concept of a nation is intertwined (15), and the study of borders in relation to the concept of (im)migration is a non-negotiable link. "The actual movement of human bodies from one point to another," Henry Yu writes, "has no inherent meaning, but is given meaning through the classifications of those movements." (Yu 2004, 532). Diasporic and (im)migratory movements both shape and are influenced by the relationship between nation states. In the case of Arab nationalisms, migration, mobility, and exile have been important and influential themes (Gualtieri 2009, 15). The large diasporic dispersals of Syrians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ('Syrians' in this case including those from modern day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine due to the contested geography at the time) greatly influenced the birth of Arab nationalisms, emphasizing the notion of a nation as "culture, language, shared experience, and political rights, and not on a particular piece of the map" (16). It is important to note here that having particular ideas of what a nation constitutes does not necessarily make one a nationalist. There are the political nationalists, which is a more extreme vision where the interests of the nation can supersede the needs of the people within that nation, causing a more authoritarian governmental approach. This thesis does not take or argue for a certain political or nationalist vision. Politics is necessary to mention in order to map out the cultural foundations of the matter, but I do not promote a certain political, religious, or nationalist approach, and I approach the artists mentioned here in the same manner. My central aim is simply presenting the

discourses of Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs in the digital space in relation to the construction of the *homeland*.

Thus, from my main question on how Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs utilize the digital space to engage in transnational dialogues and (re)construct their homeland identities, I draw on the theoretical frameworks of border performances (Malkki 1992; Simmel 1995) and the methodological frameworks of virtual anthropology (Boellstorff 2008), the art of anthropology (Lundy 2013), and autoethnography (Khosravi 2010). The virtual space needs ethnographic attention, for it does not merely exist as a byproduct of the physical space, but is a place in its own right and with its own culture that needs ethnographic attention (Boellstorff 2008, 61). Media anthropology can be described as any approach that includes media, and this simple vagueness is due to the fact that 'media' includes a vast array of explorations and intersections with other disciplines. In the case of media anthropology's intersection with migration, community identity building, and transnationalism, this too comes with its own literature such as Abu-Lughod's research on Egyptian cinema and television in constructing the Egyptian nation (2005), Ginsburg's research of indigenous identity making through film and video (1991) and Hajj's research on Palestinian identity making through transnational ties and kinships (2021). From this, we see that 'media' can mean television, film, social media, media communications such as cell phone use, and so on. In the case of my thesis, I use the terms digital/virtual to refer to internet and social media use by diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs, particularly how they use it to build constructions of their *homeland*. Indeed, the use of the internet is vital amongst diasporas, as it is the fastest and most efficient way to maintain communal ties to their homelands. Therefore, the maintenance of cultural and migratory practices and memories amongst the diaspora influences the way they approach their digital spaces, and we see that "as

media becomes embedded within the everyday experience of distanced family relationships, the meanings it is given are shaped by wider discourses about migration." (Alinejad and Candidatu 2023, 315).

My data begins with a more general view of Arabhood, and ends with the actual experience of Syrianhood: *Firstly*, I show actual dialogues being discussed between creators and their followers (and followers with each other), in addition to how such conversations are taking part in the (re)shaping of cultural and national identities. The beginning of my data centers on dialogues pertaining to Western racial epistemological frameworks, seeing as the whole Arab diaspora (who move to Western nations) confronts with this directly. I show how Arabs in general engage with their racial identity in the West, and then show how Syrians particularly do so. *Secondly*, I show how Syrians contest and negotiate their Levantine identities through dialogues and conversations, overall presenting the tensions between Arab Levantinehood and their nation-states. And *thirdly*, I move into more artistic expressions, here more focused on Syrians' construction of their homeland through voicing their experiences as Syrians and preserving their communal and national memories. Anthropological explorations of art include situating and analyzing it in its sociopolitical context so that the culture is more accurately mapped (Svasek, 2007; Morphy 1994, 655; Haraway 1988). In the case of mass media art (such as poetry and music), I analyze them only in the context of how they are being used in the digital space, while giving a backstory to their cultural and national relevance. However, I also add original artistic works of some artists, particularly graphic art which has become very prominent within the Arab diaspora, even being labeled as a "Arab digital revolution" (Khadr 2020). Through these works, I present the themes of (individual, communal, and national) Self representation. We see multiple artworks engaging in Syrian cultural nostalgia (archaeology,

food/drink, television, and other aspects of culture), in addition to expressing the current pain of being a Syrian passport holder. With the former, I show how a nation unites on memories and traditions, and with the latter I show how the Syrian identity is in a state of paradox, i.e., on the one hand there are elements of missing Syria and yearning to return (diaspora), and on the other there are elements of desperately trying to leave Syria (locals). Though my main focus is on the diaspora, the Syrian passport affects all Syrian passport holders within and outside the nation, revealing how a nationality unites the experiences of its holders on the basis of its global status.

Literature Review
a.The Perception of Arabs and Refugees in Literature and the Public

An anthropology of borders sheds light on the human cognitive and physical act of separating and Othering, in addition to the ways humans reflect on their own individual and collective Selfhood. The foundation of Othering lies firstly in the recognition of the Self, and the Self is described against the grains of who or what the Other is. It is through the description, documentation, analysis, and classification of the Other that the Self is defined, classified, and constructed. When the Self feels threatened, it imposes certain actions upon the Other in order to reaffirm its identity. Yuval-Davis notes how "border constructions are intimately linked to specific political projects of belonging" (Yuval-Davis and Wemyss and Cassidy 2019, 7) and belonging "becomes articulated, formally structured, and politicized only when it is perceived to be under threat in some way" (7).

The East versus West dichotomy has been a prevalent issue amongst Western academia and sociopolitics since the age of European colonization, and it has been gaining significant track since the Cold War and the events of 9/11. Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) presented a general worldview of how the West views 'Other' cultures, and despite the critiques it received concerning its disregard of diverse cultural interactions, Huntington's thesis continues to represent a somewhat accurate, albeit shallow, image of how the Western public views and fears 'Other' cultures. Despite the rise of diverse global academics who have been contributing countless literature exploring the political and international tensions that have given rise to the wars and unrests in the Middle East, the general Western public and media continues to view the Islamic world as an obstruction to modernity and thus a threat to the global world and its future. Instead of examining the sociopolitical and socioeconomic reasons for any issues pertaining the Middle East, Western media and news programs rely on shallow, empty, and flashy

conversations about the savagery of Arab and Islamic cultures; "Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres --- recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). When a terroristic tragedy occurs in the West in the hands of a Muslim or Arab, unrelated conversations enter the public sphere, such as women and LGBTQ rights in Islam. However, it is important to note that such conversations are not entirely unwarranted, especially as more Arab and Muslim (im)migrants enter the Western world. Indeed, cultural and ethnoreligious tensions do occur, such as antisemitic attacks perpetuated by Arabs and/or Muslims, or the Orlando nightclub shooting that targeted LGBTQ individuals. The question I am raising here is not whether we should have some conversations over another, but rather why, in any discussion in the Western public sphere pertaining the Middle East, certain cultural conversations take more hold than sociopolitical and economic ones. It is more likely for an individual to dictate sexist issues in the Middle East such as the enforcement of the veil and female genital mutilation, for example, as opposed to the post-World War II sociopolitical tensions that birthed Israel and in turn birthed numerous sociocultural tensions in the Middle East that are still at play today. Even though there are countless academics, and indeed public intellectuals such as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, who urge the public to participate in wider discourses pertaining the East/West dichotomy, nonetheless the dichotomy is maintained in the public atmosphere and especially strengthened by Western media and news programs. Edward Said's work significantly mapped out the Western literary history that constructed that constructed the Arab stereotypes we know today (1978), and while anthropology today acknowledges this history and attempts to

'deconstruct' its legacy, Western media continues to generate harmful stereotypes. Negative Arab stereotypes in the Western public are not a recent phenomenon, and in fact were birthed from the Orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Shaheen 2001, 13). The idea of the 'Orient' was created by European artists and intellectuals who highlighted the 'otherness' of Arabs, essentially mapping their own European selfhood of modernity and democracy (Said 1978). As Said's work continues to impact academia and scholarship, in addition to the rising anthropological trends of reflexivity (Marcus 2015) and the presence of more Arab scholars in the Western space, literature on Arabs is increasingly exploring in depth the political, national, historical, and religious innerwebs and diversities of Arab peoples. However, the general Western public and media continues to view the Islamic world in a narrow lens.

Arab and Muslim populations exist as an anomaly within the Western epistemological racial framework. Not entirely fitting between perfectly racialized categories of 'White' or 'Black,' the sociopolitical positionality of Arabs and Muslims is constantly under construction, especially if such populations reside as (im)migrants or refugees in the 'West.' An anomaly, as described by Mary Douglas, is "an element which does not fit a given set or series" (Douglas 1966, 38) and thus causes feelings of anxiety and fear due its being out of place. Even though we live in a globalized and fluid world where populations are intermixing (socially, political, biologically, etc.) on a scale never matched before, societies continue to be constructed within a certain set of ordered frameworks and give rise to fixed yet malleable worldviews. In particular, modern Orientalist structures that have been shaped by European discourse have been influenced by the "impulse to classify nature and man into types" (Said 1978, 119). Anomalies, or those that do not fit in perfectly in a category, are out of place and are thus polluting to the social order. Douglas writes that 'holiness' is a matter of completeness and requires that "individuals shall

conform to the class to which they belong" (Douglas 1966, 54). Holiness is to keep the categories of creation distinct, and "involves correct definition, discrimination and order" (54). Arab and Muslim populations are neither Black nor White, and neither "wholly primitive" nor "wholly civilized." This is particularly complicated when confronting diverse groups within Arab populations, i.e., North African Arabs, Mediterranean Arabs, and Persian Gulf Arabs. Arab nationals that reside in the Western world must continually navigate and reshape their Arab identity because of their existence as an anomaly.

As the refugee crisis grappled the world's attention in 2015, with most of them being Syrian (UNHCR 2022), Arab refugees were more extensively characterized and hierarchized. The "good" refugees were those who were victims of their own culture and patiently waited in refugee camps to be rescued by Western saviors, while the "bad" refugees who were more active in their survival and practiced agency through unconventional and illegal journeying such as crossing the Mediterranean (Wilson and Mavelli 2017, 7) were described with words such as 'invasions' or 'swarms'. Furthermore, the "good" Muslims, just like the "good" refugees, were likewise portrayed as helpless to the "chains of an oppressive culture" (6), while the "bad" Muslims were the ultimate enemies that not only threatened the Middle East but also the global world. The intersection of these categories created a hierarchy of refugees: non-Muslim refugees are the ultimate victims and need Western aid, followed by the helpless and agency-less Muslim refugees, and lastly the "bad" refugees who take matters into their own hands (8). The savior complex towards the Middle East was not a new concept; post 9/11 George Bush spoke of American liberty being a universal concept, and aimed to spread American values in the Middle East (Sheehi 2011, 175), and Barack Obama believed in sharing the American progress with the Middle East by corporately partnering with Middle Eastern businesses to 'help' them evolve

(182). While Arabs in general are viewed with fear and discontent, Arab refugees are further viewed with burden and distrust.

b. Diaspora and Transnationalism – What is a homeland?

This section will answer questions such as: What is a diaspora and how does it relate to the concept of a homeland? How do cultural practices and beliefs reinforce constructions of a homeland and nation? What does it mean to have a homeland, and who exercises its legitimacy?

A diaspora includes the spread of a population from their original homeland, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Transnationalism includes any ongoing social and/or economic exchanges between diasporic populations and their homelands (and thus across nation states). Community building, whether on a local, national, or global scale, relates to identity, place, and memory. Notions of what constitutes a community, from its existential place to its moral values, are built on beliefs and schemas that are entangled with politics, history, and ideology. As presented by Anderson's notion of imagined communities (1983), Appadurai's notion of the social imaginary (1996), Malkki's notion of uprootedness (1992), and Said's notion of imagined geographies (1978), communities exist and are shaped by more than just their physical borders; they exist as perceptions and practices- by existential, moral, and historical schemas and traditions that shape not only their self-identity but also the identity of other communities. In this way, borders are practiced and performed, so that even those existing in a diaspora influence the identity of a nation they are not physically in. Indeed, the construction of a *homeland* does not only occur within a physical territorially bound nation state, as exiles, diasporas, refugees, and (im)migrants all contribute to the nationalist consciousness of their homelands. This is because when a large exodus occurs, individuals of that migration will congregate on the basis of their

homeland and migratory experience, while also growing cultural connections based on nostalgia and memory of their homelands. Furthermore, they may maintain personal, social, and/or economic relationships with their home, enhancing transnational communications and connections; "From whom could migrants into new, strange, unknown lives expect help except kin and friends, people from the old country?" (Hobsbawm 1987, 154). This transnational reality expands the notion of nationhood, and thus *nationality* becomes "a real network of personal relations rather than a merely imaginary community." (154). Diaspora communities replicate homeland traditions in addition to acclimatizing uniquely in their host lands. Religious communities abroad from their homelands, for example, create their own sacred spaces and religious organizations (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009) unraveling systems and engines of identity negotiations within their host places (Carnes and Yang 2004). Refugees in host places and nations will often seek out communities and/organizations similar to theirs; such communities can be based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, other markers of identity, and/or an intersection of certain identities, such as a community of Syrian LGBTQ women intersecting nationality, sexuality, and gender. Seeking out such communities is not only an act of necessity insofar as individuals and families can build and maintain diasporic relationships, but also because they provide resources geared towards their unique (im)migratory circumstances, such as language courses, employment search workshops, immigration legal advice, and so forth.

National consciousness is built with nostalgia, which works in an interlocking system with history and memory. On a personal level, nostalgia can expand perspective, or offer the individual feelings of gratitude for a comforting past. However, it can also cause feelings of pain over what is lost, and can hinder one's development if the pain is too great. Nostalgia does not

only exist in an individual level, but on a societal level as well, and it is a border practice in that it strengthens communal ties. While nostalgia provides a sense of existential meaning (Sedikides et al. 2015, 215; Stewart 1988), it exists in a cultural and national landscape, intertwining even with its economy. On an individual level, a person may be nostalgic about any memory, personal, communal, nationalistic, or all. An individual may reminisce about moments with families and friends, or occasions such as holiday celebrations. On a national level, memory and history are used to strengthen the identity of a nation's borders in addition to its identity; "While nostalgia can be deeply personal, it can also be collective. Moreover, it can be institutionalized, as in national museums and memorials, where a given, authoritative version of the past is transformed into heritage." (Watenpaugh 2010, 231). Nationalistic movements draw upon personal memory and vice versa, and one's yearning for a homeland becomes connected with one's yearning for the comfort of the past, particularly a past that is associated with family and community. For example, this can mean a Palestinian individual who lives abroad yet tries to maintain a Palestinian lifestyle while preserving Palestinian history. A Western example includes Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again' which utilizes nostalgia as a desired goal. Nation, then, exists in memory in as much as it exists in national boundaries. Arab nationalisms, media and literature are not foreign to elements of nostalgia. From Palestinian poetry and Egyptian literature, to Syrian architecture and Lebanese music, nostalgia is infused with diverse types of Arab entertainment, media, art, literature, and politics (Shannon 2015; Abu-Lughod 2005; Furani 2012). Arab border identities are not limited to their national boundaries, as diaspora communities (re)invent meanings of their identities that are tied to their homelands, especially in the digital space that is becoming ever more present, accessible, and influential.

Context and Method

I draw my methodological frameworks from three main sources: (1) virtual anthropology (Boellstorff 2008), (2) the art of anthropology (Lundy 2013), and (3) autoethnography (Khosravi 2010), all which are inextricably linked here.

Just as an ethnographer travels to a place and anthropologically observes the conducts of interaction, the digital space is a realm of place as well. According to Tom Boellstorff, the digital space does not only mean looking at the online version of life, but acknowledging that it is a legitimate place of interaction and change (2008). The virtual realm expands the space of diasporic interaction, which in turn expands the narratives of nation and identity building. It is thus "allowing for the creation of an elastic political space that can serve to extend as well as to expose the limits of territorial sovereignty. The growing significance of diasporas coupled with the development of digital media have given rise to the nation as network" (Bernal 2014, 2). Similar to Bernal's work on Eritrean politics and nationhood in the digital sphere, this type of ethnography can be recognized as "no-sited ethnography, a de-territorialized or, perhaps, a viral ethnography" (24). However, this does not mean that every aspect of the virtual world functions in the same manner, for deterritorialization in one manner allows for reterritorialization in another manner. Different populations use digital technologies differently, and their virtual contributions become cultural artifacts with localized contexts (173). In this thesis, I am looking more specifically at diaspora, who differ from their homeland populations in terms of their experiences and homeland constructions.

It is important to note here the multiple usages of the words 'space,' 'place,' and 'realm' in this ethnographic endeavor, because it expands upon our cultural conceptions of a 'space.' What is a *space*? In Anthropology, it is understood that *culture* is the foundation of what makes

us *human*, and the existence of *culture* is maintained through action (i.e., behavior, traditions). Its *being* is affirmed through its *doing*. Space can be conceptualized in the same manner. A space is defined through what happens in it, or what happened in the past. It is some form of *action* that upholds its existence. A community, too, exists on the very basis of its practices, performances, and behaviors, and the digital space is one of many realms where cultural exchange, national dialogues and border performances are taking place. Based on Tim Ingold's notion of dwelling that intertwines being with the movement of bodies in space and time (Ingold 2011), O'Hara et al. (2014) extended this notion to include "trajectories in the digital and the physical and the interweaving of the two into narratively produced dwellings that consist of a digital and real hybrid state of praxiological experience" (1133). Dwelling in this case becomes a place of doing, and recognizing the role of the digital space in the creation of communities validates its existence as a place of dwelling. Nadya Hajj (2021) demonstrated the ways Palestinians in their towns and villages, in refugee camps, and in the diaspora engage in the digital space to maintain and exercise communal and nationalistic ties. Palestinian history and cultural practices become mirrored in the digital space, and moves through space and time continually shaping, adapting, and entangling with the local and global world.

The use of social media in the Middle East cannot be understated, as it provides individuals and communities the ability to practice agency that they may otherwise be limited in, despite the fact that there continues to be attempts of censorship in the virtual space. For example, nations can block certain websites altogether, such as Facebook and YouTube which were entirely blocked in Syria from 2007 to 2011, as it was seen as a potential threat to the regime (Al-Shagra 2011). Furthermore, the digital space can be another platform of censorship, surveillance tactics, and the spreading of propaganda (Morozov 2011). Nonetheless, Arab

nations' notorious censorship of state medias allowed individuals and communities to engage even more heavily in social media and arrange activities that protested against existing regimes (Ahmad and Hamasaeed 2015). Mass media such as film and music are sectors of the cultural landscape (Shaheen 2001; Smith 1994), and thus their examination offer a glimpse into the ways anthropologically relevant cultural ideas, such as kinship and nationalisms, are presented and exercised (Abu-Lughod 2005; Joubin and Nissler 2021). However, any analysis of mass media in this thesis is only explored in relation to how individuals engage with them in relation to their identity and homeland construction.

As Arabs, and particularly Syrians, have become transnational subjects, they utilized the digital space heavily, not only to maintain contact with friends and family, but also to create platforms for self and communal representation. The Arab diaspora, just as other people, use media and the digital space to express their thoughts and desires. Cultural dialogues and traditions occur in the digital space, in addition to preserving digital archival histories. (Im)migrants use technology as a way of self-representation, ranging from individual presentation to group presentation. In the digital space, individuals "negotiate their sense of being" (Witteborn 2015, 353) and have the agency to structure their individuality in their own terms. It enables them to "choreograph their social persona" (356) and explore realms of being that is beyond the cultural and territorial limitations of the physical space. In terms of community building, the digital space aids in the resettlement of (im)migrants in host nations in that they can digitally research for resources pertaining to language classes or employment opportunities, providing the opportunity to meet other (im)migrants, in addition to improving their acclimatation in their new places of residency. Thus, technology aids in both "intra- and intercommunity connectivity" (Alam and Imran 2015, 357). My data will present the ways

diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs interact and construct individual and national Selfhood narratives in the digital space.

Within the past recent years, local and diasporic Arabs have been artistically active in the online sphere, exchanging and echoing cultural practices and narratives. Termed as an "Arab digital revolution" (Khadr 2020), Arabs have been intertwining their artistic creativities with their individual and communal stories and creating platforms where sociocultural and national dialogues are being exchanged. Since much of these conversations and spaces in the online sphere concern artworks, my other framework is the anthropology of art, in where art is contextualized in its social setting. Though there is no solid definition of 'art' in the realm of anthropology (Morphy 1994, 650), nonetheless anthropology has not ignored art: "…anthropology has a long tradition of studying artistic practices—with the materiality of art-work; with art's power, as object or as act, to shape subjective states; with enduring questions of a comparative aesthetics" (Lundy 2013, 1). While in the past anthropologists documented art so that they may separate 'primitive' and 'Western' art, and thus 'map out' human evolutionary progress (Lundy 2013, 5), anthropologists today contextually analyze art, in that artistic objects of study are examined within their sociopolitical environments (Svasek, 2007; Morphy 1994, 655). In this thesis, mass media productions of poetry, film, and music, is situated in the knowledge (Haraway 1988) of the current Syrian and non-Syrian Arab diaspora and their engagement in community and national re(constructing) and remembrance.

Autoethnography is the final methodological framework in my thesis, described as putting the self within the social context (Khosravi 2010, 4) and using personal memories from the past as ethnographic data (Gallinat 2010, 39). Putting the self within the social context means documenting the memories in relation to literature, and not simply archiving them. In this

manner, the self is not separate from the collective but is part of it, and autoethnography serves

as a way for both the writer and reader to witness this convergence. In addition, autoethnography

translates abstract concepts of laws and policies into "cultural terms grounded in everyday life"

(Khosravi 2010, 5), putting a human face to border and national policies. Although Edward Said

is not an anthropologist, his work serves as an example of incorporating personal experience and

memory into literature, and he writes

> To value literature at all is fundamentally to value it as the individual work of an individual writer tangled up in circumstances taken for granted by everyone, such things as residence, nationality, a familiar locale, language, friends, and so on. The problem for the interpreter, therefore, is how to align these circumstances with the work, how to separate as well as incorporate them, how to read the work *and* its worldly situation (Said 2002, xv)

My thesis borrows concepts from Khosravi's (2010) use of autoethnography where the

embodiment of borders is represented (5). However, unlike his work that follows a narrative

and detailed approach of his migratory journeys, the central core of my thesis is not my

personal story and I only apply autoethnographic methods when relevant, particularly when

utilizing my own memories to drive certain narratives of my data. As I myself am a Syrian

national and a part of the Arab diaspora, the data gathered in this thesis brought forth various

memories that, as will be presented in the data discussion, expand on the findings and their

relevant literatures. I have always been a part of a diaspora, as I spent much time of my

childhood in Saudi Arabia where I was a Syrian expat, and much time of my adulthood in

the United States where I was an Arab immigrant. The Syrian civil war was not the initial

trigger that allowed me to question my identity, although it did kickstart my exploration of

the performance of borders in relation to war and memory. In my data, I discuss relevant

memories and experiences in relation to my identity, nationality, and displacement.

Although my method was non-participant observation, I participated in the digital space just

as many other Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs participate, that is, by browsing through art and discussions. In my browsing through Syrian pages, I put myself in a similar digital context as other Syrians, and likely grappled with similar feelings and memories upon viewing any artwork and dialogues that are a part of a highly diverse, polyglot, and heterogenous Syrian diasporic community. Though I initially looked at multiple online realms, such as Facebook and non-social media websites, I soon realized that Instagram is a large enough platform on its own when it relates to this topic. I only share publicly accessible information, and only contacted creators to gain their consent and permission to present any visual work.

Data Analysis
a.Arab Diaspora and Western Racial Epistemological Frameworks – Digital Dialogues

In this section, I showcase my data and its analysis in relation to the construction of the Syrian and non-Syrian Arab identity and *homeland*. I focus firstly on two main Instagram pages: @theconfusedarab, run by Algerian French artist Sofiane Si Merabet, and @mashrouwanabqa (An Arab statement written phonetically to mean "Project We Will Remain"), initially started by Syrian Hani Al Allaf currently residing in Canada, and now is run by a group of youths within Syria and around the world. Let us firstly begin by looking at @theconfusedarab:
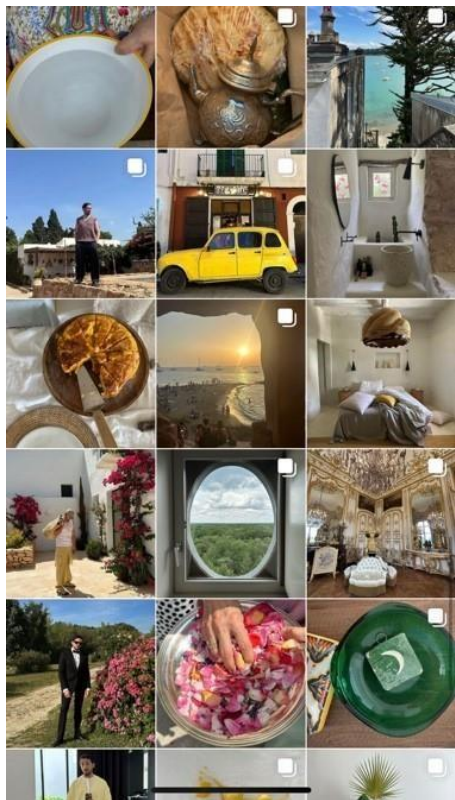
These pictures are screenshots of his Instagram display page. The left image are his posts, and they mostly consist of images of his personal life and travels. Most of his sociocultural and/or national conversations and dialogues take place in his "Stories,", pictured here on the right. Each circle represents a certain cultural topic (from Levantine nationalisms, to the Arab pop music era
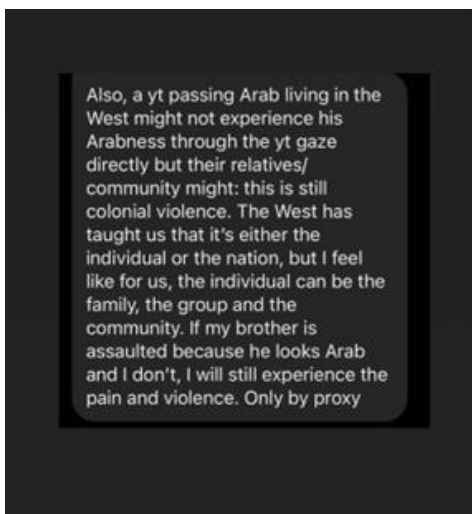
of the early 2000s, to controversies and beliefs of virginity amongst Arabs, to political events such as the 2020 Beirut explosion, and so on), which he expands upon in each "folder." In addition to his own contributions to ideas, it is mainly in his "Stories" that he showcases his followers' engagements, usually sent as messages to him from questions he poses to them. The other page, @mashrouwanabqa is pictured below:
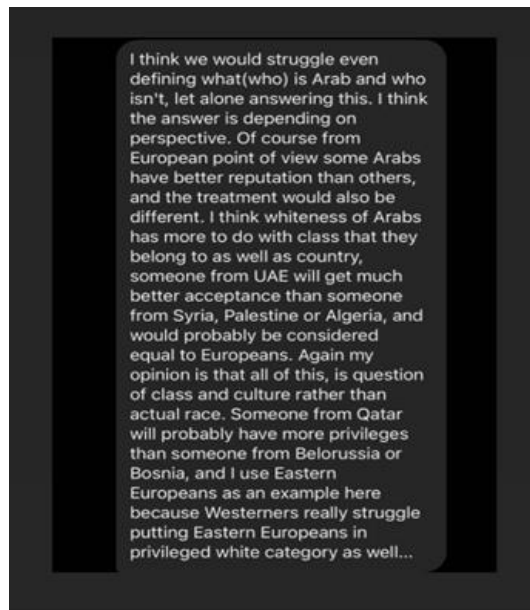
Run by multiple Syrian individuals from within Syria and across the world, their page mainly consists of interactive dialogues and bringing forth communal questions. They welcome and post stories from their followers and make posts about their families, memories, and experiences; they showcase Syrian contributions of art, medicine, and so on; they create topics of discussion pertaining to sociocultural issues, and more. They not only encourage interaction through their questions and dialogues with their followers, but also

host an online monthly psychosocial support service with a unique theme each time. After the earthquake of February sixth, for example, they offered a zoom session every Saturday for the rest of the month that was free for any (local and diasporic) Syrian able to join. Both these pages relate to each other in that they use the digital space to voice their experiences and engage in transnational dialogues, while overall taking part in the (re)construction of their identities.

Let us first begin with how Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs evaluate their race within a Western context. A facet of identity that the Arab diaspora partakes in is the topic of Whiteness, especially considering that there is a significant Arab diaspora in the so-called 'Western' world. I became more aware of my race after moving to the West at age eighteen and becoming more confronted with racial hierarchy as performed in the West. Every individual I met had differing ideas: some would call me White, others would call me neither White nor Black but 'Arab,' though that brings forth its own contradictions considering that there are Black Arabs. The Arab diaspora, then, is currently conflicted on where to fit in the Western racial epistemologies. After asking the question "Are Arabs White?" on his Instagram page, Merabet was flooded with diverse answers as seen below:

Also, a yt passing Arab living in the West might not experience his Arabness through the yt gaze directly but their relatives/ community might: this is still colonial violence. The West has taught us that it's either the individual or the nation, but I feel like for us, the individual can be the family, the group and the community. If my brother is assaulted because he looks Arab and I don't, I will still experience the pain and violence. Only by proxy

I think we would struggle even defining what(who) is Arab and who isn't, let alone answering this. I think the answer is depending on perspective. Of course from European point of view some Arabs have better reputation than others, and the treatment would also be different. I think whiteness of Arabs has more to do with class that they belong to as well as country, someone from UAE will get much better acceptance than someone from Syria, Palestine or Algeria, and would probably be considered equal to Europeans. Again my opinion is that all of this, is question of class and culture rather than actual race. Someone from Qatar will probably have more privileges than someone from Belorussia or Bosnia, and I use Eastern Europeans as an example here because Westerners really struggle putting Eastern Europeans in privileged white category as well...

it depends on where u were. in the west, in my pov, we're all treated as one homogeneous group of people with no cultural or historical differences. but within the region, i can see formations of different categories for arabs (and who is conceived to be more superior to who, as in people tend to form preconceived notions abt ur arab nationality & then act accordingly). i dont know if i'm making sense, but i'm trying to say that there are literal rankings of arabs - in some arab societies. i dont know the reason behind that but i think that's the residue of arab societies trying to be as white-adjacent as possible.

Arabs are multi ethnical so they can go from snow white to dark black. Some arabs might say they are white , tanned, brown , black . But culturally they dont identify as « white » (as a social group) because arabs dont classify themselves regarding their skin color but they do classify themselves within a cultural group.

Are Arabs White?

Non! White is not a skin colour.
L'Arabe ne jouit pas des mêmes privilèges du Blanc.

*Arabs don't benefit of the same privileges as the Whites

Are Arabs White?

It depends on who's asking the question. 😊

But there are a lot of subtilities to it . Its a question of perception. If I take myself as An example, I am a very light skin, dark blond , Green eyed north african/arab , in my country Im just like everyone else because of the huge ethnic mixity we have.
In Europe where I lived for 12years, nobody could guess my ethnicity (at least europeans) and its sad to say that it helped me to be treated nicely, never felt direct racism (talking just about the looks)
It gave me access to « white privilege » because of my skin, even tho i dont classify myself as a white person culturally, when sadly my « arab looking » Friends were sometimes looked upon or treated badly because of their typical arab features (according to what caucasian think arabs should look like) .

bref a little off topic but I insist on the perception subtilities. Some arabs can feel white , some people can see them white , some arabs dont feel white but are white , some arabs are not white but feel white ,
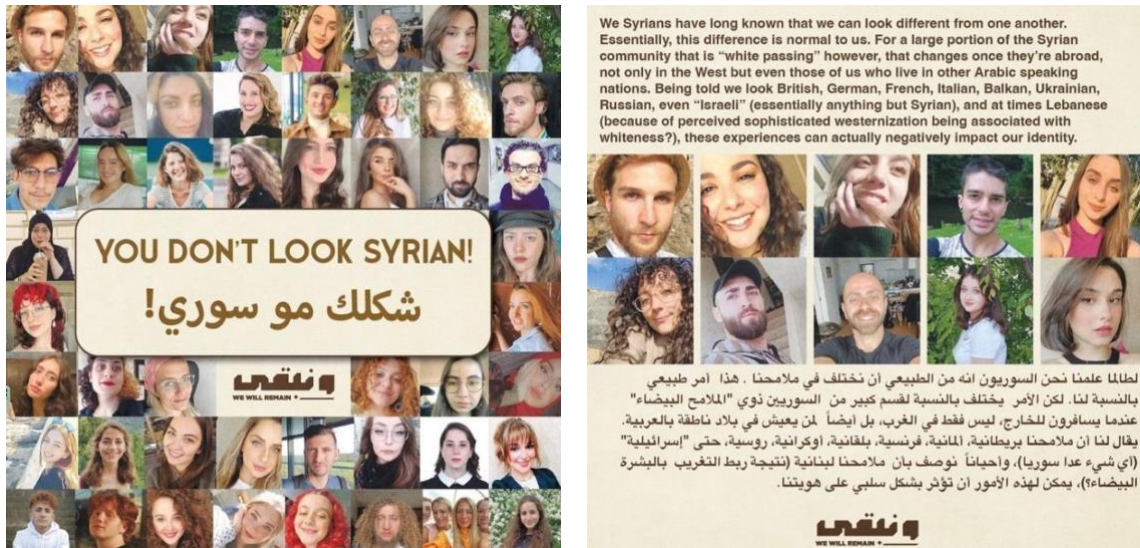😂😂😂

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As seen in the pictures above, the Arab diaspora engages in multiple dialogues and from multiple locales as evidenced in the image written in French. The conversations here show that Arabs evaluate their identity in relation to the West and other Arab identities. One answer says "A [White] passing Arab living in the West might not experience his Arabness through the [White] gaze directly but their relatives/community might." Another one says in French, "No! White is not a skin color. Arabs don't benefit the same privileges as Whites." Amidst this dialogue of race, we also see the discussion of other markers of identity such as class and culture. One answer says "Arabs don't classify themselves regarding their skin color but they do classify themselves within a cultural group." Another one states, "I think whiteness of Arabs has more to do with class that they belong to as well as country, someone from UAE will get much better acceptance than someone from Syria, Palestine, or Algeria, and would probably be considered equal to Europeans." It is evident that diasporic Arabs evaluate their intersections of identity in relation to context, time, and place, and engage in digital dialogues to construct their (individual and cultural) Selfhood. In these relational descriptions of Arabness and Whiteness, we are seeing how race is approached by diasporic Arabs in multifaceted and intersectional ways: skin color is approached in relation to class, nationality, inter Arab cultures and ethnicities, and global Arab culture in relation to the West. Indeed, diasporic Arabs approach Western stereotypes in a myriad of ways. I remember a moment I had when I was still new to the United States, and I met a Saudi Arabian man who was also fairly new to the country and we began discussing our experience as Arabs in the West. He mentioned that once individuals knew he was Saudi Arabian, they assumed he was rich and of a higher class, whereas I never had someone confronting me with such a stereotype in relation to *my* Arabness. For those who knew what

Syria was, they expected that I came directly from a war-torn experience and that I was in a greater state of struggle. My personal 'racist' experiences, though fortunately not too extensive, varied: from an American man nearly yelling at me in a public setting telling me I should 'join the military' to 'prove my allegiance to the country,' to an individual telling me that it is good that I am 'not like the people I come from' (i.e., I am more 'Westernized' and thus better), we see that even individual Arabs vary in their personal interactions pertaining to Western dialogues, and their Arabness is positioned at the intersection with other identity markers such as class. This shows that "race" is not a neatly arranged solidified category, but is rather "a historically contingent category that acquires meaning within specific relations of power" (Gualtieri 2009, 5). Individuals become *racialized* when confronted with systems of power and governance that use race as an identity marker, and thus one's exploration and construction of their Self (individual, communal, and national) becomes intertwined with their category of race. We see in these examples that Arabs, due to their communal, ethnoreligious, and/or national diversities, confront these racial contradictions through dialogues. However, their difference in experience showcases that race is both rigid in its place-hood and stereotyping, and malleable in its construction through dialogue and experience, especially considering its intersection with other identity markers such as class and race (Dağtaş 2018). Therefore, the digital space offers us a platform to witness the (re)constructions of race and (individual and communal) identity.

However, the subject of Whiteness in relation to Arabs is not a new topic, nor has it been restricted to only Arabs. Seeing that the United States had racial categories infused with its laws, and even restricted naturalization to certain races from 1790 to 1952 (López 2006, 1), immigrants had to navigate these categories and make racial cases for themselves.

The courts examined the races of the immigrants wishing to naturalize based on "skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry, the speculations of scientists, popular opinion, or some combination of these factors" and thus the courts "were responsible for deciding not only who was White, but *why* someone was White" (2). This, understandably, was not without its challenges. For example, the famous 1923 case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* included an Indian Sikh man, Bhagat Singh Thind, fighting for his right for United States citizenship on the basis that he is Aryan and thus White, only to be rejected on the grounds of "common sense" (115). Though racial categories today do not function as a prerequisite for naturalization per se, race continues to be a legal identity marker. Individuals, immigrants or otherwise, must always check a racial category in any legal format. In some cases, Arabs are included in 'White' boxes as a "White or Middle Eastern" category, which as mentioned above brings challenges to nonWhite Arabs such as African Arabs. In other cases, 'Arab' is an entirely separate category. Though one's race does not grant certain legal and national rights anymore, racial epistemologies continue to be important in Western discourse. Because the Arab identity is not homogenous and is constantly shifting and evolving in relation to context (as is the nature of identity itself), the Arab discussions on identity depends on an intersectional lens; i.e., between the Arab and the West, between different Arab nationalities, between class differences, and so on. As seen in the pictures above, the answer to "Are Arabs White?" is tough to answer and differs highly based on class, nationality, ethnoreligious culture, and skin color – all that were brought up above by the various answers. From here, let us now look more closely in to how Syrians in particular are engaging with this question:

We Syrians have long known that we can look different from one another. Essentially, this difference is normal to us. For a large portion of the Syrian community that is "white passing" however, that changes once they're abroad, not only in the West but even those of us who live in other Arabic speaking nations. Being told we look British, German, French, Italian, Balkan, Ukrainian, Russian, even "Israeli" (essentially anything but Syrian), and at times Lebanese (because of perceived sophisticated westernization being associated with whiteness?), these experiences can actually negatively impact our identity.

لطالما علمنا نحن السوريون انه من الطبيعي ان نختلف في ملامحنا . هذا أمر طبيعي بالنسبة لنا. لكن الأمر يختلف بالنسبة لقسم كبير من السوريين ذوي "الملامح البيضاء" عندما يسافرون للخارج، ليس فقط في الغرب، بل أيضاً لمن يعيش في بلاد ناطقة بالعربية. يقال لنا اننا ملامحنا بريطانية، ألمانية، فرنسية، بلقانية، اوكرانية، روسية، حتى "إسرائيلية" (اي شيء عدا سوريا)، وأحياناً نوصف بان ملامحنا لبنانية (نتيجة ربط التغريب بالبشرة البيضاء؟)، يمكن لهذه الأمور أن تؤثر بشكل سلبي على هويتنا.
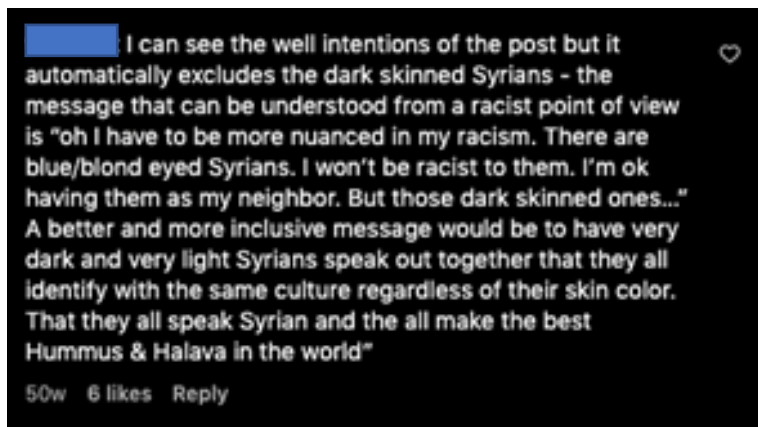
A longer thread compilation than presented above, the images are a part of a series that @mashrouwanabqa posted on May 06, 2022 pertaining to Syrianness and Whiteness. In the series, they criticize the shock of individuals from Western nations when meeting White passing Syrians, in addition to criticizing the romanticization of Western features that is prevalent amongst Syrian and other Arab societies. Because Arabs are believed to be of "one race" in Western public discourse (which classifies race in terms of skin color) and are believed to have "darker features" than Caucasians, Arabs of lighter skin tones that could pass as White are met with confusion within the Western public. The first image of the series posted above states the experiences of White passing Syrians amongst the West and other Arab populations, and how both Westerners and other Arabs become shocked at the Whiteness of White passing Syrians. Another image from the series states

> Coloured eyes, as people know, are very common in Syria, but when it comes to "looking European" (having white skin, "white features," blond or ginger hair), other Syrians either interrogate us to prove our Syrianness, or glamourize us to an uncomfortable extent. The glamourization, especially since childhood, can lead one to internalize colourism, and have a perceived sense of "I'm different and better/more attractive/desired." In Arabic speaking countries, this is a common experience. In the west, we become an artifact of fascination because we're from this far away uncivilized place, yet we somehow look closer to them than they had imagined.
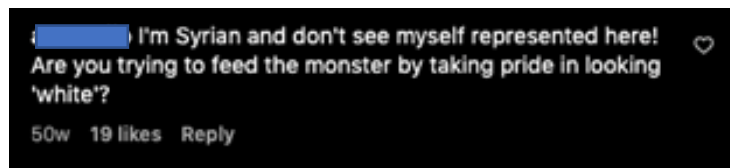
And another image states:

The experiences that I and other Syrians have had are quite broad. From other Syrians recognizing you as one of their own to insisting that we're descended from Crusaders, the French, or Turks. From being told we don't look Syrian by people who can't even locate Syria on a map, to being able to hear other Arabs speak about you since they assume you don't speak Arabic.

While some offered words of support and gratitude to having their personal experiences presented, others backlashed:
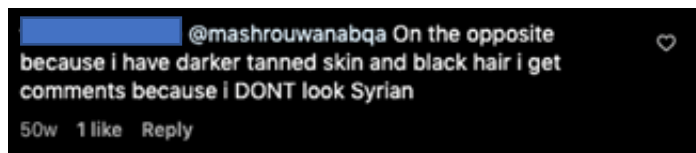

I can see the well intentions of the post but it automatically excludes the dark skinned Syrians - the message that can be understood from a racist point of view is "oh I have to be more nuanced in my racism. There are blue/blond eyed Syrians. I won't be racist to them. I'm ok having them as my neighbor. But those dark skinned ones..." A better and more inclusive message would be to have very dark and very light Syrians speak out together that they all identify with the same culture regardless of their skin color. That they all speak Syrian and the all make the best Hummus & Halava in the world"
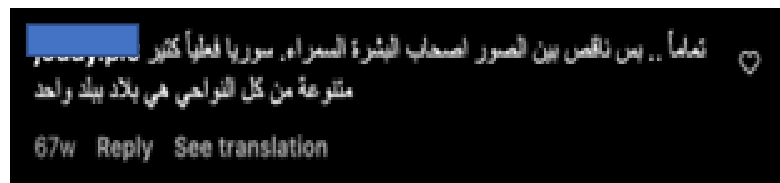
50w 6 likes Reply

I'm Syrian and don't see myself represented here! Are you trying to feed the monster by taking pride in looking 'white'?
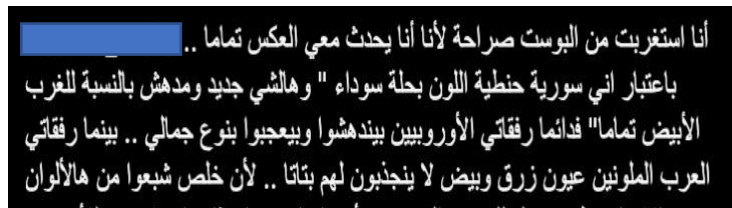
50w 19 likes Reply

@mashrouwanabqa On the opposite because i have darker tanned skin and black hair i get comments because i DONT look Syrian

50w 1 like Reply

أنا استغربت من البوست صراحة لأنا أنا يحدث معي العكس تماما ..
باعتبار اني سورية حنطية اللون بحلة سوداء " وهالشي جديد ومدهش بالنسبة للغرب الأبيض تماما" فدائما رفقاتي الأوروبيين بيندهشوا ويبعجبوا بنوع جمالي .. بينما رفقاتي العرب الملونين عيون زرق وبيض لا ينجذبون لهم بتاتا .. لأن خلص شبعوا من هالألوان

تماماً .. بس ناقص بين الصور اصحاب البشرة السمراء، سوريا فعلياً كتير متنوعة من كل النواحي في بلاد بيلد واحد

67w Reply See translation

As seen in the images above, some individuals viewed the post as not relatable, offensive, and excluding of the experiences and presence dark skinned Syrians. The two images below written in Arabic state this too, with the first one agreeing with the post but saying the experience of dark-skinned Syrians is lacking in the thread, and the second one claiming that their personal experience as a dark skinned Syrian in the West have been "the opposite" because they get compliments on their dark skin from Westerners. As a response to the backlash, @mashrouwanabqa posted a follow up thread:

Also consisting of a longer thread than shown here, @mashrouwanabqa clarified to their followers on May 09, 2022 that their main intension was to criticize the perceived homogeneity of Syria that is held by both the West and other non-Syrian Arabs, in addition to criticizing colorism amongst Syrians. This shows that diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs engage in complex dialogues in the digital space in response to Western racial epistemologies.

I say 'Western racial epistemologies' because it is mainly diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs who confront them, and the color of one's skin is not a major tension in the Arab lands as much as class, politics, and ethnoreligious tensions; where 'race' in the West is hierarchized by skin color, in the Middle East it is hierarchized based on ethnoreligious communities. Seeing that the Ottoman empire promoted a Turkic Islamic unison under its governance and used it as a way to distance itself from European/Christian identities, Arabs under the Ottoman empire had their racial/ethnic and religious identities put into question (Makdisi 2000). Furthermore, the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the subsequent anticolonial and nationalist struggles in the region brought nationality in to the mix of Middle Eastern identity-hood, and ethnicity and nationality became foundational in Middle Eastern group identity (Ozcelik 2021, 2159). Therefore, systemic discriminatory issues and 'racism' related to identity in the Middle East pertain to ethnicity and nationality, such as the persecution

of Kurds in Syria due to their non-Arab identity that does not fit nationalist discourse, or the kafala migrant system in some nations of the Middle East that brings migrant laborers from countries like Bangladesh, Philippines, and Ethiopia and binds them to contracts with their employees with few to no legal rights (2158).

However, despite the fact that color-based race in the Middle East is not as heavily systemized and memorialized as it is in the West, it nonetheless does exist to a certain extent, such as within relational and personal experiences, in that a fairer Arab will be seen as 'more beautiful' than a darker Arab, a point that the post makes above when critiquing the romanticization of European features. Indeed, Arabs have confronted color consciousness with their involvements and interactions with the African continent, becoming especially prominent during the European slave trade where Arabs contributed so much to the African enslavement that the Arabic word for slave (i.e., *abid)* is still used by some Arabic dialects to mean African (Perry 5). Furthermore, so-called 'Western beauty standards' have entered countless nonWestern societies and continues to make an impact, especially if such nations have a colonial history. Diasporic Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs of all skin tones who travel to the West, then, become more directly confronted with color-tone racism in their exploration on where to fit in Western racial hierarchy; this could be from personal conversations where an individual is directly faced with racial questions from others (as in the example above), or it could be a more systemic confrontation where an Arab is asked to tick a "Race" box in a form. In a post by @mashrouwanabqa on May 31, 2020 in the wake of the George Floyd shooting, they wrote about the realities of color racism within Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs, and below is some of the conversation they brought forth:

In the past decade, we as a people have dispersed across the world and through this process have gone through experiences of hatred, ignorance, violence & racism. I would think that these shared experiences we face as a people would make us more compassionate with others, encouraging us to change our racial biases.
Many Syrians are obsessed with being "white-passing", we glorify blond hair & coloured eyes. It's so deeply rooted in our tradition that when some mothers "search for brides" for their sons, these are often qualities they look after!

We even have several sayings about these physical traits! We have incredibly horrible stereotypes circulating about black people, some even still casually refer to them as عبيد (abeed - slaves) or immediately associate these racialized bodies with hard labour work or even housekeeping.
If you are uncomfortable, you should be. We cannot stay silent about this and pretend it isn't a big deal. I won't mention all details and examples, because I'm certain, you know precisely what I'm talking about, and it's time that we stop this.

In their thread, they criticized the ways some, if not most, Syrians look down on darker races, and they call for racial unity. While some agreed with the post, others felt that this is more of a Western problem than a Syrian one:

الافكار و الصور النمطية ما تنتهي و ما ننسى الشعب السوري قليل جدا
منهم البشرة الداكنة وما تعايشنا معهم و لكن الاهم من هذا كلو انو طريقة التعامل مع الناس مهما كان لونو و هذا الشي اغلب السوريين متربين عليه ، اليوم السوريين بمصر و السودان متعايشين و لا نرى استياء او انتقاص او كراهية، و بالنسبة لموضوع هوس البياض فهذا مع الاجيال الجديدة رح يختفي
168w   Reply   See translation

Hide replies

mashrouwanabqa
لازم نتذكر انو سوريين، مو يعني بس يلي بسوريا، فتقريباً 35% من السوريين حوالي العالم خارج سوريا. وهيك مواضيع كتير بتخص الجالية السورية بالخليج، بأميركا، غير بلاد، وحتى بسوريا... صحيح يلي بالبلد بجوز ما اختلط وبتفهم انو تكون في أفكار وصور نمطية منتشرة، بس كلنا منعرف انو في مشاكل وعنصرية شديدة وما عم ينحكى عن هالشي.
168w   4 likes   Reply   See translation   ...

كل هل حكي صح و بتفق معكون بس اذا بدكون تحكو عن ا_____ العنصرية بسورية بعتقد العنصرية الدينية هي الموضوع يلي لازم يتناقش، و بعتقد هو الموضوع يلي محد بحب يقرب عليه بس فعلياً موجود و مافينا تنكرو
167w   1 like   Reply   See translation

The left image translates to "All this talk is correct, and I agree with you, but if you want to talk about racism in Syria, I think that religious racism is the topic that we should discuss, and I think it is the topic that no one likes to approach but it is indeed there and we shouldn't repeat it." The second image does not fully disagree per se, but says that only a few people

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in Syria are dark skinned and that is why the topic is not very prevalent in Syrian communities. Furthermore, they say that Syrians in Sudan and Egypt do not engage in color racial tensions. @mashrouwanabqa replied to this comment, stating that nearly 35% of Syrians today live outside Syria and such racial topics should be addressed to "Syrians in the (Arab) Gulf, in America, other nations, and also in Syria" because "We all know that there are problems and racism that are severe and we don't talk about it." We see in this example that the Syrian diaspora in the United States felt compelled in addressing the George Floyd tragedy, especially considering that it was an Arab American man who called the police who would eventually kill him. Ultimately, there may be differences in what constitutes 'race' within Arab populations, but the act of bordering and discriminating of the 'Other' share similar foundations; "Racism functions through political, cultural and religious/sectarian relations, technocratic methods of governance that perpetuate human categorization and everyday forms of discrimination." (Ozcelik 2021, 2157). Therefore, we see in the digital space how Arabs engage with their intersections of global and national identities and as a result construct narratives of Selfhood.

b.Arab Diaspora and Levenantinism – Digital Dialogues

Now that I have presented the topic of Whiteness amongst the diasporic Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs, let us move into the topic of Levantinism, another identity marker Syrians and other non-Syrian Arabs confront. During the beginning and middle of the twentieth century, the peoples of Africa and Asia were gaining national independence against the final forces of settler colonialism, and a great deal of non-Western nationalistic driven intellectual, social, and political debates were taking place, and with practice too.

Arab nationalism was evolving from the post-World War I/collapse of the Ottoman empire

which, at the time, highlighted the distinction of Arabhood versus non-Arabhood and

brought forth non-Muslim intellectuals contributing to Arab nationalist thinking. The

creation of the Arab league in 1945, the Ba'ath party in Syria, and the rise of Gamal Abdel

Nasser in Egypt all contributed to Arab nationalist thinking that made Arabs distinct from

non-Arabs (Manduchi 2017, 19). Arab nationalist Sati' al-Husri (1880-1968) went as far to

say that anyone who speaks the Arabic language is an Arab, whether or not they wish to be

so (Salameh 2012, 39). However, intellectuals and writers from the Levant, particularly

Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, were drawing attention to the limitedness of the Arab identity as

pertained in Arab nationalism. Levantine nationalisms, however, while supposedly aiming

for more 'secular' approaches of identity that went beyond the strict Arab paradigms of the

region, came with their own set of diversities, challenges, and even extremism. Levantinism,

then, had different localized versions. Phoenicianism in Lebanon, for example, saw Lebanon

and its peoples "as a singular, unique, complete nation, descendants of the Canaanite

seafarers of antiquity, unrelated to the more recently arrived Arab conquerors" (48).

Egyptian Levantinism aimed for a "Pharaonic" identity (51), and Israeli/Palestinian

Levantinism "sought to replace the Jewish attributes of Israel with a Levantine cross-breed

identity" that included Jews, Druze, Christians, and Arabs (52). In the case of Syria,

Lebanese intellectual and founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist party Antun Saade (1904-

1949) promoted a unique *Homo Syrius* notion that saw Syrians as a "synthesis of many

cultures, civilizations, and ethnic and linguistic communities; a rich tapestry of Levantine

peoples." (41-42). To Saade, Syrians are not Arabs but Levantine and uniquely *Syrian* (41).

Such a radical and isolationist version of Syrian nationalism did not grow significantly, and

Saade was executed in 1949. Even the prominent Syrian poet Adonis would eventually leave the party in 1960 (44), though he continued his pluralist philosophies and in 2011 wrote an 'Open Letter' to Syria's president Bashar al-Assad criticizing the government's privilege of Arab identities at the expense of others (57). Indeed, the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Syria, the Kurds, for example, have suffered severe persecutions due to their non-Arabhood, with Syria re-contextualizing history that favors Arab influence within the borders while neglecting the non-Arab others. Against this backdrop, Levantine Arabs engage in dialogues pertaining to their national and historical identities regardless of their political stances, as this topic has become intertwined with sociocultural interactions and experiences, and has thus extended to (trans)national dialogues on the Internet.

Just as someone who engages with nationalist discourse does not necessarily make one a 'nationalist,' so too can Levantine Arabs engage in Levantine discourse without adhering to a certain sect of Levantine nationalist. Indeed, Levantine Arab culture (music, art, literature, etc.) greatly intermixes with each other, celebrating the love of their nation state in addition to their Levantine identity, both identities that are paradoxically contradictory and compatible. In my case, I was a Syrian in Saudi Arabia. We had other Levantine Arabs in our social circle, and I spoke the Syrian dialect of Arabic. However, I also had family in Lebanon, and thus my home life consisted of an intermixing of Syrian and Lebanese culture. My mother was particularly proud of her Syrian and Levantine heritage, and made sure it was represented in our home. For example, she placed a plaque in our home that she brought from the Khalil Gibran Museum in Lebanon, and in the plaque were the words written in Arabic, "If Lebanon was not my country, I would have chosen it to be." To my Syrian mother, this plaque represented her Levantine heritage. Indeed, my

mother was and continues to be heavily invested in Levantine music and arts, all which strengthen her love for her homeland.

Music cannot be ignored as a cultural landscape, and it is "integral to the geographical imagination" (Smith 1994, 238) in that it "is one facet of the cultural contest that begins where institutional politics ends" (236). For diasporic populations, music links "homeland and here-land with an intricate network of sound" (Slobin 1994, 243), and through its engagement evokes emotion, nostalgia, and memories, all which contribute to the construction of the homeland and the political boundaries it lies in. With the Arab national tensions of the mid twentieth century, Levantine Arab musicians were heavily invested with the politics of their nation, and their songs modernized their homelands' folk music and integrated them with romantic and sentimental nationalist and nostalgic themes. By nationalist here, I do not mean that all homeland songs promoted a certain political backing, but that they fundamentally recognized the territories/nations they were singing about and represented them. Much of the music of that era continues to be popular today, especially with the ever-widening Arab diasporas yearning for the past. How then is the preservation of 'Levantine' music being practiced by Syrian and non-Syrian Arabs in the digital space to construct narratives of their homelands?

As mentioned, there were vast sociopolitical changes and nationalistic movements within the Middle East during the mid to late twentieth century. The music of that era reflected this, and has only become more popular and culturally memorialized due to the rise of Arab diasporas since. A prominent example of such musicians is the Lebanese singer Fairouz, who has herself become a symbol of both Lebanese and Levantine culture. Her music ranges across Arab political landscapes, including songs dedicated to Lebanon,

Palestine, Syria, and the Levant as a whole. The sociocultural, political, and (trans)national impact of Fairouz cannot be understated. To my mother, as well as the rest of the Arab diaspora, Fairouz shaped her *homeland* narratives and "cemented [her] displacement" (Issa 2019, 7). Her impact continues to influence the Arab diaspora today, growing only stronger with the ever-growing Arab diasporas. For example, in 2020, Fairouz was visited by French president Emmanuel Macron who was visiting Lebanon amid frustration of the ruling class there. My mother, who was in Saudi Arabia at the time of the event, was heavily invested in the meeting, and sent me and my sister images on the messaging app WhatsApp of the news channel she was watching it in. Even the Algerian French Merabet was invested, creating a series of posts on August 31, 2020 about Fairouz's impact on the Arab diaspora in France:

Some of the comments in the posts include:
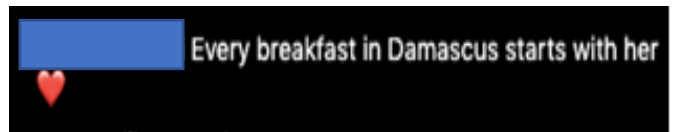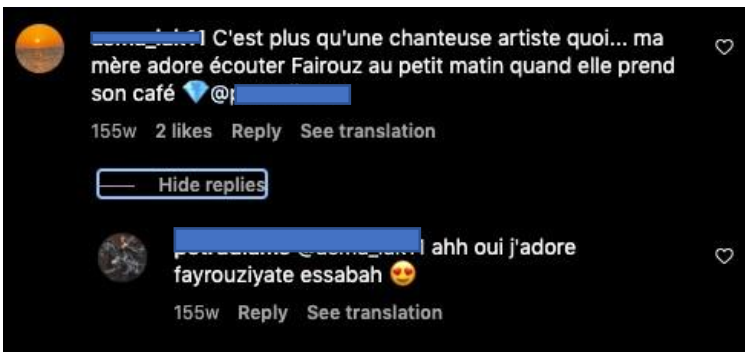
The first image on the left, written in French, translates to "She's more than a singer and artist… my mom loves to listen to Fairouz in the morning when she has her coffee," garnering a response of "I love the morning 'Fairouziyat." *Fairouziyat,* is a plural version of the name Fairouz, and 'the morning *Fairouziyat'* refers to the now common cultural practice (common across Arab nations and diasporas) of listening to Fairouz in the morning with 'a cup of coffee.' The comment next to it states "Every breakfast in Damascus starts with her." The third one, written also in French, says "A queen we will never forget" and has an emoji of the Lebanese flag next to it. We see here that Fairouz symbolizes a form of cultural unity amongst the Arab diaspora, uniting Arab diasporas of all backgrounds in their yearning of their homelands. Another example includes a post of Fairouz by Syrian page @mashrouwanabqa posted on September 23, 2021. The caption said:

فَانَا هُنَا جُرحُ الهَوَى
وَهُنَاكَ في وَطَني جِراحُ وَعَلَيكِ عَيني يا
دِمَشْقُ، يا دِمَشْقُ، يا دِمَشْقُ
فَمِنْكِ يَنْهَمُر الصَّبَاحُ

So here I am, wounded in exile
And there is a wound in my homeland
My eyes are on you O Damascus, O Damascus, O Damascus
From you, the morning spills…

مين بيجي ببالو انو هالغنية يلي غنتها فيروز ب 1976 بالشام، عن الشام، ممكن تأثر فينا جداً بالوقت الحاضر
Who knew that this song by Fairuz, who sang these impactful words in 1976 about Damascus, in Damascus, could be so relevant to our present time. The eeriness and melancholy of it hits hard.

In this post, they use a 1976 Fairouz song about Damascus to describe the pain of the Syrian diaspora today. We see in these examples that Fairouz's music continues to impact Arab diasporic (trans)national and sociocultural dialogues, on the one hand uniting all diasporic Arabs in their love and attachment to her art, while on the other cementing particular

nationalized experiences of exile. I asked my mother about the lyrics above, especially

considering that she was present during the concert itself in 1976. I asked her why Fairouz is

aching for Damascus, and she said that Fairouz was crying to Damascus about the pain she

is experiencing in her own homeland of the then civil war-stricken Lebanon. Thus, we see in

this case how a particular 1976 song echoing pains of the Lebanese civil war at the time is

being used by the Syrian diaspora today to reflect their own tragedies. Fairouz, then,

occupies a unique position in the Arab consciousness. Seeing that her music was evolving as

Europe was losing its colonial grasp in the Middle East, she provided homeland narratives

that solidified unique pluralistic and Levantine national sentiments but also contradicted the

strict Arab nationalisms of Egypt and Syria that preached a unifying Muslim/Arab paradigm.

Fiarouz herself was a Maronite Christian, an ethnoreligious group whose elites cooperated

with the French (Kaufman 2004). Thus, Fairouz was "part of a national project that

significantly was not predicated on difference with Europe" (Stone 2008, 142). Indeed,

when Macron visited Fairouz in 2020, he said of the visit, "I told her everything that she

represented to me, of a Lebanon that we love and that many are expectant of, a nostalgia that

many have" (Chulov 2020). I remember too when the 2020 Beirut explosion occurred,

multiple Lebanese people on social media called Beirut 'The Paris of the Middle East.'

Colonial Europeans aimed to solidify their presence in colonized lands by placing

themselves in historical narrations, and the interests of the French colonials in Lebanon who

were crafting their origin stories in relation to the Arab Levant converged with the interests

of Arabs looking for nationalisms that went beyond the strict Arab/Muslim paradigm, such

as the Maronite Christians (Phoenicianism, for example, implies a shared European and

Arab origin). Thus, Fairouz's influence and positionality amongst the French also contributes to other Arab diasporas who were occupied by the French, such as the Algerian French Merabet who, in his posts above, speaks of Fairouz's impact on France. Seeing that the Syrian nation promoted and practiced a stricter, less inclusive and more anti-Western Arab nationalism, Syrians were viewed as less tolerant, less 'classy', and less Western in return. This has been exacerbated with the influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Therefore, such Levantine artists unify Arabs while simultaneously bringing forth these nation state tensions. For example, another post on June 11, 2021 about the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) brings forth more directly the Levantine and nation state tensions:

A long caption description, they begin by stating the impact of Gibran's writing on the Syrian identity. Indeed, Gibran is one of the most remembered and revered *mahjar*, or emigrant poets who, along with other emigrant poets, played an active role towards Arab and Levantine nationalist and homeland dialogues, narratives, and philosophies. His emigrant life in the United States influenced his significant contributions to the Arab *mahjar* literary movement that was happening at the time which consisted of works rich in dialogues pertaining to the Arab homelands and nations (Abushihab and Awad and Abushihab 2021;

Bushrui and Jenkins 1998). Even Fairouz herself sang some of his poetry. In the post above, @mashrouwanabqa wrote towards the end,

> Gibran's Syrian identity has been recently subjected to complete ignorance and replaced with the modern-day Lebanese identity. Today, due to the separation of the two identities, the Lebanese deny Gibran's Syrian identity that is evident in his writings. This brings us to some important questions: Who gives modern-day Lebanon the right to claim important figures such as Gibran Khlil Gibran as their own, with no consideration of the fact that he himself identified himself as a Syrian? Why is it that there is substantial effort by the Lebanese to separate themselves from Syria?

Thus, the discussion of Gibran today brings forth issues of identity, as seen in the comments below:

I just think this shows how in reality we are all one people, the people of baled al sham and the borders separating us are false borders, our traditions and cultures and language are the same, we may have some differences but these are really tribal or slightly regional differences. We are all one.

Syria is not defined by the borders you see on the map today. It is an everlasting and eternal concept and an idea much bigger than borders. It's our land, our Levant, our Syria ❤

صحيح كتير لاحظت بكتاباتو بيحكي عن سوريا كتير ..كان يقول انه هو سوري الميول لبناني العواطف ❤️

The comments above speak of a borderless Levant ('Belad Al Sham' refers to the Arab Levant region) emphasizing the shared traditions across the Levantine spheres. In addition, Gibran's connection between Syria and Lebanon is mentioned, as in the post written in Arab translating to "I noticed in his writings that he speaks of Syria a lot. He would say that he is Syrian inclined and emotionally Lebanese." We therefore see here the contradictions of transnationalism; while on the one hand it showcases cultural unity beyond the physical borders, it nonetheless relies on border identity for its diversity. In the case of non-Levantine Arabs, they are transnationally united in their Arabhood with Levantine Arabs. And in the case of Levantine Arabs, they are transnationally united in their Levantin-ness. However, both transnationalisms reveal the

tensions of national identities. This is why this post also brought forth some controversy, shown

below in one shared conversational thread (I copy and pasted the responses directly as they were

posted, as the pictures are too large considering it's a long dialogue):

Person A: it honestly shouldn't matter where he's from; the levant was united before
imperialist intervention. but the insistence that he is "syrian" and asking "what gives modern
lebanon the right to claim him" is frankly hypocritical -- you must see that, right? i love your
page and we all believe in a united levant. but i really urge you to copy edit statements like
this. you can make the post with the correct historical information without dragging lebanon
for the same type of identity politics you're participating in.

Person B: The problem is when we identify everything as "Lebanese" due to better
marketing. Even Levantine food is branded as Lebanese… when it's also Syrian and
Palestinian.

Person A: Syrian & palestinian erasure is an obstacle to a united levant (or a pan-arab
identity) but so is anti-lebanese sentiment. the "better marketing" you're referring to is a
western construct, not a lebanese one - something bred from the imperialists who colonized
all of us. so one can't advocate for a united levant if they harbor resentment for the
lebanese -- or resentment for syrians or palestinians.

Person B: We still need to recognize this and counter it, as many Lebanese have internalized
this imperialism impact and see themselves as "superior" to Syrian/Palestinian. I think it's
important to see ourselves as bigger then just the political entity, a bigger united entity that
is
BILAD el Sham or the "levant" region. Also yes it is a western construct and this is why we
need to talk about our identity and how it's so much bigger.

Person A: of course, you're right! but none of this is about the superiority complexes in the
region. many in syria & palestine would also staunchly deny a "levantine" identity that
includes lebanon, because they're harboring the same damaging & isolating nationalism. my
point is that the caption blames "modern-day lebanon" for "claiming" gibran even though he
was literally born in what was then lebanon. no one is denying that nationalists exist on all
sides. & lebanon has certainly benefited from the colonizer's "western" depictions (&
internalized them, the same way many have internalized their baseless hatred for us). but for
a page intended to bring about levantine unity, this is just harmful language to the cause.
anti-lebanon is not pro-unity. the same way anti-syria is not pro-unity. the right way to
advocate for our collective identities is -- again -- to state the facts & keep the language
inclusive. i am lebanese, i am VERY pro pan-arabism, & i felt alienated by the insistence
that "we" are somehow stealing something. *we* is supposed to be all of us! so who does
this blame serve? many lebanese want the same things you want. it does your following a
disservice when you perpetuate anti-lebanese sentiment. for example: he mentions tyre and
sidon here which were beautiful and successful phoenician settlements. why couldn't the

caption emphasize that our ancestry is all linked in these ancient cities, instead of immediately assuming the defensive? do you see what i mean?

Based on the discussion above, it is evident that the Arab Levantine diaspora is active in dialogue about their national and historical identities. Person A, for example, criticizes the @mashrouwanabqapost as "anti-Lebanese" and sees it as a hindrance to a united Levant. Person B as a response to Person A criticizes "Lebanese superiority," saying that "many Lebanese have internalized this imperialism impact and see themselves as "superior" to Syrian/Palestinian." Despite both individuals recognizing Levantine unity, they engage in complex dialogue relating to history, imperialisms and nationality. Levantine unity brings forth nation state tensions and vice versa, and seeing that such tensions have only been growing with the rising Syrian civil war, we see transnational dialogues increasing as well. While @mashrouwanabqa addresses these tensions too and criticizes Lebanese superiority, they nonetheless warn against anti-Lebanese sentiment as seen in their post below, published on August 05, 2020 after the 2020 Beirut port explosion, criticizing Syrians who were not mourning the tragedy:

Every Syrian spewing bullsh** that the Lebanese never cared for us, saying they deserve what happened, how dare you. We should be the first to feel for them. From war, destruction, broken hearts & filthy corruption. We are literally one land, people, nothing separates us but a boundary. No Syria without Lebanon. No Lebanon without Syria. Of course the majority aren't like this, but they exist. This hatred & generalization is not logical. We have glorious pasts. We befriended each other, we studied there, spent summers in each other's countries & watched each other's shows, series, works... Beirut faced a disaster & we must be the first to say I am with you, I love you, I know what you feel. That is being Syrian.

The post above states, "We are literally one land, people, nothing separates us but a boundary. No Syria without Lebanon. No Lebanon without Syria." We see, then, that Syrians in the digital space engage in Levantine discourses to express their own national and historical identities, while also addressing the tensions that come forth from such an endeavor.

c.The Syrian Homeland and Nationality - Artistic Constructions

In the previous sections of my data, I presented the ways Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs discuss their identities in the digital space, from Western epistemological frameworks of race to Levantine and nation-state tensions. At the root of these dialogues lies a communal and national consciousness that is linked to history and politics. However, Syrians in the digital space express their experiences not just through dialogue, but through visual art as well, therefore let us look some examples below:

To anthropologically explore these images warrants now the discussion of communal and national nostalgia more heavily. The first three images were created by graphic artist Carla Abkarian @carlas.artt and are a part of a series. All in Arabic they read "My country." The first image (posted March 03, 2021) contains a Syrian archaeological artifact, the second (posted March 07, 2021) a popular Syrian drink, and the third (posted March 05, 2021) a whirling dervish. The fourth and last image (posted October 22, 2022), created by graphic

artist Bushra Affouf @the.chucky.chuck, is a cartoon rendition of a 1999-2002 Syrian television show family titled "The Four Seasons" that Syrians continue to watch and hold dear for nostalgic reasons. Syrians are expressing their nation through nostalgic memories of archaeology, food/drink, culture, and television. Archaeological and other national memories fall under "restorative nostalgia," while more personal or collective memories fall under "reflective nostalgia"; the former "reconstruct[s] emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time [while the latter] cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space." (Boym 2001, 49). Where nationalist driven memories function in structured settings that strictly archive and utilize history, such as in museums or history books, and thus enforce the physicality of borders, collective memories on the other hand represent the cultural performance of borders through the utilization of nostalgia. The images above represent Syria through its cultural artifacts and behaviors, including archaeology, diet, religion, and television show.

Syrian artwork and digital presentation is also intertwined with yearning to go back (for the diaspora) and yearning to leave the nation (for the locals). For example, diasporic contributions include:

All these images are from @mashrouwanabqa. The image on the left (posted August 24, 2021) is an artistic rendition of musician Lynn Adib, with her lyrics written on the side translating to:

We shall return
She told me, upon your arrival
Kiss Barada [a river that flows through Damascus] for me
I replied, in my homeland
I become a child again

The post is visually and audibly active, with the lyrics appearing on the screen with the moving stars in the background as the song plays. The image next to it on the top right (posted December 04, 2022) is the arrivals section in Damascus airport (an airport I visited so many times that the picture alone evoked much nostalgia and emotions for me that I sent it to my sister who felt the same) with the caption beginning with "How long has it been fellow diaspora Syrians? What was that day like?" and ending with "Remember, if you left, consider yourself lucky. Move on, but don't forget. Move on, and remember those still there. Move on, but be grateful. Move on, and do not give up. Do not give up, for Syria's sake." The image on the bottom right (posted February 14, 2022) is a long thread written by a Syrian refugee and titled "Why do you blame me for missing home?" In it, the author defensively states that although she is grateful to be safe in and protected by her host nation, she should not be expected to be "infinitely grateful" and pain free. Before she writes detailed memories of her childhood in Syria, she says "I miss my home country despite the ugliness that has ruined the happiness of childhood" and ends the caption with "These are my memories of Syria, I have no memory of anything else. It is not my fault that home, in my head, is still associated with those things. Should you always blame me for it?". We see here themes of *yearning* and longing for the Syrian homeland, shaped by memories of

geography (as in the Barada river example) and kinship relations. However, the diaspora is not actively trying to go back, considering there is a war there. This paradoxical pain of wanting to return but knowing it is unsafe is also evident when we see Syrian nationals (either within the land or abroad but still facing the global tensions of having a Syrian passport) expressing their desires to leave it. For example, the artworks below present the pain of holding a Syrian passport:
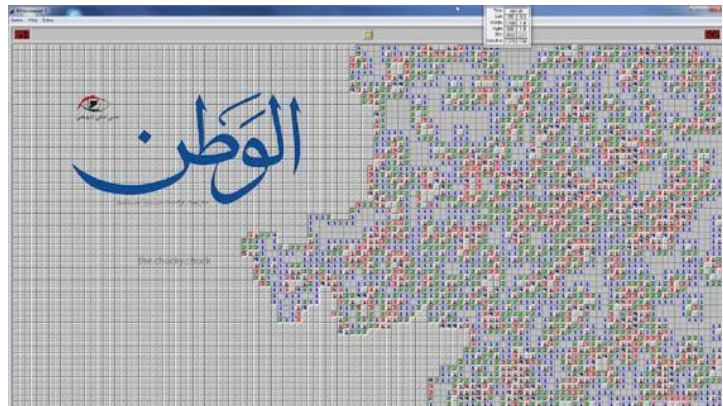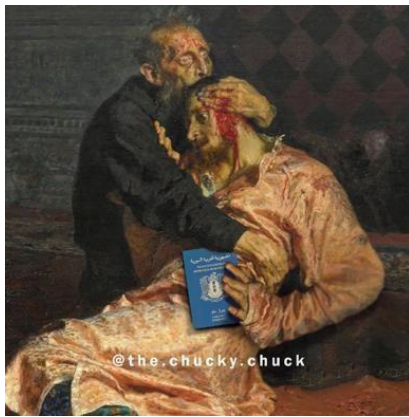
The first image (posted August 16, 2023) by @the.chucky.chuck is a painting from the 19th century by Ilya Repin titled *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* with the father cradling his bloodied son who, in this rendition, is holding a Syrian passport. The image next to it (posted October 02, 2020), also by Affouf, is a razor blade with the front cover of the Syrian

passport stamped on it. The third image (posted April 05, 2021) by @carlas.artt reads in Arabic "The Syrian Dream" with a "Visa Approved" stamped next to it and shows an airplane leaving Damascus airport. The fourth image (January 04, 2022), created by @the.chucky.chuck, shows spider man at the Syrian border, and next to him are the words "Spider Man: No Way to Leave Home" (in reference to the film Spider Man: No Way Home). The image next to it (posted November 19, 2020), also by Affouf reads in Arabic "The Nation" in a field of explosives in the computer game minesweeper. Within these themes, we see how Syrian nationals approach their nationality and homeland. On the one hand, Syrians shape the Syrian *homeland* through personal memories and kinships, while on the other hand they embody the limits of the Syrian passport in their inability to travel freely and escape hardships. Because indigeneity to a homeland is expressed and interlinked with *naturalistic* terms and themes (such as the term 'roots' or the emphasized environmental links with indigenous populations) that solidify and justify their innate naturalness (Malkki 1992), refugees' kinship and communal memories become intertwined with the homelands that they were forced to leave. Their physical kinships that shape the memories of the land are seen as botanical and innate, intertwining with the soil itself. Furthermore, their Syrian nationality restricts their border movements and thus human rights, and they begin to embody their passports, showing how the harm in their homelands is essentially the harm of their bodies and vice versa.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I presented the ways diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs engage in transnational dialogues in the digital space. I showed their active participation in dialogue and art making in relation to the (re)construction of their homelands, which prompted me to expand on the literature of borders and their performances. I presented the conversations diasporic Syrians and non-Syrian Arabs are having in relation to their identities pertaining to Western racial epistemological frameworks on the one hand and Levantin-ness on the other. As was presented in the data, we saw that the Arab diaspora in the West face tensions with their skin color. In addition, we saw the links between colonial remnants of the Arab and Levantine identity and how Levantine unity on the one hand unites Levantine Arabs and non-Arabs but also reveals nation state tensions. Furthermore, I showed the ways Syrians artistically express their memories and experiences in the digital space, while overall shaping and embodying their Syrian nationalities. Altogether, this thesis emphasizes the value of the digital space as a place of cultural and global interaction. Despite the great and tragic suffering that Syrians have been enduring within the past decade, they nonetheless are active in the preservation and (re)construction of their homelands through their dialogues with each other, the sharing of their memories, and their artistic expressions of their experiences. Because of this, we get a glimpse into how a diaspora shapes a nation and its identity through its behaviors, kinships, and memories.

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