

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE BEIRUT COFFEEHOUSE AND CAFÉ

by

ANNA KATHLEEN MEDEARIS

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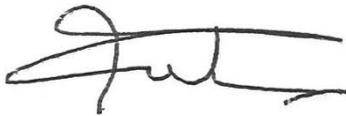
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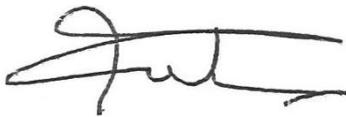
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I would not have been able to complete this thesis without my supportive friends and family who continually encouraged me, especially amidst the many tragedies Beirut faced the last several years.

I owe my gratitude, first, to God and my faith, which provided peace during the intellectually and emotionally challenging times that accompanied this thesis-writing journey. I also owe my gratitude to my family, who never doubted I could finish my thesis, who continued to support my efforts, and who have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams. I would like to thank my advisor and committee, Sari Hanafi, Blake Atwood, and Ilham Khouri-Makdisi for stepping in when I needed feedback and inspiration. I look up to professors including Mona Fawaz, Rima Kanawati, Nadya Sbaiti and others, who taught their classes at the height of the 2019 revolution. I will always remember the classes Dr. Fawaz held in Martyr Square while protests took place around us. Their commitment to continue to show up for their students and for their city, Beirut, inspires me to continue to pursue academic excellence. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Aliya Saida for her continued support and patience, as she followed up consistently over the past few years. Finally, I have a long list of friends who showed up in countless ways. While I cannot name all of them, I owe my humble gratitude to my friends Angela, Mokhtar, Rawan, Jan, Will, Kelsey, Emily, Cameron, Thom, James, Agnes, Olivia, Ibrahim, Kate, Ricardo, Ellie, Natalie, Kalyn, LJ, and my family, Bailey, Jon, Marie, Carl, and Christine.

I dedicate this thesis to the city I love so deeply – Beirut. Reading and writing about the beautiful, yet complex history of its culture and cafes only fuels my nostalgia for the place I call home. My hope is that Beirut's streets will soon be bustling with life, once again.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The Beirut Coffeehouse and Café

Beirut, a city with multiple histories, multiple profiles, and contested cultural identities, remains at the heart of cultural production. I argue that the Beirut coffeehouse and cafe shed light on Beirut's identity, serving as a place that both represents and reflects culture, and a place that produces and informs culture. This thesis aims to study the arrival and history of coffee and the coffeehouse in Beirut, the transformation of the urban space, the significance and importance of the coffeehouse, and the multilayered representations of the coffeehouse and cafe through film and literature in Lebanon. The introduction of coffee in Beirut predates this paper by a few centuries, as this paper focuses on the 1950s through the 1980s, with a special emphasis on the 1960s and 1970s.

The reasons behind this chosen time period include Lebanon's independence in 1943 and the importance of looking at Lebanon through the lens of its nation-building period, the second Arab Nahda that speaks volumes of the cultural production in the region, and the years leading up to and leading through the first half of the Lebanese civil war, which begs the questions of national identity and national representation. To reiterate, I argue that coffeehouses serve as a lens in which to study the culture of Beirut and attempt to define the culture of Beirut as I study the movements that came out of these spaces.

In order to take one step further in understanding cultural production, I will highlight a few case studies which will look at national icons, films, and historic moments.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

From the “Switzerland of the Middle East ” to “Paris of the Middle East” to “Hanoi of the Arab World,” Beirut’s cultural identity remains to be a contested topic of research. Who and what contributed to the cultural production of Beirut? What were the contributors' backgrounds? Who was their audience? What were their styles and what was their agenda? What is Beirut’s post-colonial journey to cultural production? While Beirut’s culture has been studied, the literature around the topic often misses looking at the intersection between politics and culture and the quest to build an independent nation. How does a post-colonial nation fit in the world of cultural production? The binary dichotomy of east versus west is no longer a sufficient lens for answering the questions of what defines the culture of Beirut and whom, but rather, the literature often portrays a false dichotomy – the westernized culture and the oriental culture. The cosmopolitanism of Beirut highlights questions of modernity and how one frames global modernity.

The question of Beirut’s identity and culture has always been a mystery to me, so after viewing Maroun Bagdadi’s film, “Beirut O Beirut”, where the coffeehouse and café-goers were asking the same questions, I began to think these spaces could provide a framework for studying the culture of Beirut. The cafes not only housed cultural producers, they themselves reflected the cultural production. The goal of this thesis is to frame these questions within the context of the Beirut coffeehouses and cafes, which often played the role of mobilizing social and political change, potentially claiming the role of both creating and reflecting Beirut culture. In other words, this thesis asks the

question: do the coffeehouses and cafes give an accurate representation of what makes Beirut, Beirut? And what role do they play in cultural production, which includes the intersection between politics and culture?

Coffeehouses in Beirut remain an understudied topic throughout Lebanon's history, especially in the eyes of the sociopolitical movements that took place leading up to the civil war and throughout the war. Working within the framework of philosopher Jürgen Habermas' theory, which claims that civil society is created by individuals who engage in rational discussion on public and political topics in the public sphere, coffeehouses and cafes in Beirut between 1958 and 1990 will be analyzed through the lens of the ways in which people gathered and why.¹ This framework will be used in conjunction with the critiques of Habermas' eurocentrism to frame this thesis within the Middle Eastern context. The question to address is how the coffeehouse in Beirut served as a public sphere in the years leading up to the civil war and throughout the civil war. By briefly looking at the coffeehouses dating back to the Ottoman Empire, the aim is to frame the coffeehouse within a Middle Eastern context rather than through a Eurocentric framework, however, the years between 1958 and 1980 will be the focus of analysis as they proved to be transitional years in Beirut. The goal is to reveal the ways in which the coffeehouses and cafes in Beirut brought people from various backgrounds together, changing the social discourse and challenging the private and

¹ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991.

public dichotomy, while also creating and mobilizing political movements, and deeply informing cultural production and distribution.

A. Theoretical Framework

Using Jurgen Habermas' theory to explain public spheres helps one understand the place and importance of the coffeehouse. Habermas focuses on communicative rationality and the public sphere, arguing that communicative argument is central to the human experience as democratic beings. The public sphere is any place where the exchange of ideas and communicative rationality takes place. According to Habermas, "[c]ivil society is created by individuals having a free, voluntary, and active membership that is produced in the public sphere, whereby private individuals engage in rational discussion on public moral and political issues."² Using this logic, the coffeehouse serves as the place where discussions of social life and political talk take place. Habermas often discusses coffeehouses in his work, as they serve as a gathering place for "the nobility and the bourgeois as well as the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers."³ In the context of Beirut, coffeehouses, unlike bars, are frequented by Muslims and Christians, and often blur the line between religious or class divisions, depending on the location and style of coffeehouse. "Clearly, if presently we are to build anything - and something as important as democracy - on the concept of civil society, we need to deal with the problems of

² Mike Douglass and John Friedmann, "Cities for Citizens: Planning and the Rise of Civil Society in a Global Age." Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998

³ Abdelmoula, Ezzeddine. "The Arab Public Sphere in the Context of the Current Debate." In *Al Jazeera and Democratization; The Rise of the Arab Public Sphere*, 1st ed., 85–100. London: Routledge, 2015., p. 159

exclusion, difference, diversity and the politics of identity.’⁴ The problem of exclusivity will appear throughout the study of Beirut’s coffeehouses, but overall, they acted as places of inclusion given the context and time period in comparison to other places, both in Beirut and the region. Location plays a key role in determining the coffeehouses users, as well as the ideologies and purposes which formulate in and around each coffeehouse and cafe, leading one to question who and what is being excluded from each coffeehouse and cafe.

While Habermas provides a good basis for understanding the public sphere, his work must be critically applied as a framework, as he fails to address some power structures or tends to emphasize the western context. For example, “His idealization of the liberal type of the bourgeois public sphere made him fail to examine other non-liberal and non-bourgeois public spheres.”⁵ Elizabeth Breese insists on using the term “public spheres” rather than “the public sphere,” allowing for a diversity of publics, institutions, and groups with different goals, which can go beyond the liberal one. In order to apply Habermas’ framework of the public sphere in non-western contexts, Michael Schudson argues for a more communal understanding of the formation of rational discussions and opinions. He says, “[p]olitics was more a communal ritual than an act of individual or group involvement in rational-critical discussion.”⁶ The

⁴ Abdelmoula, Ezzeddine. “The Arab Public Sphere in the Context of the Current Debate.” In *Al Jazeera and Democratization; The Rise of the Arab Public Sphere*, 1st ed., 85–100. London: Routledge, 2015., p. 159

⁵ Abdelmoula, Ezzeddine. “The Arab Public Sphere in the Context of the Current Debate.” In *Al Jazeera and Democratization; The Rise of the Arab Public Sphere.*, p. 159

⁶ Schudson, Michael. *Politics as Cultural Practice*. Political Communication - POLIT COMMUN. 18. 421-431. 2001. 10.1080/10584600152647128.

communal ritual applies to Beirut's public sphere, although Habermas' individual choice theory still applies at some level, as Beirut does carry some measure of western individuality, especially among the well-traveled intellectuals and writers. However, overall, the communal aspect attributes to the informal politics of the coffeehouses, which becomes apparent in the movements or political events discussed in chapters three and four. Barclay argues that "Habermas' theory validates the significance of early café culture (sixteenth to the twentieth century) to building civil society, but it fails to recognize that later café culture (twentieth to the twenty-first century) continues to serve the function of empowering civil society in the changing conditions of the city"⁷ as Habermas claims that the bourgeois public sphere began to crumble in the 19th century. However, this paper argues the spreading of the public spheres included individuals and communities across class lines in the twentieth century. Fawaz Traboulsi agrees with this point as he says "I wish to argue that Habermas seems to underestimate the role of a decisive factor in the democratization of European societies, the non-bourgeois and anti-bourgeois forces in effecting radical revolutionary changes in their societies which culminated in the final transition to democratic systems. This Habermasian *bévue* (blunder) can be attributed to a set of different but converging and interrelated factors."⁸ This means that Habermas attributed too much agency to the elite and if his framework instead includes the radical revolutionaries, the public sphere is then extended to be

⁷ Barclay, Nadia. "Cafe Culture in Beirut; A Center for Civil Society (16th Century - Present)." *Cafe Culture in Beirut; A Center for Civil Society (16th Century - Present)*. Al-Hakawati, 2007. al-hakawati.net.

⁸ Traboulsi, Fawwaz. "Public Spheres and Urban Space: A Critical Comparative Approach*." *New Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2005, pp. 529–541., p. 6, doi:10.1080/07393140500371228.

more inclusive and thus more effective in analyzing the public sphere in non-European settings.

Fawwaz Trablusi critiques Habermas' theory of the public sphere, as well, and his critique is important in this context of understanding Beirut coffeehouses and cafes. "Habermas has often repeated that the idea of the public sphere is motivating, not simply instrumental. He is here emphasizing the public sphere's independent influence on action, political action in particular. However, the aim in both cases remains the same. It is the contribution of public spheres to the democratic process, whether as a factor in the transition to democracy, in countries with non-democratic regimes or as a corrective agent of the distortions and the corruption of democratic institutions and practices in the advanced countries of the West."⁹ Trablusi may not agree with the application of Habermas' theory on the public sphere or even the inspiration for his theory, but the framework itself remains helpful in understanding in stating that the public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed.¹⁰

Habermas continues to offer a grounded understanding of the public sphere and civil society, which is enriched with insights from scholars such as Schudson and Breese who have studied the public spheres in non- western contexts, allowing the

⁹ Trablusi, Fawwaz. "Public Spheres and Urban Space: A Critical Comparative Approach*." *New Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2005, pp. 529–541., p.1, doi:10.1080/07393140500371228.

¹⁰ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991, p. 398.

theoretical framework to be applied to the context of Beirut.¹¹ While Traboulsi's arguments are necessary, it does not discount the basis for Habermas' theory and the need for some sort of framework for understanding the public spheres of Beirut. For example, I do agree with Habermas' definition of public sphere when he describes it as follows: "a network for communication, information, and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions (. . .) the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action, for which mastery of a natural language suffices."¹² It seems as if Habermas missed the mark in his framework too as Traboulsi points out that he believed the French Revolution was in itself a bourgeois revolution. The French Revolution was not isolated to the elite, and it was by no means separate from the political sphere. So, if we look beyond where Habermas misses the mark, and use his framework to understand the way and reason people gather, his thoughts on the public sphere can continue to be useful. Rather than using Habermas to get to the conclusions drawn for Western societies, the framework is instead used to set the stage and lens in which to view the role of the public sphere in Beirut.

¹¹ Abdelmoula, Ezzeddine. "The Arab Public Sphere in the Context of the Current Debate." In *Al Jazeera and Democratization; The Rise of the Arab Public Sphere*, 2017.

¹² Habermas, Jürgen. "Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere." *Between Facts and Norms Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Polity Press, 1996.

1. Lens and Outline to Study Beirut Culture

Before looking at specific examples of cultural production, it is important to first define the key term, cultural production. According to Oxford reference, cultural production is “The social processes involved in the generation and circulation of cultural forms, practices, values, and shared understandings.” The definition comes from the realm of media studies. More anthropologically, Clifford Geertz offers a definition culture defining “as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and developed their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”¹³ This thesis addresses the importance of Third World cultural production, acknowledging the tensions of post-colonialism and western culture, and focuses on the post-French Mandate period in Lebanon. As a framework, I will use Partha Chattarjee’s book, “The Nation and Its Fragments; Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,” as he introduces a new way to look at the relationship between the colonial power and the local subject. He states: “The history of nationalism as a political movement tends to focus primarily on its contest with the colonial power in the domain of the outside, that is, the material domain of the state.”¹⁴ Rather than a contest, the colonial power can be seen more as an infrastructure in which local culture is produced and curated. Chattarjee describes the colonial power as the material or external element, while the local tradition is the inner and “spiritual,” which he then uses in a formula for explaining cultural production in a post-colonial state.

¹³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Clifford Geertz". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 26 Oct. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Clifford-Geertz>. Accessed 15 January 2023.

¹⁴ Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY: Princeton University Press, 1993. Accessed May 11, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctvzgb88s. P. 6

While Chattarjee's framework leans too far in the direction of a false or unhelpful dichotomy that most post-colonial frameworks do, his formula or framework is useful to look at the cultural elements of Beirut to understand its journey, purpose, political relationship and analyze any agendas between the cultural producers, the production itself, and the state or the attempt at forming the state.

In the framework of cultural production and the question of nation-building, one must look at the broader spectrum of cultural identity and perhaps dismantle the idea of nations and nation-building altogether. "One significant result of this globalizing influence is that world cities tend to become comparatively less effectively inked to their "own" countries as they are increasingly enmeshed in this global capitalist system. This symbolizes a new kind of power that transcends state boundaries and sustains a world economy much as the old colonial cities represented imperial interests."¹⁵ So, one thing we may see in this thesis is that Beirut does not necessarily reflect a national culture, but one that fits more on the global scale, transcending nationalism. Beirut found itself caught in between the drive for Arab nationalism and Western modernity, which is a central theme in the film, *Beirut, O Beirut*, a film by Maroun Bagdadi, which will be highlighted in detail in a later chapter. "Two decades later, in the 1950s, all the countries of the Mashriq were shaken at one moment or another by the collision between Arab nationalism and Western imperialism. Lebanon did not by any means escape the effects of either controversy. What set it apart from neighboring states,

¹⁵ Blij, Harm de. *The Power of Place Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape*. Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 183

however, was the fact that the internal resonances of the regional politics affected not only governmental policies, but the very possibility of holding the country together.”¹⁶ There was disagreement over Lebanon’s relation to the Arab World and its position in relation to the West. Lebanon’s fresh independence (1943) lent itself to the fragility of its nation-building efforts, along with its building of a cultural identity.

Scholars such as Christopher Stone, author of *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: Fairouz and the Rahbani Nation*, provide examples of the tension between the Western-propped state-building efforts and the grassroots or internal efforts- as Chattarjee would call them- using the example of the Rahbanis and Fairouz versus the leftist intellectuals of Beirut.¹⁷ The Rahbani Brothers, Assi and Mansour, were musicians, composers, songwriters, authors, and playwrights/dramatists, best known for their work with the singer Fairouz, Assi's wife. In the broad spectrum, they show two sides of the coin of cultural production. Do the Rahbanis- who seemingly align with the state, oppose the leftist intellectuals- who seemingly aim to dismantle the state? It is worth noting these would be questions or stances taken from the lens of the State. Is one form of culture more “authentic” than the other? Were the Rahbanis merely puppets of the post-colonial regimes, thus creating cultural appropriation and popularization? Does that mean the intellectuals, who were often anti-imperialists, were the true creators of authentic culture? I argue that one side could not operate and produce culture without the other, and that both sides felt tension with the state. But, at the same time, both

¹⁶ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 448.

¹⁷ Stone, Christopher. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*. Routledge, 2010.

steered towards nation-building. Christopher Stone says, “and the Rahbani Brothers (Asi and Mansour) have always been thought of as unifying forces in Lebanon and beyond, and this seems to have been their intention.”¹⁸ While the two sides played different roles, they both made important contributions and played key roles in the production of culture. In order to further narrow the topic of research, I will localize the cultural production to Beirut, rather than all of Lebanon, and in turn, I will focus on how Beirut was the epicenter of cultural production for the nation as a whole. To direct the paper, I will restate the questions of who produced the culture, who was their audience, what were their outlets, where did they gather and produce, and what political events and climate affected the cultural production of Beirut.

B. Time Period

The timeline of this paper will focus on post-independence Lebanon, or postcolonial or post-French Mandate Lebanon, through 1982, which covers the important events of 1958, 1967, and the early years of the civil war. An overall understanding of Middle Eastern history leads one to understand the transitional and formative time between 1958 and 1982 in the region and specifically in Lebanon. 1958 is a significant year for many reasons, including heightened tensions between sects, which led to a short war, mass urbanization to Beirut, the US marines landing in the Beirut port— marking the first full-scale US military operation in the Middle East and symbolizing the imperial move to the region, and the era of Shebahism. June of 1967

¹⁸ Stone, Christopher. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*. Routledge, 2010, pp. 16.

marked the Arab-Israeli War, hinting at the near end of Pan Arabism, and resulting in a regional shift and changing the regional order.¹⁹ “In June 1967, the mood changed in Beirut. On the day following the outbreak of war, Camille Chamoun emerged from almost a decade of ostracism, immediately resuming his place as one of the central figures of Lebanese politics. At the same time the Phalange Party, until then, was one of the chief supporters of Shibahism, a defender of the policy of the Arabist movement, which it saw as a mixture of communal atavism and ideological extremism.”²⁰ The headquarters of these militia groups become important when talking about the geography and its importance in culture production. In 1970, Abdul Nasser died, and with him, Pan Arabism came to an end. “In the aftermath of the Naksa, or Setback, dejected Arab intellectuals grappled with the contradictions of ideology, political praxis, and mounting challenges to empowerment, growth and development.”²¹ While the region shifted to more authoritarian rule, Lebanon continued to have a special sense of freedom and modernity. Part of this paper will look at why Beirut maintained a level of freedom. Due to the level of freedom of speech, poets, writers, intellectuals and political figures from the region often met in “cosmopolitan” Beirut. It became a refuge for the exiled intellectuals in the region. This is where the importance of geography and coffeehouses come into play.

¹⁹ Maasri, Zeina. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties. The Global Middle East*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2020. doi:10.1017/9781108767736., p. 13

²⁰ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 471.

²¹ Hanssen, Jens, and Max Weiss, eds. *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108147781. P. 140

C. Literature Review

This thesis finds itself among a limited number of secondary sources of academic literature, primarily in the circulation of decolonization discourses and political history of Lebanon. Additionally, however, the literature only begins to answer the question of how cultural production between 1958 and 1982 played a role in nation-building and national identity and vice versa. Zeina Maasri's book, "Cosmopolitan Radicalism; "Very little work, however, is available on the cultural dimensions of political struggle. How did global configurations of the Cold War intersect with regional anticolonial struggle and in the everyday life of 1960s Beirut?"²² The lack of literature on the political-cultural intersection fails to address the questions such as how the key intellectuals, artists, militia members, and revolutionaries produce culture. And how did culture and politics influence them? Another gap in the literature falls in line with the post-colonial discourse. For example, Stone presents the Lebanese cultural production to be a product of colonial underpinnings and manipulation. He suggests the imprisonment of Fairouz by the state and by the Rahbanis, but I argue in line with Chattarjee's material and spiritual formula for cultural production. The Rahabani brothers, Assy and Mansour, were taught in Christian schools early on, and their first music teacher introduced the children to music theory, piano and organ playing to Arabic music and to western music. Mansour Rabhani says that through their teacher,

²² Maasri, Zeina. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties. The Global Middle East*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2020. doi:10.1017/9781108767736., p. 7

Bertrand Robilliard, they “learned a lot about Western and Easter music.”²³ Fairouz, for example, set herself apart from typical Arab singers by not using the nasal tones and instead used clearer resonances, sounding more western.²⁴ While the Rahbanis were inspired by the west, they were also inspired by Egyptian music and trends in Cairo. The group of five, which included Egyptian Muhammad Abd Al-Wahab, Umm Kulthum, Rahbani brothers and Fairouz, inspired the Rahbanis creation of a new school of music included the following innovations:

“(A) the use of Lebanese rather than Egyptian dialects in their music; (b) the brevity of the signs; and (c) the ‘Lebanese’ or ‘Rahbani’ sound, which consisted of flute, piano, violins, double bass, sometimes the accordion, and the repercussion instruments the riqq and darabuka.”²⁵

While influences by the east and west, the Rahbanis created music inherently Lebanese. Fairouz, though admired by the state and by the international community, was not a puppet, but rather, was a producer and perpetrator of the inner, “spiritual” or local traditions that then became part of the core identity of a Lebanese person. Her life will be discussed in a later chapter, revealing the states of her cultural production, one that builds the nation, and one that goes beyond the state.

While this paper does not use Marxism as a theoretical framework, it is important to note that many subjects and sources did in fact operate under different branches of Marxism. That being said, some of the work produced by Mahdi Amel and

²³ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 156.

²⁴ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 156.

²⁵ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 156.

Fadi Bardawil, prominent Arab Marxist thinkers and Lebanese Communist Party Members, will help set the framework for understanding the questions of colonialism, dependency, and cultural heritage.

While Maasri pursues the research of the role of visual material, this thesis further looks into the cultural dimensions of the political struggle through the literary analysis of the 2nd Nahda contributions. Bardawil's book helps with the understanding of the Lebanese Left, which differentiated itself from the Cold War left. Literature around the Cold War is important when considering the soft power influence of culture. Bardawil's book takes a look at the 1960s to study "the rise of the New Left and its subsequent ebbing away, as well as an anthropological inquiry into the production, circulation, and uses of revolutionary and critical theory."²⁶ His book offers a different reflection on "the consequences of defeat, disillusionment, and displacement in post-1967 Arab intellectual culture."²⁷ Similar to Maasri's methodology, the paper will look at cultural studies from an angle of the post-Marxist perspective "that foregrounds a decentred account of power and hegemonic articulation of social relations."²⁸ The Eurocentric foundations of cultural studies skew the work of Third World traditions. In this, modernism is widely debated in the mid-twentieth-century decolonization A major

²⁶ Bardawil, Fadi A. *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2020. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv123x6kc>. P. 1

²⁷ Hanssen, Jens, and Max Weiss, eds. *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108147781. P. 155

²⁸ Maasri, Zeina. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. The Global Middle East. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2020. doi:10.1017/9781108767736., p. 2

gap in the literature, according to Maasri, is “While anticolonial Arab nationalist politics have been widely studied as key forces of transformation in the region, very little attention has been given to the role of everyday visual and material cultures in the transnational circulation of decolonization discourses, cultural forms and associated aesthetic sensibilities.”²⁹ This power over the president in 1998 stands in contrast to a meeting that took place between then President Camille Chamoun and the Rahbani Brothers in 1957, just before their controversial debut at the same Festival. According to Mansour, President Chamoun told them that he would either shoot them or award them a medal after the show depending on its outcome (Zoghaib 1993: part V, 72). This jocular threat is emblematic of the tension that surrounded their original inclusion in a festival that had been conceived as a showcase for international acts. According to Lebanese actor and theater historian Nabil Abu Murad, the Festival’s committee members “could barely hide their anger, concern and fear about including a program of local art in this international festival” (qtd. in Abi Samra 1998: 9). This was not just snobbery, but also because the Festival was an integral part of a larger elite nationalist project that aimed to highlight the Christian and European faces of the new nation.”³⁰

Given the time period and the nation-building phase, modernization will come into play, and Timothy Mitchell’s outlook of modernity will be applied, as he looks at

²⁹ Maasri, Zeina. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties. The Global Middle East*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2020. doi:10.1017/9781108767736., p. 3

³⁰ Stone, Christopher. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*. Routledge, 2010, pp. 18.

how modernity comes about in a non-western setting.³¹ Chatterjee also discusses subaltern modern nation-building: “While in both locales [India and Lebanon] the phenomena of the classicization of tradition and the appropriation of the popular were instrumental in the formation of identities, the main thesis of Chatterjee’s work is that elite Indian nationalists initially began pressing for independence from the British not on the political plane, but rather on the cultural one. Using Gramsci’s theory of incremental revolution, he describes how Indian nationalists assimilated in the public sphere, all while cartive out a private -- in their minds superior -- cultural space.”³² This is seen later in Bagdadi’s film and in the example of the Lebanese state using Fairouz for their nation-building agenda.

Since the secondary sources on the topic of cultural production are lacking, I use primary sources to build a foundation for pursuing these research questions. The paper will dig deeper into the lives of key intellectuals and sources will include memoirs, poems, films, and plays. The analysis will address questions such as why these individuals and these pieces of culture have such a great influence, whether they are reflections of culture (and what culture) or productions of culture, and if they fall under the category of culture or counterculture. As mentioned previously, the works of Roger Assaf, Maroun Bagdadi, Mahmoud Darwish and a few others will be analyzed through the lens of coffeehouses and cafes. Christopher Stone references Partha Chatterjee,

³¹ Mitchell, Timothy, ed. *Questions of Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2000. Accessed May 11, 2021.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsqrg>.

³² Stone, Christopher. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*. Routledge, 2010, pp. 141

who discusses the timeline of cultural and political movements and argues that anticolonial nationalists produced their own domain of society within the larger colonial society. The nationalists then divided their culture into material and spiritual domains.³³ This claim helps frame the timeline of the second Nahda and the new wave of cultural production, as well as the anti-imperialist and leftist accent that came to rise in the 1960s.

1. National Icons, Cultural Producers, and the Second Nahda

The Rahbani Brothers and Fairouz are widely considered to be some of the most celebrated Arab singers of the 20th century. Fairouz herself is considered a national icon, even across political divisions. Christopher Stone, while appreciative of the work of the Rahbanis, argues that their cultural production aligned themselves with the regime and the Christian Mount Lebanon, and stirred up underlying causes that led to the civil war. While he makes valid points about the ways in which their work reflected the state's agenda, I argue for reasons why the Rahbani family's, and specifically Fairouz's, work played a central role in the production of Lebanese culture, alongside with the equally important role of the leftist cultural production. A gap in the literature includes missing the Arabness of the Maronites themselves. "The landmarks of Arab history that guided the Muslims of Greater Lebanon--to say nothing of the cultural Arabness of the Maronites themselves--were ignored, and the modern outlook propagated by every life in Beirut was dismissed as a matter of little or no

³³ Stone, Christopher. *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation*. Routledge, 2010.

consequence.”³⁴ In the early years of nation-building in Lebanon, Bourkhalter depicts the transition that takes place under different leadership. In Beirut, Emile Eddé propagated Lebanon as a continuation of Lebanon as a Christian homeland with a Mediterranean persona, while Bishara al-Khoury saw Lebanon as an independent country with close ties to the rest of the Arab world and in recognition of its Muslim population. “The idea of Phoenicia as the mother culture of Lebanon become popular at the time. The New Phoenicians, a group of mainly Christian Maronite intellectuals of the Francophile Beirut bourgeoisie, foresaw an important role for estivation and tourism in Lebanon.”³⁵ While this paper does not focus on the “New Phoenician” culture being produced and propagated, it reveals the “outer domain” of cultural production in close ties with the French and the infrastructure put in place during the mandate period. “In this outer domain, nationalism begins its journey (after, let us remember, it has already proclaimed its sovereignty in the inner domain) by inserting itself into a new public sphere constituted by the processes and forms of the modern (in this case, colonial state).”³⁶ One form of culture could not have been produced without the other, and I argue, the nature of this culture could not have been produced without the “external” and material infrastructure. And there was more overlap than discussed in most literature. In order to frame the discussion, Elias Khoury’s second Nahda discourse will be applied. The Nahda was the Arab renaissance - the golden period for Arab artists,

³⁴ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 449.

³⁵ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 150.

³⁶ Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY: Princeton University Press, 1993. Accessed May 11, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctvzgb88s. P. 10

poets, writers and creators. The second Nahda provides a historical, political and literary framework. Khoury describes the second Nahda as follows:

“The second Nahda arrived in search of a way past the shame of defeat and occupation, but it was distinguished by the premature separation of culture and power. The first Nahda was created by a *mélange* of intellectuals from various movements: Arab nationalists, Islamists, partisans of Enlightenment, secularists, Liberals, socialists. The second Nahda, by contrast, was founded upon an alliance between the army and middle-class intellectuals, reliant upon nationalist thought after it had been rejuvenated with a leftist accent. The idea of resurrection called for by the pioneers of the first Nahda was embodied in the young officers, including those with rural origins who fanned the flames of the Nasserist experiment: land reform, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Syrian-Egyptian unity.”³⁷

While Khoury provides a base framework for understanding cultural production, I argue against his statement of the separation of politics and culture and agree with Zeina Maasri’s notice of the gap in the literature around the intersection of culture and politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Even the seemingly apolitical works of literature and arts carried political undertones or politically affiliated producers behind the work. Rather, the effort to create a culture in post-independent Lebanon became a mission for all the artists, musicians, writers and intellectuals in Lebanon. We will later see how this played out in the poetry revolution and the Shi’ir Group.

³⁷ Hanssen, Jens, and Max Weiss, eds. *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108147781. P. 6

2. *Sources and Methodology*

The sources include memoirs, literature, film, poetry, as well as photographs from the time period to study the culture of Beirut between 1958 and 1982. In order to understand the prevalent culture, the sources must go beyond the mainstream newspapers and periodicals, which often reflect the State's agenda. But it is worth studying both sides of the spectrum to understand what and who the intellectualists and revolutionists were going against. In order to frame the debate around modernity, Elias Khoury's theory of the second Nahda becomes useful again. The intellectuals of the second Nahda organized themselves and their work against American-Israeli imperialism in the 1960s and 1970s, revealing the leftist accent: "The demonstrations and the theatrical productions, the strikes, the painting exhibitions—all these things gave the impression of a place where the air itself was red."³⁸ Most of this sentiment stemmed from the Arab-Israeli conflict; 1948 and 1967 acted as two major dates showcasing the American-Israeli partnership and stronghold in the region. This paper will be a socio-historical literary analysis, so the works of Mahmoud Darwish, Maroun Bagdadi, Roger Assaf, Fadi Bardawil, Mahdi Amel and several more will be analyzed along with publications by Shi'ir and al Adeb and L'Orient de Jour. As a way to go about analyzing their work, the authors themselves will be researched in order to understand their upbringings, ideologies and beliefs. For example, Bagdadi and Assaf were both born into affluent families, but challenged elitism and the state through their controversial films and plays. The key pieces of their work will be Bagdadi's "Beirut, Oh Beirut," and Assaf's "Majdaloun" play. In the end, the question will be whether the

³⁸ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 495

leftists did indeed produce counter-culture, or whether it was culture in line with the Rahbanis and Fairouz. What constitutes it as counter-culture versus culture? Was their aim to dismantle the state or to go beyond it? By briefly looking at the life of Fairouz, along with the timeline of the leftist movement, the answer might be that neither side propped up the state, but that both challenged their colonial-sided state, aiming to move beyond the state in their cultural production.

This paper allows for a more de-centered reading of power relations in global cultural encounters, leading to a more nuanced analysis of culture. Bardawil's *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*, helps frame the theoretical discussion around the revolutionaries and leftist movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the Arab world.³⁹

In order to understand culture politically, the cultural analysis should be situated in its historical context to analyze “its generic codes, its positioning of viewers, its dominant images, its discourses, and its formal-aesthetic elements all embody certain political and ideological positions and have political effects.”⁴⁰ Through this lens, light is brought to how culture can serve to advance the interest of some groups at the expense of others, such as the state over the general population, or oppose hegemonic

³⁹ Bardawil, Fadi A. *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2020. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv123x6kc>.

⁴⁰ Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge. 1995. P. 56

ideologies, which in the case of Beirut would be the colonial and imperial ideologies. Chapter 2 will discuss the pertinent time period.

While reading through these sources, special attention will be paid to any mention of gathering places and the geography of his or her meeting places. Most of the coffeehouses, at least the ones that are highlighted in the literature, are located in West Beirut. The mixed demographics of West Beirut gave rise to a greater sense of intellectual freedom. Hamra, for example, although majority Sunni Muslim, had several Christian families in the neighborhood. Additionally, because of the density of universities in Hamra, the mixing of people from different backgrounds occurred more frequently. “Communism of all kinds, Ba'thists, Syrian nationalists, and Islamists”⁴¹ were found in West Beirut. In an article on Beirut’s cafe, Fadi Akoum says, “In a return to the eastern region, intellectual and cultural life was disrupted due to the control of the one party, which is the Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges.”⁴² Any other movements were often harassed by the Lebanese Forces, so if any informal politics took place at coffeehouses in East Beirut, they were quickly interrupted by the Lebanese Forces. East Beirut did not enjoy the same freedoms as West Beirut, due to the strong political forces and militias. Throughout the civil war, many would argue that East Beirut experienced more intense fighting, also contributing to the demise of coffeehouses and cafes in the area.

⁴¹ Akoum, Fadi. “Beirut Cultural Cafes.” Elaph Literature, March 30, 2005. <https://elaph.com/ElaphLiterature/2005/3/51036.html> .

⁴² Akoum, Fadi. “Beirut Cultural Cafes.” Elaph Literature, March 30, 2005.

CHAPTER II

WHY BEIRUT? WHY COFFEEHOUSES AND CAFES?

A typical scene at the coffeehouse would reveal men, and sometimes women, sitting for hours, sipping on coffee, playing cards, and discussing social and political highlights. Like seen in *Beirut, O Beirut*, a film set in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War where four young Lebanese navigate their existence along rapidly transforming political lines, people would gather in coffee shops either to organize strikes or protests, or to gather after a significant political event to discuss the ways they could respond. But could the ideologies, movements and informal politics have brewed without the coffeehouse? This brings back the question of focusing on the coffeehouse instead of another public space. In the time period between 1967 and 1990, technology was not available to the masses, so ideologies could not be spread digitally and uprisings could not be organized via social media as they are today. Informal politics could not be limited to the private home, as they would not have been challenged and refined or spread. Bars, cinemas and other semi-private spaces played a role in mobilizing movements, but they were not as accessible as coffeehouses.

Even the way coffee is prepared and served reasserts the role of the coffeehouse. Hattox explains that in the Middle East, people expected their coffee to be served extremely hot, which meant that it could not be produced en masse, or consumed

quickly. “Coffee demands that you take your time.”⁴³ Larkin quotes Henri Lefebvre in his celebrated for his classic *La Production de l’Espace* (1974), which outlines three interconnecting modes of socially produced space (or the public sphere):

“The perceived, the conceived and the spatial organization. The conceived by contrast contains the abstract, the imagined space, as well as the visual order, signs and codes of the city, dominated by political rulers, planners and economic interests. Finally, lived space describes how people inhabit everyday life; the way they create their city as ‘users’ through practices, images and symbols.”⁴⁴

Larkin goes on to say that every political organization demands a “place organization” as life is dependent and space making. Therefore, one could argue that the political movements depended on the life of the coffeehouse, and the coffeehouses and cafes in Beirut, to be specific. Political exiles left their native homes and found refuge in Beirut. “A babel of Arab accents, Beirut was the impromptu capital of various political groups forced to relocate by police repression in their native countries, beginning with the Syrian Ba’th Party, whose founders, Michel ‘Aflaq and Saleh al-Din al-Bitar, endured several periods of exile in Beirut.”⁴⁵ The freedom Beirut prided itself on also led to many challenges, instability and clashes. “What is certain is that the

⁴³ Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*.

Seattle: Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1985., p. 88

⁴⁴ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015., p. 97

⁴⁵ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015., p. 97

concentration in the space of a square mile or two (in Beirut) of so many conflicting allegiances promoted the free discussion of ideas, which had become impossible elsewhere, doctrines, as the virtually symmetric movements of the Lebanese left toward Arab nationalism, and the form of Arab nationalism toward socialism, were to show in the late 1960s.”⁴⁶ Even more so, as tensions rose leading up to the civil war, the emergence of new political parties or the strengthening of old allegiances ultimately led to the civil war. Interestingly, even within the coffeehouses and cafes, groups with different ideologies inevitably crossed paths and often clashed, but also were able to exchange ideas. For example, after the Ba’th coup of 1969, Ba’thist leaders established their meeting place in Beirut. “And then there was the force of habit: in going day after day to the Dolce Vita, which became their headquarters, they found themselves among friends—but also enemies.”⁴⁷ They could not escape contact with their rivals of the Arab Nationalist Movement.

The cafes and coffeehouses of Beirut in the 60s, 70s, and even through the civil war, were notorious for being the meeting places where informal politics took place. So, while Lebanon enjoyed more freedom, the state remained weak. The reasons for informal politics are explained in Michael Johnson’s *The Middle East: Sociology of Development Societies*. Due to the weak state of Lebanon, the “zu’ama” or the non-state political leaders and militia groups were allowed to function, and the state could not

⁴⁶ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 463

⁴⁷ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 463

intervene.⁴⁸ In analysis of the weak state, it's important to reference Traboulsi's question: "Does the weakening of the state always lead to an expansion of the public sphere and of civil society and consequently to the progress toward democracy?"⁴⁹ While weak states and civil societies might not be a causal effect, there is a correlation between the two. The public sphere can and will form even if there is a strong or stable state, but I argue that these public spheres stand apart from the state and act independently, allowing for ideologies beyond the state or in resistance to the state to form. The knowledge of non-state actors and grassroots movements provides an understanding of the leftist movements and intellectual groups who gathered at the coffeehouses. An analysis of their movements and production brings to light the culture and politics being produced or distributed. The civil war, which began in 1975 and ended in 1990, impacted the sociality around the coffeehouses, and affected the movements pre-civil war, but as sources reveal, the coffeehouse continued to play a role throughout the war.

In the narrative post-1967 of authoritarianism, social and economic transformations and capitalism become the master key to unlock intellectual, political, social, and economic transformations in the Arab world. It's a master key that is without much heuristic value, one that plots structural transformations in societies and modes of production on the same plane as the event of a swift military defeat, without any

⁴⁸ Johnson, Michael. "Popular Movements and Primordial Loyalties in Beirut." *In The Middle East: Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, 178–94. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1983., pp. 180

⁴⁹ Traboulsi, Fawwaz. "Public Spheres and Urban Space: A Critical Comparative Approach*." *New Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2005, pp. 529–541., doi:10.1080/07393140500371228, pp. 532

distinction between different registers of analysis.”⁵⁰ 1967 may be the most important turning point, as it marked the end of pan-Arabism, and shifted the role of the regimes. As mentioned earlier by Samir Kassir, the state was weakened, which gave rise to the leftists and the revolutionaries. At the same time, one can see a shift in the work of the Rahbanis, as they echoed some of the same sentiments of the revolutionaries, especially around the topic of the Palestinian movement. As Elias Khoury says in his description of the second Nahda, it was defined by leftist-Nationalists, with a twinge of Marxist thought. The second Nahda serves as a framework.⁵¹ This thesis only looks at the civil war through 1982, where key events took place, including the occupation and departing of Israeli forces, the Wimpy Cafe resistance of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and the decline or reshaping of the Lebanese leftist movement, as well as the claim to the end of the second Nahda.

While this paper does not focus on the leftist movement, as it is beyond the scope of this thesis, acknowledging and being aware of the Beirut leftist movement highlights the tension between culture and politics. While a wide variety of literature discusses politics during this time period, there isn't much literature on the intersection of politics and culture. In order to study the culture, the first and second Nahda must be studied. In light of the “awakening” or al-Nahda, Kassir writes, “The later development of Beirut as the cosmopolitan capital of a country that was itself liberal and that imposed hardly any restrictions on freedom of teaching, at a time when the entire

⁵⁰ Bardawil, Fadi A. *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2020. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv123x6kc>. P. 83

⁵¹ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011.

surrounding area embraced a strict regime colored with linguistic nationalism, is apt to give a misleading view of the history of education in the Levant in the nineteenth century.”⁵² The so-called Second Nahda was at its core, counter-cultural, which I argue then became the culture. While the state reinforced colonial tendencies, the intellectuals and key players of the second Nahda challenged the colonial and imperial culture driving Beirut’s image. Elias Khoury then vies for the continuation of the Nahda through the 1960s, calling it the second Nahda.

In order to hone in on the intellectual, leftist and even revolutionary movements, Elias Khoury’s claim of a second Nahda is essential. The second Nahda would have begun after the end of the first Nahda in 1955. Intellectuals, writers, poets and political leaders led discussions and formulated ideologies. It becomes clear that certain movements and ideologies were connected to particular coffeehouses and cafes, as presented later in the thesis. Elias Khoury says that the second Nahda began like a “lightning bolt, bringing with it a fundamental overturning of concepts, literary styles and the structure of political power.”⁵³ While many scholars suggest the second Nahda ended with the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, others claim that it lasted until the start of the Lebanese civil war. Whether or not an official second Nahda can be named, a clear movement of intellectuals and literary contribution took place in Beirut in the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, given the circumstances of the weak state of Lebanon, especially after 1967, these grassroots movements led to substantial formations of leadership.

⁵² Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 178

⁵³ Hanssen and Max Weiss, 357–69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 6

“This laboratory on the periphery came to life because it welcomed those whom the resurrection regimes now led by the militarocracy were no longer able to accommodate, pursuing the idea of the second Nahda in a fragile nation, founded upon subtle balancing that had granted it a democratic margin.”⁵⁴

“Leftist-Nationalist thought, which had met its match in other transformative political movements, especially the Marxist ones among them. It offered new contributions to criticism and the meaning of culture, including Ra’if Khuri in Lebanon and ‘Abd al-‘Azim Anis in Egypt.”⁵⁵ Khuri was a writer and poet, who wrote several books on revolutions, challenging authority.

A. Why Coffee?

In order to gain from a greater pool of sources and experiences, “coffeehouses” and “cafes” will be used interchangeably to mean the same space. The criteria of the space must include the service of coffee and must be supposedly open to the public. This is important as the paper will talk about the “Wimpy Operation” when a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) killed an Israeli soldier who was supposedly getting coffee from Wimpy’s Cafe in Hamra.⁵⁶ The coffee shop was even open to the enemies. The reason universities or other institutions and spaces are not

⁵⁴ Khoury, Elias, Max Weiss, and Jens Hanssen. “For a Third Nahda.” Chapter. *In Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, edited by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, 357–69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108147781.020, p. 379

⁵⁵ Hanssen and Max Weiss, 357–69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 7

⁵⁶ Wikipedia contributors. "Wimpy Operation." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 20 Aug. 2022. Web. 16 Jan. 2023.

studied in this paper is because academic or governmental institutions would have preexisting ideologies attached or only be open to the educated and the elite. The “supposed” public aspect of the coffeehouse must be taken with a grain of salt, as like many community spaces, certain demographics will be more welcomed than others.

Regardless, coffeehouses and cafes studied in this paper must be open to all, whether or not it is in fact used by all. Habermas’ theory of communicative action in this analysis on café culture is the link between social engagement in cafés and political engagement in the city. The café is a public space that gives the modern public an opportunity to engage in the political life of the city, and gives them the potential to affect broader political and social conditions in the city.

In order to get a sense of the coffeehouses of the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire, which are replicated today, Hattox describes the first small coffeehouse:

“The first is the small, local shop, which sometimes shared the same function as the aforementioned coffee stalls, acting, among other things, as a “service” cafe in a quarter, a take-out. There was, in addition, usually some space in the shop for customers to sit and consume their beverage, usually on the high stoop that stuck out from the stall, or on a few benches inside the narrow confines of the shop. When the modest confines of the coffee shop were insufficient to accommodate all the customers (particularly on nights when a story-teller was present), patrons spilled out onto the front stoops of shops adjacent and opposite the coffeehouse.”⁵⁷

The Ottoman Tanzimat, a period when the Ottoman Empire gave agency to the individual in relation to the state rather than to their communities or “tribes” was the start of the emergence of the public sphere. Not only were urban spaces opening up, in

⁵⁷ Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*.

Seattle: Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1985., p. 81

the form of public squares, gardens, wider roads, promenades, etc., but cities were witnessing the same phenomena that Europe had known in the 18th century: a proliferation of cafes, associations, theaters, scientific, literary and learned societies, salons, etc. In addition, independent and autonomous secret societies were actively engaged in organizing the youth, calling for constitutionalism, decentralization or simply Syrian or Arab independence.”⁵⁸ This history further deconstructs the eurocentric definition of modernity and sets the stage for the public sphere outside of Europe.

In Beirut, coffeehouses, became a place of informal politics, often resembling the above description. In an article on cafes in Beirut, an ex-journalist, when asked for directions to the American University of Beirut, pointed the person in the direction of Mat’am Faysal, an infamous cafe in the 1960s and throughout the civil war.⁵⁹ They served as geographical landmarks. In many ways, the coffeehouse took the place of formal political meeting places and institutions, as the coffeehouses, which lay outside the structured institutions, allowed for more freedom of speech. “On the margins of literature, and free of academic attachments, political exiles further enriched and complicated Beirut’s intellectual life.”⁶⁰ The reason for the rise of informal politics and

⁵⁸ Traboulsi, Fawwaz. “Public Spheres and Urban Space: A Critical Comparative Approach*.” *New Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2005, pp. 529–541., doi:10.1080/07393140500371228, pp. 537

⁵⁹ Alsharif, Ghada. “*Coffee Culture: Resurrection of an Intellectual Trend.*” *The Daily Star*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Life/Lubnan/2019/Aug-20/489947-coffee-culture-resurrection-of-anintellectual-trend.ashx>.

⁶⁰ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 462

the ways in which it spread in Beirut and affected politics will be discussed later in the paper, in chapter three.

Researching the importance of coffee and coffeehouses takes one back to the Ottoman Empire. Coffee first made its appearance in the Middle East in the late sixteenth century, coming out of the corners of Yemen. Dana Sajdi discusses how coffeehouses, since the Ottoman period, play a major role in bridging the public and private life and mobilizing civil society. “Ottoman cafes were at differing moments domestic spaces, places of business and leisure, an extension of the street or market, a venue of entertainment, a space of courtship, and area of communication, a place in which to read and a realm of distraction.”⁶¹ When coffee made its grand appearance in the Middle East, it created quite a bit of controversy. As mentioned before, coffee and coffeehouses disrupted the normal routines of society around that time period and blurred the lines between public and private life. Ralph Hattox’s book, “Coffee and Coffeehouses” approaches the topic from a historical and linguistic perspective, bringing light to the evolution of the coffeehouse. In the sixteenth century, coffee influenced many spheres of urban life in the Middle East. “In the economic sphere, production of and trade in coffee helped breathe life into many areas that only shortly before had been commercially moribund.”⁶² Hattox highlights all the positive influences

⁶¹ Sajdi, Dana. *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century*. London:

I.B. Tauris, 204., p. 135

⁶² Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*.

Seattle: Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1985., p. 72

of coffee but also focuses on the controversies around the methods of the coffeehouse and the social life of the coffeehouse. One reason for the opposition of coffee in the Middle East in the sixteenth century, that is also reflected today, was the ways people gathered at the coffeehouse and felt free to challenge authority: “The political activities that became an important part of the social life of the coffeehouse grew increasingly alarming to the governmental elite.”⁶³ Later in the paper, the events which took place in the years leading up to the civil war and throughout the civil war exposed the anti-authoritarian sentiment.

The coffeehouse, a semi-private space, blurs the line between public and private life, allowing members of society who were once contained to their private life, to participate in the public. For example, women felt more comfortable in the semi-private space of a cafe, which was neither public nor fully private. In “Writing Beirut’s” chapter on sexualizing the city, one gets a glimpse of the life of a woman in Beirut: “The public sphere controlled by patriarchy is also central to feminine resistance, where the boundaries between what Rose (1992:150) refers to as the ‘territoriality of masculinity’ and private female spaces are erased, producing ‘paradoxical’ spaces where women occupy, simultaneously, the inner sphere and outer patriarchal domain. In point of fact, women's participation in the voyeuristic spectacle afforded by the cinema empowers her and serves as a source of knowledge and power.”⁶⁴ While this paper does

⁶³ Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*.

Seattle: Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1985., p. 6

⁶⁴ Aghacy, Samira. *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh univ. Press, 2015., p. 94

not focus on the gendering of the coffeehouse, an awareness of the female presence, or lack thereof, speaks to the societal norms of the time and highlights their role in the informal politics of Beirut. Maroun Bagdadi's film, *Beirut, O Beirut*,⁶⁵ sheds light on the demographics of the coffeehouses and cafes from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. The film will be discussed in further detail later in the paper to address the role of the coffeehouses in political events and movements, but it's worth noting the demographics of the coffeehouses as shown in the film.

The people Bagdadi chooses to film in the coffeehouses may reflect the reality of who was involved in civil society at the time. Early on in the film, most of the gatherings at the coffeehouses and cafeteria show young Lebanese and students, the majority being men. Later in the film, most of the coffeehouse gatherings include only men, especially the scenes which take place at night. Given the time period, the demographics are somewhat expected. And the women who do appear in the coffeehouse scenes seem to come from a higher socioeconomic background, a Christian background (as they are seen going to the church), and seem to participate amongst the intellectual crowd. Throughout the whole film, only one or two women are veiled, and are much older. Several reasons could be attributed to the lack of veiled women in the film. First, devout Muslim women may not have had the freedom or space to act in a film, for fear of their reputation. Or, Bagdadi reflected the actual demographics of those who participated in civil society. Although the interpretation is speculative with some contextual support, he could also have biases based on his own religious background. In

⁶⁵ Bagdadi, Maroun, director. *Beirut, O Beirut*. 1975.

that case, the film would then miss an important element of those who frequented the coffeehouse. However, based on several articles and other sources, the coffeehouses were mostly frequented by intellectuals, political figures, poets, writers and journalists, with the majority of them being men.

Finally, reemphasizing the importance of looking back at the history of coffee which began in Yemen and the far east and then spread to the Ottoman Empire allows for the framing within a Middle Eastern context. Sajdi's article deconstructs the orientalist approach to modernity in the Middle East, by highlighting the Ottoman lifestyle from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, which was separate from the typical Eurocentric approaches. Sajdi's awareness and criticism of the Eurocentric understanding of the Middle East, serves as a helpful framework for looking at coffeehouses from a more contextual, Middle Eastern approach.⁶⁶

B. Regional Politics and Freedom of Speech

1. Time Period and History

Understanding the significance of the time period between 1958 and 1990 is crucial before diving into specific coffeehouses and particular political events or movements. An overall understanding of Middle Eastern history leads one to understand the transitional and formative time between 1967 and 1990 in the region and in specifically in Lebanon.

⁶⁶ Sajdi, Dana. *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century*. London:

I.B. Tauris.

June of 1967 marked the June War, hinting at the near end of Pan Arabism, and resulting in a regional shift. In 1970, Abdul Nasser died, and with him, Pan Arabism came to a final end. 1967 changed the regional order: “In June 1967, the mood changed in Beirut. On the day following the outbreak of war, Camille Chamoun emerged from almost a decade of ostracism, immediately resuming his place as one of the central figures of Lebanese politics. At the same time the Phalange Party, until then, as one of the chief supporters of Shihabism, a defender of the policy of Arabist movement, which it saw as a mixture of communal atavism and ideological extremism.”⁶⁷ As mentioned before, Beirut retained a level of freedom, which brought in thinkers and artists to the city, and this is where coffeehouses come into play. The cafes and coffeehouses of Beirut in the 60s, 70s, and even through the civil war, were notorious for being the meeting places where informal politics took place. So, while Lebanon enjoyed more freedom, the state remained weak. The reasons for informal politics, which formulates outside the state, is explained by Michael Johnson in the book, “The Middle East: Sociology of Development Societies.” Due to the weak state of Lebanon, the “zu’ama” and militia groups were allowed to function and the state could not intervene.⁶⁸ While this paper does not focus on the militia groups and the causes of the civil war, the knowledge of non-state actors and grassroots movements, provides an understanding of the leftist movements and intellectual groups who gathered at the coffeehouses. The civil war which began in 1975 and ended in 1990 impacted the sociality around the

⁶⁷ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 471

⁶⁸ Johnson, Michael. “*Popular Movements and Primordial Loyalties in Beirut.*” In *The Middle East: Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, 178–94. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1983., pp. 180

coffeehouses, and affected the movements pre-civil war, but as sources reveal, the coffeehouse continued to play a role throughout the war.

2. *Turning point of 1976 and 1968*

1676 revealed physical representations of imperialism and the resistance to it. June 6, 1967, Nasser publicly accepted the defeat of the Arab states by Israel and declared that he resigned from his position. Protests erupted across Cairo, and also other cities in the region, including Beirut, all less inclined to accept the defeat. “At the southern entrance to the city the most visible symbols of American domination, the Coca-Cola bottling plant, was burned, and later the parent company, along with Ford Motor Company, was placed on the list of firms to be boycotted by Arab nations in retaliation for their investments in Israel.”⁶⁹ These American companies and landmarks were targeted due to the unquestionable alliance between the United States and Israel.

In 1970, Nasser died, and Hourani described his death as “the end of an era of hope for an Arab world united and made new.”⁷⁰ His replacement, Sadat starts a new era of connection and dependence on the United States, which has been an attempt on behalf of the US to maintain even after his assassination in 1981.

Distinguishing between leftist ideologies and “primordial loyalties” or systems of patrimony, produces an understanding of the geography of the coffeehouses. Most of the coffeehouses, at least the ones that are highlighted in the literature, are located in

⁶⁹ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 469

⁷⁰ Hourani, Albert. *A History of Arab Peoples*. The Balknap Press of Harvard University, 1991, pp. 417

West Beirut. The mixed demographics of west Beirut gave rise to a greater sense of intellectual freedom. Hamra, for example, although majority Sunni Muslim, had several Christian families in the neighborhood. Additionally, because of the density of universities in Hamra, the mixing of people from different backgrounds occurred more frequently. “Communism of all kinds, Ba'thists, Syrian nationalists, and Islamists” (Akoum 2005) were found in West Beirut. In an article on Beirut’s cafe, Fadi Akoum says, “In a return to the eastern region, intellectual and cultural life was disrupted due to the control of the one party, which is the Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges.”⁷¹ Any other movements were often harassed by the Lebanese Forces, so if any informal politics took place at coffeehouses in East Beirut, they were quickly interrupted by the Lebanese Forces. East Beirut did not enjoy the same freedoms as West Beirut, due to the strong political forces and militias. Throughout the civil war, many would argue that East Beirut experience more intense fighting, also contributing to the demise of coffeehouses and cafes in the area.

“Lebanese authors and artists were not the only players on this stage. The openness of Beirut’s economy had its cultural counterpart, with one slight difference, namely that the emergence of the cultural sphere had preceded economic prosperity in the modern history of the city...The Nahda had left its mark on Arab societies well beyond Bilad al-Sham when Beirut was only the port of Damascus; the Revival of the 1030s likewise occurred before the postwar boom.”⁷² Beirut, a major financial market

⁷¹ Akoum, Fadi. “Beirut Cultural Cafes.” Elaph Literature, March 30, 2005. <https://elaph.com/ElaphLiterature/2005/3/51036.html>.

⁷² Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 460

and commercial hub, played the role of a producer and transporter of cultural goods. Writers became attracted to its appeal of its way of life, and no longer wanted to merely send their transcripts to Beirut where it could be published and distributed, but wanted to be based there to experience and be inspired by the aura of the city. Samir Kassir highlights the cafes that were at the center of this appealing city: “[The physical boundaries of the publishers and writers] extended from the Lazariyyeh Center in the commercial downtown, where the majority of publishing houses were located among a clustering of book shops near the Dolce Vita cafe, to the cliffs of Rawsheh, passing along the way by the Horseshoe Cafe on Rue Hamra and the offices of AN-Nahar, the newspaper founded on the same street in 1933, which gladly opened its columns to poets and writers – not to mention the campus of the American university and the two unavoidable brasseries access from it, on the other side of Rue Bliss, Faysal and Uncle Sam (whose name did not prevent it from serving as the favorite meeting place of supercilious anti-imperialists).”⁷³

“*Uncle Sam’s* was the first diner in Lebanon to epitomize all things American – hotdogs, hamburgers, grilled ham and cheese, doughnuts, waffles, pancakes, chocolate mud, milkshakes, apple pies, percolated American coffee etc.”⁷⁴

The juxtaposition of the cafe seemingly representing everything imperialist, does not result in customers shying away from discussing opinions challenging imperialism. This seems to often be the case across the board in Beirut coffeehouses

⁷³ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 460

⁷⁴ Najia, F. “The Supporting Cast of Beirut’s Old Bliss Street.” *Arab Saga*, Blogspot, 12 Sept. 2012, arabsaga.blogspot.com/search/label/Uncle%20Sam%27s.

and cafes. It is seen throughout the film, *Beirut, O Beirut* when the characters meet in various types of coffeehouses and cafes to plot against the developers and capitalists.

This is why it is important to stay away from the dichotomy that post-colonial discourse often subjects itself to. Yes, the Beirut cafes often resemble the sidewalk cafes of Paris, France, but the culture being produced in and around the European-looking cafes are authentic and true to Beirut and Arab thought.

C. Cultural Production

1. Shi'ir Group and Publishing Centers

Lebanon, the “Paris of the Middle East” or the “Switzerland of the Middle East” took on several projects to grow and establish a thriving tourist industry. However, throughout these efforts, the state was seemingly absent. Therefore, the private sector, known for its innovation, made Beirut into a place that “a moderately well-off foreigner could possibly desire...”⁷⁵ Interestingly, Kassir makes it clear who the audience is - the foreigner. The mass increase of hotel production affirms this drive to draw in the foreigner. Most of the hotels in Beirut were located in West Beirut or Ras Beirut. In line with the increase in hotels, came the increase in cafes.

Samir Kassir, in his chapter “On the Knife’s Edge” in his book *Beirut*, talks about the intellectual’s role in politics since the Nahda, the war of the newspapers, the republic of Arab letters and the cultural revolution, from various angles, including the

⁷⁵ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 365

Shi'ir group.⁷⁶ The chapter will serve as a resource for understanding the intellectual's role in politics since the Nahda, and will also lead into the war of the newspapers, the republic of Arab letters, and the cultural revolution, even by publications, such as Shi'ir.⁷⁷

As nations gained national independence, the 1940s and 1950s became an era of nation-building along with the production of national culture. From the late 1940s, a poetic revolution was established, mostly among young poets from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq— who were mostly living in Beirut and Baghdad. The poetic revolution gave birth to the periodical *Shi'ir*.⁷⁸ This wave of poetry differed from the previous generation consisting of the Romantics, who attempted to “replace the poetry of rhetoric and public events by one which expressed personal emotion and saw the natural world as an external sign of that emotion.”⁷⁹ The poets of *Shi'ir* believed in the importance of expressing the reality of things, but that it should not lack the poet's personal character, voice and input. Ahmad Sa'id, a leading poet of this group from Syria, believed poetry should change the order of things, giving weight to the use of the word, “revolution.” Hourani summarizes *Shi'ir's* sentiment by saying, “A new Arab

⁷⁶ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 461

⁷⁷ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 461

⁷⁸ Hourani, Albert. *A History of Arab Peoples*. The Balknap Press of Harvard University, 1991, pp. 395

⁷⁹ Hourani, Albert. *A History of Arab Peoples*. The Balknap Press of Harvard University, 1991, pp. 295

nation, a new Arab individual, needed to be brought into being, and the poet should be the ‘creator of a new world.’”⁸⁰

In this attempt at building a national culture, many of these poets borrowed from European literary techniques. There was a general feeling of malaise and expression of discontentment toward the Arab people and their position in the world. Similarly, music production does the same. Expert on Arab music Jihad Racy comments on the conglomeration of eastern and Western practices. He notes a “continuum from Bedouin music to rural music to urban music.”⁸¹ Other commentators, such as musicologist Victor Sahhab, reflects on how Lebanese music should set itself apart completely from Arab, or even Muslim, culture.⁸²

When the rest of the region stifled creative production, Beirut became a center for publishing and producing culture. More specifically, the cafes and coffeehouses of Beirut became the key places of production. In 1959, Beirut brought over and, in some ways, got to lay claim to an “iconoclastic novel by Naguib Mahfouz called *Awlad haratina* (Children of the Alley), for which the author could not find a publisher in Cairo.”⁸³ This novel had to be published in Lebanon because al-Azhar claimed it could not be published in Cairo. Egypt had been the dominant producer of music and

⁸⁰ Hourani, Albert. *A History of Arab Peoples*. The Balknap Press of Harvard University, 1991, pp. 396

⁸¹ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 147.

⁸² Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 154.

⁸³ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Univ. of California Press, 2011, pp. 461

literature, and there was admiration for their production. It is said that when Umm Kalthoum accepted an invitation to perform in Syria in 1931 via Lebanon, “Lebanese drove out with their small boats to greet the Egyptian singer...They welcomed her as if she were an important political leader coming back from exile.”⁸⁴

“In situating *L’Orient* culturally and politically, I wish to suggest that the newspaper’s discourse exhibits, to use Mitchell’s conception (1988), a particular way of seeing Beirut. This way of seeing had to do with the promotion and cultivation of a modern, urban society that looked to Western models of civilization and development in the shaping of an urban social order that required the disciplining of certain kinds of public behaviors.”⁸⁵ Thomas Burkhalter in “Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut” points out that terms such as “modernity,” “global North,” and “global South” are being deconstructed in academic theory, but continue to be used in “cultural networks and markets.”⁸⁶

This poetry movement and particular style is in line with the push and pull of the post-colonial infrastructure versus the authentic local voice. The key is to avoid the simplistic and dichotomous view of the post-colonial staying, saying that the culture reflects one or the other, but rather that the two are intertwined to create a unique, and new cultural identity. Poetry and music also reflected the geography of Lebanon.

⁸⁴ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 151.

⁸⁵ Monroe, Kristin V. *The Insecure City Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut*. Rutgers University Press, 2016, pp. 191.

⁸⁶ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 13

Mansour Rahbani, for example, talks about how Egyptian poems were “fragile and smooth like rosewater. Lebanon is the opposite, full of thorny bushes, wild nature, rocks and mountains, wind and snow.”⁸⁷

In the next sub-chapter, we will see how this plays out in the way literature and film represent coffeehouses and cafes, and how these cultural producers use the places as platforms to distribute their work and ideas.

2. *Film and Literature*

Nabil Khoury, brilliant journalist, communicator, essayist and author, wrote a piece on Faisal cafe when it closed its doors in 1978 due to the heightened civil war.⁸⁸ His short essay read like a eulogy, and also encapsulates the significance of the Beirut cafe. His translated piece reads:

*“Freedom of Speech was the favorite food at Faisal’s...
Reading a book was immaterial. More important was to hear what was said
about it at Faisal’s...
No one was judged an author or journalist before being recognized as such by
Faisal’s inner circle. It was easier to win a degree from AUB across the street...
You entered Faisal’s as a student, spending your first years as a listener before
you were allowed to join the dialogue
Dialogue in the morning...
Dialogue at noontime...
Dialogue in the evening...
All the paradoxes of the Arab world, all its [political] parties and their
ideologies, and all its VIPs... used to hang violence [in the cloakroom]
alongside their coats before entering the civility of dialogue
You met a hundred people in Arab capitals who would tell you, “I know you
from school or university” ...
You met a thousand who would say, “ We know you from Faisal’s” ...*

⁸⁷ Burkhalter, Thomas. *Local Music Scenes and Globalization: Transnational Platforms in Beirut*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 155

⁸⁸ Koury, Nabil. “When Beirut’s Old Bliss Street Epitomized the Arab World.” *Arab Saga*, Blog Spot, 11 Sept. 2012, arabsaga.blogspot.com/2012/09/when-beirut-old-bliss-street.html.

*It was the Arab world's biggest [political] party...
It was the Arab unity that foundered...
It was the pan-Arab parliament... that is now on its deathbed
It was the unborn Arab democracy
It was the backbone of a nation stretching from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the
[Arabian] Gulf -- a place where the revolutionary rested and the big shot
dropped a size
So long as you were outside [Faisal's] you dreaded speaking, but once inside...
you were secure
It's the Arab world that slipped away with no one present to bid it farewell...
No one hurled a funeral flower at its internment because most were either
faraway or exiled...!
But tens of thousands mourned it with tears
It was the last bridge, the bridge of no return. ”⁸⁹*

Could it be that the death of such places also represented the death of the building of a unique cultural identity, and in some ways an attempt at a national identity? Khoury calls it the “unborn Arab democracy.” This paper does not have the scope to cover this question - it begs to ask, who holds responsibility for the death of what started in Beirut? Is it the imperialists? The religious? The sects? Or is it the violence of the civil war, regardless of what was being fought over?

Nabil Khoury's poem / eulogy could be applied to other cafes too.

D. Beirut, O Beirut

Maroun Bagdadi's first feature film, *Beirut, O Beirut* encapsulates Beirut coffee culture, while also looking at the bigger question: what makes Beirut, Beirut?⁹⁰ In order

⁸⁹ Koury, Nabil. “When Beirut's Old Bliss Street Epitomized the Arab World.” *Arab Saga*, Blog Spot, 11 Sept. 2012, arabsaga.blogspot.com/2012/09/when-beirut-its-old-bliss-street.html.

⁹⁰ Bagdadi, Maroun, director. *Beirut, O Beirut*. 1975.

to set the stage for understanding the way Bagdadi showcases and represents coffeehouses and cafes in his film, it is worth dissecting the plot of the film first.

The film is set in 1968, an important time in history for the region and for Beirut. A year after the Arab-Israeli War, regional balance has shifted and foreign intervention is at its peak. Beginning in the 1950s, American imperialism landed in Beirut.

Most of this sentiment stemmed from the Arab-Israeli conflict; 1948 and 1967 acting as two major dates showcasing the American-Israeli partnership and stronghold in the region. *Beirut, O Beirut* orients itself around the 1968 Israeli attack on the Beirut airport. Three days before the new year in 1968, Israeli commandos attacked the Beirut International Airport, destroying sixteen aircraft owned by Middle East and two other Lebanese carriers. Samir Kassir adds an interesting comment about Lebanese resiliency despite the attack's devastating effects, as he says, "Even if it did not spoil the upcoming festivities for all of the city's residents, the attack did mark the end of Beirut's age of innocence."⁹¹ As mentioned previously, the film discusses the push back against the rise of American developers in Beirut. In an exchange between two characters in the film, Beik, the developer, and Kamal, the lawyer and a main character, the viewers get a sense of the two sides. Beik, who wants to take back the school building to sell it to foreign investors, says, "Give people the life of the 20th century. This is civilization!" Kamal replies, "If civilization means to disfigure our traditions and our daily lives then this is not civilization. What civilization evicts people from their

⁹¹ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., p. 468

homes?”⁹² Following this exchange, the next scene cuts to a shot at the main coffeehouse.

The social revolution atmosphere in Beirut is portrayed in the film by Maroun Bagdadi, “Beirut, Oh Beirut.” Bagdadi depicts Beirut as the hero and the antihero. Unlike many films produced at the time, which romanticized Beirut, Bagdadi tells a story highlighting the tensions in Lebanon. *Beirut, O Beirut* was the complaint that a young man, twenty-five years old, unable any longer to repress the political, intellectual, artistic, existential, and sexual anxieties of his generation, felt obliged to address to the city of his birth.”⁹³ The film tells the story of four main characters from different socioeconomic and confessional backgrounds and how they navigate the political climate in Beirut from 1968 to 1970. The messages portrayed in *Beirut, O Beirut* include the people’s roles in the shifting regional balance, fighting (or at least addressing) capitalism and imperialism, the tension of modernity, the role of the youth and their participation in strikes and protests, and the public sphere represented through Bagdadi’s portrayal of the coffeehouses. The film revealed the “relentless and continually growing appetite for political confrontation...and increasingly animated every aspect of social life, beginning at the cultural sphere.”⁹⁴

The two main coffeehouses in *Beirut, O Beirut* include the frequently shown one which appears to be inland and is made up of simple chairs and square tables, and the

⁹² Bagdadi, Maroun, director. *Beirut, O Beirut*. 1975.

⁹³ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 494

⁹⁴ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., p. 495

other coffeehouse, which is located on the sea and appears more traditional than the former.

In one shot at the coffeehouse by the sea, two characters exchange a conversation about the tradition of the coffeehouse and reflect on the generations of people who have gathered at the coffeehouse since the Ottoman period. The latter coffeehouse highlighted in the film gathers people who discuss more political, rather than social topics. Bagdadi portrays the young main characters as the protagonists, who challenge the neo liberal movements, the Israeli attack and the land sales, amongst other issues. A conversation takes place in a coffeeshop following the threat of having their building expropriated and in response to new people moving into the neighborhood. One man says, “In a while, there will be nothing left of this neighborhood and all the ones we know will leave. It’s almost full of strangers now.”⁹⁵ An interesting correlation can be drawn between this statement and one of the main causes of the civil war being the influx of people in Beirut, referred to as the “revenge on the city.” People from all socioeconomic and religious lines came into contact, and often clashed, as a result of new people moving to the neighborhood. However, Bagdadi portrays the coffeehouse to be somewhat of a safe haven. The idea of a “safe haven” relates back to the idea of the coffeehouse being a semi-private space. Contrary to the more social setting of the coffeehouse during the day, at night, the coffeehouse reveals a significantly different purpose. The night scenes expose a more organized and formal setting, and do not show any women amongst the men. These gatherings usually precede or follow major events

⁹⁵ Bagdadi, Maroun, director. *Beirut, O Beirut*. 1975.

or conversations. For example, after the interaction with Beik, the building developer, Kamal gathers with about fifteen other men at the coffeehouse to inform the neighborhood men and discuss further measures. The discussion of the American building developers highlights the contestation of modernity.

While the film itself is about Beirut and its culture, the behind the scenes view of the film also reveals much about the culture of Beirut and its people. Ibrahim Al-'Ariis's book, "The Hanging Dream; Cinema of Maroun Bagdadi," addresses questions of who Bagdadi was, what his intentions and vision were for his film, and how the history of the region plays a key role in the themes presented in his films. Chapter three, "'*Beirut, O Beirut,*' the Eve of the War," dives into the making of the film and the culture of cinema from the 1940s to 1970s. One of the reasons Beirut became home to many artists and creators was due to the freedom of speech in the country, especially compared to neighboring countries.⁹⁶

The three parts of Lebanese cinema included: The fifties, which witnessed many attempts by directors to make Lebanese films, most of them speak in Lebanese dialect on the events between the city and the rural place, that deals with "emotional problems that stem from the concepts of good and evil in a melodramatic manner with unclear boundaries anyway."⁹⁷ The films also deal with migration and alienation. In the fifties,

⁹⁶ Al-'Aris, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu'allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi*. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013.

⁹⁷ Al-'Aris, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu'allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi*. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013, pp. 40-42

Egypt some of their film producers as they relocated to Beirut. For example, film producers Ahmed al-Toukhy from Egypt migrated to Lebanon..

In the 60s, Beirut took the place of Cairo as the main place of production of cinema. “The bottom line is that the socialist measures that had begun to be applied in Nasserite Egypt in the early years of the state’s control over the production of the private sector and on the process of distribution and marketing of films prevailing among the owners of Lebanese or Arab capital who use Lebanon as a base for their work, it was logical for the capital to start flowing away from the Cairo to land in Beirut, followed by dozens of directors, technicians and actors, and still big stars as well.”⁹⁸ It’s also for this reason that the films made in Beirut did not reflect one national identity.

When Lebanon started to go bankrupt in the fall of 1966, Lebanese films started to lose importance. With the changes, social powers started to move around, and the middle class wanted to create a new Lebanon. The following years added more to the regional changes and shifting dynamics, including the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, and the bombing of the Beirut airport by Israel in 1968– which is highlighted in *Beirut, O Beirut*, the death of Abed el-Nasr in 1970, and growing social and political tensions leading up to the Lebanese civil war.⁹⁹ At the same time, the globalization of the world

⁹⁸ Al-*Aris*, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu‘allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013, 41*

⁹⁹ Al-*Aris*, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu‘allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013, 43*

led Lebanon into an era of political and artistic mixes and the rise of the Lebanese New Left.

Bagdadi studied in France and studied French techniques and filmmakers that he brought back to Lebanon. The fact that Bagdadi had the chance to study in France sheds light on his socioeconomic background and his political and religious affiliations. He was no doubt part of the cultural intellectuals of Beirut, challenging the dichotomy of post-colonial discourse. This is also made apparent in *Beirut, O Beirut*, as one of the main plot lines is that of challenging the developers and capitalism, seemingly taking away from the authenticity of Beirut and its culture.¹⁰⁰

Beirut, O Beirut start in 1968, during an Israeli attack on the Beirut airport, a year after the Arab-Israeli war, and ten years after the arrival of about 15,000 US marine troops in Lebanon. all of these things served to mark the growing presence and battle against imperialism and its extensions. Although this paper focuses primarily on the 1960s through the early 1980s, the years leading up to the 60s are key to explore. 1958 marked the year of a short civil war during which disparities in the country grew, in part due to rapid urbanization and a fast-growing poverty rate. Chamoun didn't help when he began talking in 1957 about changing the constitution to benefit himself, which would cause a greater imbalance and favor the Maronite Christians. Those opposed, armed themselves against the president, igniting a full-scale insurrection, and a civil war between sectarian parties.¹⁰¹ This is what spurred on the arrival of the US troops on July

¹⁰⁰ Al-__Aris, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu'allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi*. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013.

¹⁰¹ Anderson, Betty S. *A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues*. Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 330.

15, 1958 who came back to Chamoun. In the end, the US and with the support of Egypt, Fouad Shihab was a compromise for a new leader. The US troops left by July 31, 1958, only to return in the 1980s. The 80s in Beirut turned out to be a time marked by violence, occupation, and a melting pot of foreign actors operating on and out of Beirut domain. Maroun Bagdadi addresses foreign powers' involvement in Lebanon and pushes back against such interference through his scenes of people gathering, *in coffeehouses and cafes*, to push for anti-imperialism and true self-determination.¹⁰²

E. Cultural Producers and Distribution

Toward the end of the 1970s, the region became interconnected due to economic institutions such as OPEC and OAPEC, and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. But for countries without oil, Hourani says, "Other kinds of links were even more important, because they were links between individual human beings as well as between the societies of which they formed part. A common culture was in process of formation."¹⁰³ While I disagree that there was a "common culture" (but rather the sharing of different cultures), I do believe in the importance of the distribution and interaction of cultures, especially with Beirut being at the epicenter of the Middle Eastern region. So, with that in mind, I argue for Hourani's explanation of how the culture was spread by radio, cinemas and newspapers, but the most important medium was the introduction of the television. Examples of countries sharing and appreciating cultures included singers and icons Umm Kalthoum and Fairouz.

¹⁰² Al-__Aris, Ibrahim. *Al-Hilm al-Mu'allaq. Sinima Maroun Bagdadi*. Beirut: Dar Al-Farabi, 2013.

¹⁰³ Hourani, Albert. *A History of Arab Peoples*. The Balknap Press of Harvard University, 1991, pp. 424.

While looking at the leftist movements, one cannot forget the simultaneous rise of militia groups. Michael Johnson says that, “Ultimately, primordial loyalties reasserted themselves, but at the height of the Civil War it looked to some as though a social revolution was taking place in Lebanon.”¹⁰⁴ The tension between the left and right prevailed.

According to the archival article “Soon on Screen” in “Tonight,” the author, Farid Jabr, of the article says *Beirut, O Beirut* is about the collapse between people. Jabr says that Bagdadi takes from Doestevski and Albert Camus as he dives into existential questions, looking at the emotional and psychological state of the characters of the film. The conflict portrayed between the characters of the film does not necessarily focus on the conflict between people, but on the conflict between the modern and the old. In the wake of the “blooming death with modernity” beginning in 1968, Bagdadi reveals the tension of the various parties in the film and the tension between the old and new: the culture and the possible erosion of culture due to modernity. Bagdadi’s film reveals the old and new through three main characters, and one woman.¹⁰⁵

The first character, Amil, is of the Beirut bourgeoisie, living in isolation from what is happening in front of and around him. Rather than be part of the world around him, he exists as the center of his own universe, isolated with his books and records. However, he wakes up one day to the reality around him, setting in motion the

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, Michael. “Popular Movements and Primordial Loyalties in Beirut.” *In The Middle East: Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, 178–94. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1983., pp. 178

¹⁰⁵ Jabr, Farid. “Beirut, Ya Beirut.” *Tonight: Cinema in Lebanon 1929-1979*, by Abboudi Jaoude, Al Fourat, Beirut, Lebanon. , 2015, pp. 465–481.

existential questions. At the school where he used to go, he would interact with the working class - janitors and teachers- and he felt anxious now because he became aware of those existing outside of his bubble. He grows frustrated with his family, and specifically with his mother, who is only concerned with comfort, worldly pleasures, and simplicities.

The second character, Kamal, lives within this idea that Beirut is divided into two parts: the colonized Beirut and the original Beirut. Later, he explored the idea that the real thing that divided Beirut is not the sects or the small cities, not the large amount of money- but what is actually dividing Beirut is the Bourgeoisie class and capitalism.

The third character, Safwan, is a young man from the south who moves to Beirut for work. The author of the the article, Farid Jabr, argues that Safwan is the most important character in the film, exemplifying the plight to understand Beirut, once blinded by its magic and then being exposed to the real reality of its factitious state. Safwan starts to occasionally meet with Amil and later Kamal, often at coffeeshops, since the “capitalistic” developers wanted to demolish the apartment they would meet at. Safwan starts to realize Beirut is making him miserable and the magic of the city begins to fade. He realizes that Beirut could explode at any time, so he returns to his village in the south - only to live and die with his friends against the enemy.

Between the four main characters, there is one woman, Hala, the bourgeoisie girl who is lost in Beirut. Farid Jabr analyzes that Bagdadi may even use Hala to exemplify Beirut. She left her bourgeois class twice to experiment with reality. Once with Amil, but it didn't work out. But it was the revolution in her mindset and opened up a new world. Secondly, with Kamal, who used to tell her about another world which

was the original Beirut and the old. Kamal exposes her to the coffeehouses of the people. But that relationship is unsuccessful, as well, because of the class differences and differences in culture.¹⁰⁶

In order to frame the debate around modernity, Elias Khoury's theory of the second Nahda becomes useful again. The intellectuals of the second Nahda organized themselves and their work against the American-Israeli imperialism in the 1960s and 1970s, revealing the leftist accent. "The demonstrations and the theatrical productions, the strikes, the painting exhibitions—all these things gave the impression of a place where the air itself was red."¹⁰⁷ Most of this sentiment stemmed from the Arab-Israeli conflict; 1948 and 1967 acting as two major dates showcasing the American-Israeli partnership and stronghold in the region. *Beirut, O Beirut* orients itself around the 1968 Israeli attack on the Beirut airport. Three days before the new year in 1968, Israeli commandos attacked the Beirut International Airport, destroying sixteen aircraft owned by Middle East and two other Lebanese carriers. Samir Kassir adds an interesting comment about Lebanese resiliency despite the attack's devastating effects, as he says, "Even if it did not spoil the upcoming festivities for all of the city's residents, the attack did mark the end of Beirut's age of innocence."¹⁰⁸ (Kassir 2011, p. 468). As mentioned previously, the film discusses the pushback against the rise of American developers in Beirut. In an exchange between two characters in the film, Beik, the developer, and

¹⁰⁶ Jabr, Farid. "Beirut, Ya Beirut." *Tonight: Cinema in Lebanon 1929-1979*, by Abboudi Jaoude, Al Fourat, Beirut, Lebanon. , 2015, pp. 465–481.

¹⁰⁷ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 495

¹⁰⁸ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 468

Kamal, the lawyer and a main character, the viewers get a sense of the two sides. Beik, who wants to take back the school building to sell it to foreign investors, says, “Give people the life of the 20th century. This is civilization!” Kamal replies, “If civilization means to disfigure our traditions and our daily lives then this is not civilization. What civilization evicts people from their homes?”¹⁰⁹ Following this exchange, the next scene cuts to shot at the main coffeehouse.

F. Location: The microcosm of Ras Beirut

Through looking at these various primary and secondary sources that highlight patterns of gathering places and tell stories of cultural production and distribution, one observation becomes clearer – the location of these places. Ras Beirut, or West Beirut, is at the center of these movements. To be more specific, the few blocks between Bliss Street, that borders the American University of Beirut, and Hamra Street, are home to the cafes where the intellectuals, writers, and political influences gathered. In the next chapter, a few case studies will demonstrate how Ras Beirut, and more specifically Hamra, is its own culture and microcosm. It is the place that political and artistic exiles find refuge in.

¹⁰⁹ *Beirut, Oh Beirut*. DVD. Directed by Maroun Bagdadi. Beirut: 1975. 1:16

CHAPTER III

CASE STUDIES COFFEEHOUSES, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND INFORMAL POLITICS

In the early 2000s, several Beirut intellectuals from different sects and areas gathered around Modka Cafe on Hamra Street to protest the owner's decision to close the cafe due to financial hardship after operating for about forty years. Closing the café would destroy the culture and memories of the place. "They even called on the Lebanese Ministry of Culture to save the cafe."¹¹⁰ Despite all the efforts, Modka was still shut down, and the trend continued on to other cafes.

Next to Modka Café, there was Wimpy Cafe, which has since closed for the same reason as Modka. And next to Wimpy Café, one would find the Horseshoe Café that mostly attracted Arab intellectuals, opposition leaders, and political and artistic exiles. Not far away, at the beginning of Hamra Street, stands the Horseshoe Cafe.

"Over the course of 30 years, from 1960 until 1990, the cafes of Hamra Street became home to Lebanese and Arab journalists, politicians and artists, along with the intellectuals. In the aftermath of 1967, the year that witnessed the defeat of the Arab regimes at the hands of the Israeli military, Hamra's cafes were celebrated as clandestine 'back rooms,' in which the founding statements of Arab opposition parties were drafted and plans for coups d'état devised. When the offices of *An-Nahar*, considered the first

¹¹⁰ Chararah, Nasser. "Beirut Historic Hamra Street No Longer Cultural Epicenter." *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2013, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/06/hamra-street-beirut-lebanon-intellectuals-culture.html#ixzz7QJJegxNt.

liberal newspaper in the Arab world, moved to Hamra Street, the political and cultural character of the street was further elevated. Michel Abou Jaoude, a well-known *An-Nahar* columnist, later revealed that Yasser Arafat and his companions had gathered in his office during delicate periods in Fatah's history.”¹¹¹

Walking through Hamra in the 1950s and 1960s would be reminiscent of walking past the sidewalk cafes of Paris. The mix of local and foreign gave its unique charm and character to Hamra, attracting intellectuals from around the world. Hamra, in Ras Beirut, would become a microcosm to the rest of Beirut and even the rest of the region.

A. Case Study: Wimpy’s Cafe

Many scholars, and certainly Lebanese people looking back on the civil war, would say that 1982 was one of the most intense years of the civil war. Israel invaded and laid siege to Beirut on June 6 of 1982, with the purpose of combatting the Palestinian Liberation Organization, who at the time were headquartered in Beirut. Bashir Gemayel became president shortly after the invasion, in August of 1982. But on 14 September, “an assault against the Phalange party headquarters put an end to his life and killed several of his men.”¹¹² This gave Israel an excuse to occupy West Beirut. But members of the Communists party, the formation of Lebanese National Resistance Front (LNRF), and members of Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, SSNP started to

¹¹¹ Chararah, Nasser. “Beirut Historic Hamra Street No Longer Cultural Epicenter.” *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2013, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/06/hamra-street-beirut-lebanon-intellectuals-culture.html#ixzz7QJJegxNt.

¹¹² Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 515

harass Israeli army patrols. “Shortly afterward three Israeli soldiers who made the mistake of thinking they could safely sit in a sidewalk cafe on Rue Hamra were cut down by fire from an SSNP rifleman.”¹¹³

The attack on the Israeli soldiers occurred at Wimpy Cafe in Hamra on September 24, 1982, marked one of the most well-known political events which occurred at a coffeehouse. Wimpy Cafe was frequented by Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) members. SSNP always constituted a challenge to the system. “Over the years its secularism had attracted many intellectuals alienated by organized religion, many of whom, after a more or less short-lived membership in the party, went on to become enlightened establishment figures, such as Jumblatt himself and Ghassan Tawayni.”¹¹⁴ Due to SSNP’s anti-Zionism sentiment, the party also attracted many young Palestinians. The Israeli invasion in 1982 led to heightened tensions. So, when three Israeli soldiers were seen at the Wimpy Cafe, which could be interpreted as an infringement on the public sphere of Beirut, SSNP member, Khaled Alwan, took out his pistol and shot one soldier and injured the others. “The Wimpy Operation has a strong symbolic significance, as it marked the start of the campaign against Israeli forces in Beirut.”¹¹⁵ SSNP argued that this event encouraged the retreat of the Israelis from Beirut. While such a statement may be an exaggeration, the event sheds light on the political activity which took place in and around the coffeehouse.

¹¹³ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 515

¹¹⁴ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 485

¹¹⁵ Wikipedia contributors. "Wimpy Operation." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 20 Aug. 2022. Web. 16 Jan. 2023.

Khaled Alwan was a 19-year-old member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and after the shooting, Alwan walked home calmly. “Popular legend has it that Alwan had been upset with seeing the Israeli officer insisting to pay his bill at Wimpy with shekels. The Lebanese National Resistance Front claimed responsibility for the operation. In the aftermath, the Wimpy Operation prompted other residents of the city to engage in resistance against the Israeli troops. Such acts continued until the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the capital.”¹¹⁶ Alwan was later killed in an ambush in 1984.

The SSNP commemorates the Wimpy Operation annually, and in 2000, the site of the attack was renamed "Place Khaled Alwan" by the municipality of Beirut, in honor of his contributions to the resistance.¹¹⁷

In *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon*, Craig Larkin argues that the "'[t]he mythical power of this act' enabled a narrative which helped subsume memories of intra-Lebanese violence in the Civil War in favour of a 'more pressing narrative of Israeli aggression and violence.'"¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Wikipedia contributors. "Wimpy Operation." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 20 Aug. 2022. Web. 16 Jan. 2023.

¹¹⁷ "Wimpy Operation." *Owl Apps*, next.owlapps.net/owlapps_apps/article?id=45013982&lang=en.

¹¹⁸ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015.

B. Case Study: Horseshoe Café

Another event showcasing the political activities at the coffeehouses occurred in 1968 at the Horseshoe Cafe. Roger Assaf, one of the greatest figures in Lebanese theater and who ran in the same circles as Maroun Bagdadi, starred in a play written by a member of the SSNP, Henri Hamati. The play denounced the government's lack of response in southern Lebanon despite the Israeli provocation. "[The play] was shut down by military order on the evening of its premiere in 1968. The cast and audience decamped at once to the Horseshoe Cafe, where the play was then performed."¹¹⁹ The event remains to be one of the most powerful events amongst the Beirut intellectuals.

"When the play *Majdaloun* directed by Roger Assaf and Nidal Al Ashkar, and written by Henry Hamati, was performed in Beirut in 1969, Internal Security Forces stormed the theatre occupying the space between audience and stage. Actors continued their performance on the street walking accompanied by security forces from Ain el Mreisseh (Beirut's theatre location) to Hamra street up until the Horseshoe cafe. Roger Assaf filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Information on the basis that there was no legal pretext that permitted prior censorship on theatre, violating the Ministry's law provisions, and violating Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution and the opposition of censorship to the International Declaration of Human Rights which Lebanon was a signatory of. The director won the case. This incident was considered a historical and legal precedent following which theatre workers in Lebanon enjoyed wider freedom up

¹¹⁹ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 496

until the outbreak of the civil war when censorship measures returned to being a fierce weapon against freedom of speech.”¹²⁰

A New York Times article from May 30, 1970, titled “Lebanon Allows a Protest Drama” explains the context, resistance, and perseverance of the play. The author of the article, Dana Adams Schmidt explains that for the past year, intellectuals have pushed to circulate this play, *Majdaloun*, after it was banned a year previously after performing it four times. The play advocates a for a revolution against the current Lebanese state, as well as a full resistance against Israel. Schmidt explains it as “something of an obsession among Lebanese intellectuals”¹²¹ and seems to represent something much larger than the play itself. The title of the play, “*Majdaloun*,” is an imaginary state representing Lebanon. And after it’s been banned, playwright Roger Assaf fights in the court to have the decision overturned. Despite the legal rights to show the play, there is still resistance from the Lebanese army and state.¹²²

Al-Monitor article writes, “After the 1967 defeat, Lebanese General Security banned a play, *Majdaloun*, written by Henry Hamati and starring Nidal al-Ashkar, both of whom were affiliated with the secular, leftist Syrian Social Nationalist Party. In it, they sought to highlight the prelude to popular resistance emerging against Israel in

¹²⁰ Merhi, Mona. “History of Censorship in Lebanon.” *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, 20 Aug. 2016, howlround.com/history-censorship-lebanon-alrja-alnzwl-lqrat-almqal-ballght-alrbyt.

¹²¹ Schmidt, Dana Adams. “Lebanon Allows a Protest Drama.” *New York Times*, 30 May 1970, www.nytimes.com/1970/05/31/archives/lebanon-allows-a-protest-drama-intellectuals-win-campaign-for.html.

¹²² Schmidt, Dana Adams. “Lebanon Allows a Protest Drama.” *New York Times*, 30 May 1970, www.nytimes.com/1970/05/31/archives/lebanon-allows-a-protest-drama-intellectuals-win-campaign-for.html.

response to 1967.”¹²³ While the dates do not align between the New York Times article and the Al-Monitor article, the importance here is that there was resistance from the state toward the intellectuals and the leftists. However, “Hamati and Ashkar defied the state and staged an open-air performance of the play in front of the Horseshoe Cafe. After that, Hamra Street's reputation was sealed as a meeting place for intellectuals and those opposing the official Arab systems.”¹²⁴

Schmidt writes, “[The play] opens, on the stage of the 400-seat theater of the Hotel Phoenicia, with three Israeli soldiers studying a map of Majdaloun and planning an attack. Then the scene switches to Majdaloun, and its problems — the commandos, the efforts of the Government to control them, the inability of the Government to cope with this or any other problem, the interference of the big powers.”¹²⁵ It’s no wonder the Lebanese state resisted the play. Performing the play not only marks a turning point against the state, it also represents the importance of place, hence, reinforcing the role the cafes placed in cultural production and distribution.

The play, like the film, *Beirut, O Beirut*, exposes the imperialist movements and moments in Lebanon. In a scene described by the New York Times article, the Israelis,

¹²³ Chararah, Nasser. “Beirut Historic Hamra Street No Longer Cultural Epicenter.” *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2013, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/06/hamra-street-beirut-lebanon-intellectuals-culture.html#ixzz7QJJegxNt.

¹²⁴ Chararah, Nasser. “Beirut Historic Hamra Street No Longer Cultural Epicenter.” *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2013, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/06/hamra-street-beirut-lebanon-intellectuals-culture.html#ixzz7QJJegxNt.

¹²⁵ Schmidt, Dana Adams. “Lebanon Allows a Protest Drama.” *New York Times*, 30 May 1970, www.nytimes.com/1970/05/31/archives/lebanon-allows-a-protest-drama-intellectuals-win-campaign-for.html.

the commandos and the Lebanese officials are seen at a cocktail party. The scene shifts to “A slightly inebriated women declaims: ‘The Jews are more intelligent and stronger than we are. We must have peace with them.’ Someone adds: ‘The only way to deal with the commandos is to get them out of this country.’ The American Ambassador wheedles: ‘If you want peace, my friends, we can arrange it.’ This is followed by a riot of students demanding war against Israel.”¹²⁶

The scene is very reminiscent of scenes in *Beirut, O Beirut*, such as the scenes of the main characters resisting the development of Beirut and the student protests that arose in response to America’s imperialism and neo-liberal movements across the region.

Through these case studies we see how coffeehouses provided a place between the public and private, changing the social norms. The narratives of characters in Arab novels highlighted by Samira Aghacy in “Writing Beirut” provides some insight on who visited the coffeehouses and why, and how the demographics changed between the 1960s and 1990. From Yusuf Awwad’s novel, *Tawahin Bayrut*, 1972, the young female student, Tamima, dreams to move to Beirut in search of individuality and autonomy:

“In the city, she plans to take her life into her own hands, attend the university and realize herself as an autonomous individual away from the transparent space of the village that emphasizes group identity and denies individual freedom. When she visits Beirut briefly with her mother, she sits in “a pavement cafe” and is overwhelmed with

¹²⁶ Schmidt, Dana Adams. “Lebanon Allows a Protest Drama.” *New York Times*, 30 May 1970, www.nytimes.com/1970/05/31/archives/lebanon-allows-a-protest-drama-intellectuals-win-campaign-for.html.

the dizzying life and nervous energy of Hamra Street. By sitting in the cafe, she insists on rejecting the stifling constrictions of the village and its restrictive home space and embraces a *nonrestrictive semi-private* space away from the exclusively private space of her home in the village. Life in Beirut's spaces opens new visits and possibilities hitherto unavailable to Tamima."¹²⁷

In another novel that Aghacy highlights, *Taqaniyyat al-bu's* by Rashid al-Daif, the character, Hisham, describes the difference between pre civil war and during the war.¹²⁸ The Hamra cafes, once frequented by men and women, become a male-dominated space at the start of the war, where they gather to talk politics. "In the semi-private space of the cafe, men gather around the table, read the newspapers, share impressions and discuss the financial and political situation. In other words of al-Duwayhi, the cafe is 'a warehouse of news,' particularly in a war situation where people are always on the lookout for news about what is going on."¹²⁹ Coffeehouses served as an answer for those who felt the desperate urge to get out of the house, leaving the fully private space and entering the semi-private space. Coffee met a real social need. "One went to the coffeehouse not merely because one wished to drink coffee. One went to the

¹²⁷ Aghacy, Samira. *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh univ. Press, 2015., p. 39

¹²⁸ Aghacy, Samira. *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh univ. Press, 2015.

¹²⁹ Aghacy, Samira. *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh univ. Press, 2015., pp. 64

coffeehouse because one wished to go out, to spend the evening in the society of his fellows, to be entertained, to see and be seen.”¹³⁰

Beirut in the 1960s and 1970s prided itself on its cosmopolitanism. Charles Helou, president of Lebanon from 1964 to 1970 and a formal journalist, welcomed different opinions from writers and journalists. “Receiving the leaders of the local press, which is to say the nominal Lebanese proprietors of the city’s newspapers, he (Charles Helou) greeted them with the words, ‘I bid you welcome to Lebanon, your second country’.”¹³¹ His spirit welcomed the exiles into Beirut, so in search of some freedom of speech—writers, poets, journalists, intellectuals and grassroots political leaders—gathered at the Beirut coffeehouses. “Although poetic invention mattered first and foremost for these writers, their work was at the same time invested with the mission of changing the world, or, failing that, the Arab world. In this sense the Shi’r group was not unrelated to the circle of more overtly politicized writers who were published in Beirut.”¹³² Mahmoud Darwish, the well-known Palestinian poet and writer was one of those who frequented the coffeehouses. He wrote these words in 1982 amidst shelling from Israel:

“The aroma of coffee is a return to and a bringing back of first things because it is the offspring of the primordial. It’s a journey, begun thousands of years ago, that still goes on. Coffee is a place. Coffee is pores that let the inside seep through to the outside. A separation that unites what can’t be united except through its aroma. Coffee is not for weaning. On the contrary, coffee is a breast that nourishes

¹³⁰ Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*. Seattle: Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1985., p. 90

¹³¹ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 465

¹³² Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 465

men deeply. A morning born of a bitter taste. The milk of manhood. Coffee is geography.”¹³³

Darwish alternates between telling the reader the steps of preparing coffee to describing the sounds and sights of the shelling happening off in the distance. His words paint a contrasting picture between the harsh realities around him, and the stillness and assurance that coffee offers him.

Darwish’s statement, “Coffee is geography,” carries significant meaning in Beirut. Certain cafes and coffeehouses were associated with certain ideologies and movements. As seen earlier in Akoum’s article, “Beirut Cultural Cafes”¹³⁴, geography also played a role in the life of the coffeehouse depending on whether one was situated in East or West Beirut. Pre-civil war, Beirut was a fairly mixed city, adding to the vibrancy of cafe culture. However, once the civil war began, Muslims in East Beirut went from forty percent to five percent from 1975 to 1989. And similarly, fifty-five percent Christians in West Beirut went to five percent by the end of the war.¹³⁵ The dichotomy that East and West Beirut created affected social life and political developments. Hamra, once the center of theaters and coffeehouses, became somewhat isolated during the war. Unlike areas like Achrefieh and downtown, Hamra did not experience as much day-to-day violence, which helps explain the concentration of cafes

¹³³ Darwish, Mahmud and Ibrahim Muhawi. *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995., p. 12

¹³⁴ Akoum, Fadi. “Beirut Cultural Cafes.” Elaph Literature, March 30, 2005. <https://elaph.com/ElaphLiterature/2005/3/51036.html> .

¹³⁵ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015.

and coffeehouses in that area. Additionally, publishing and print houses were largely concentrated on Hamra street. “The majority of publishing houses were located among a cluttering of book shops near the Doce Vita cafe, to the cliffs of Rawsheh, passing along the way by the Horseshoe Cafe on Rue Hamra and the offices of An-Nahar, the newspaper founded on the same street in 1933, which gladly opened its columns to poets and writers—not to mention the campus of the American university and the two unavoidable brasseries across from it, on the other side of Rue Bliss, Faisal and Uncle Sam (whose name did not prevent it from serving as the favorite meeting place of supercilious anti-imperialists).”¹³⁶

The names of a few particular coffeehouses carry on in many Lebanese’s memories. “[Modca, Wimpy, and the Horseshoe Cafe] are synonymous with Beirut’s cosmopolitan history; a meeting place for musicians, performers, poets, exiles and intellectuals. Each Hamra cafe gained a unique pre-war reputation: the Horseshoe as an artistic and cultural hub, the Modca as a gathering place of Arab businessmen and later intellectuals, the Wimpy and Express Cafe as the meeting place for journalists and writers.”¹³⁷ Local narratives help piece together the history and importance of coffeehouses. Most of the memories locals share revolve around the years right before the civil war and then during the civil war. Pre civil war seemed to act mostly as a gathering place for intellectuals and for social activity, allowing for more women to participate in the semi-private space. During the civil war, the demographics seemed to

¹³⁶ Kassir, Samir. *Beirut*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011., pp. 460

¹³⁷ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015.

shift to house mostly men, as the situation became less and less secure and more and more politicized.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

COFFEEHOUSE NOSTALGIA AND LASTING IMPACT

Although the literature around the role of the coffeehouse is limited, their impact is evident which is especially through the memories of those who frequented the cafes and coffeehouses. They served as geographical keepers of memories - memories of theater and musical moments, and memories of social and political reform. Ras Beirut, home of the majority of cafes, stirs a sense of nostalgia in people. “This time period (1960s and 1970s) arouses the nostalgia of those who were in their youth during the sixties and seventies, especially those engaged in the political, cultural and commercial life of the area.”¹³⁸ Lebanese film critic, Mohammed Soueid, dreams of the past, recounting the life of the Beirut coffeehouse. “After shows at the Piccadilly theater, performers like the legendary Fairouz stopped in at Wimpy’s, where their black-and-white pictures still hang. The Horseshoe drew poets and Arab exiles; Modca, self-made intellectuals. The Strand Café catered to Palestinians, whose cause intersected headily with other Third World liberation movements of the time.”¹³⁹

The coffeehouses and cafes not only made up the cartography of Beirut, they also served as hubs where intellectuals, poets, writers and political exiles exchanged

¹³⁸ Abou Ghaida, Susanne and Alia Al Zougbi. "Oral Histories of Ras Beirut Nostalgia, Memory and the Construction of History." *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 15 no. 2, 2005, p. 379-392. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/677406. pp. 383

¹³⁹ Shadid, Anthony. 2008. "The Long War: Loss and Nostalgia in the Middle East." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8 (1): 19. p., 26

caffeine- fueled ideas. Beneath the veneer of the sidewalk cafes where people drank coffee, played cards, and smoked cigarettes, people formed and shared political ideologies, challenged authority, formulated movements, and played their part in the transitional and formative time in Beirut between 1967 and 1990. The weak state of Lebanon mixed with the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Beirut, allowed for the increased freedom of the exchange of ideas and literature. While the mixing of people from various socioeconomic, political and religious backgrounds was mostly a positive aspect of Beirut, it also led to the clashes between the various ideological groups, which escalated during the civil war. The presence of the leftist groups, the regional groups (such as the PLO), and the growing strength of the right, ultimately led to the violent civil war. Studying Beirut between 1967 and 1990 through the lens of the coffeehouses helps one gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the civil war, as the coffeehouses often served as a “warehouse of news” and housed the influential figures of Beirut. As the history of the civil war is still being written and rewritten, the stories of the coffeehouses, which highlight the lived experiences of the Lebanese, should be retold. “Knowledge and recognition must precede closure and healing; stories must be told not suppressed; the past must be addressed before the future can be properly embraced.”¹⁴⁰

The 1960s period of Lebanon’s history, though underexplored in historical scholarship, is one for which many Lebanese people—even those too young to have any first-hand memories of it¹³—have great nostalgia. Indeed, there is a lively global

¹⁴⁰ Larkin, Craig. *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, 2015. pp. 72

circulation today of postcards, posters, and advertisements that capture images from this time of the city's beachgoers, modernist luxury hotels, and even promotions for the Lebanese national airline—, Middle East Airlines. A quick search for “Beirut in the 1960s” on the online marketplace, Ebay, for instance, returns myriad printed materials that trade in the symbolic capital of the city as a font of Western modernity. This was a modernity seen in a range of styles and practices such as the aesthetics and design for a growing tourism industry (Maasri 2016), urban planning schemes (Verdeil 2012), even dance and music¹⁴—but also one identified more broadly with what historian Kassir called “the triumph of the consumer society.”¹⁴¹

Perhaps, Lebanon failed in its nation-building, but it did not fail in its efforts to create and distribute culture. In the words highlighted in “The Power of Place,” it is the city, not the country, that produces culture and outlasts the rise and fall of nations. In the chapter, “Power and City,” the author says, “In these capitals, cityscapes substantiated national achievements through elaborate palaces, columned government buildings, decorative triumphal arches, spacious parade routes, and commemorative statuary...The trappings of this primacy reappeared in the architecture of colonial headquarters from Dakar to Delhi and from Luanda to Lima, incongruous Greco-Roman-Victria-Iberian imprints on administrative offices, railroad stations, post offices, even prisons half a world away from Europe.”¹⁴² This aligns with Chatarjee’s theory of the external or infrastructure of the colonial setup. Blij goes on to say, “More

¹⁴¹ Monroe, Kristin V. *The Insecure City Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut*. Rutgers University Press, 2016, pp. 193.

¹⁴² Blij, Harm de. *The Power of Place Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape*. Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 182-183

than ever before, the city in the global periphery was the locus of authority and transculturation.”¹⁴³ Transculturation is when society changes due to the mixing of different cultures, traditions and beliefs.

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940, from the *Our America* by José Martí, describes the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures.¹⁴⁴

I argue Ras Beirut serves as the center of transculturation, for Lebanon and for the Arab region. Through the circulation of ideas from France, Egypt, Palestine and other places, the infrastructure of the Ottoman and French foundation, and the resistance to that colonial base and the impending imperialism, a culture was born. It is a culture marked by paradoxes – the French sidewalk café housing the Syrian Socialist National Party clientele or the place to perform infamous play calling for resistance against the state and its imperial partners. Despite the so called globalization effect, “A place is still defined by cultural milieus and natural environs whose imprints on its inhabitants are durable and whose power ranges from the infusion of language to the transmission of diseases and from the inculcation of belief to the delivery of natural disaster.”¹⁴⁵ The Ras Beirut coffeehouse serves as this place defined by and which defines cultural milieus. Culture, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains, is not an abstract power that is defined by social behaviors, institutions, and politics, but culture is a context, meaning the social aspect of life, the politics, the economics, and human experience all

¹⁴³ Blij, Harm de. *The Power of Place Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape*. Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 183

¹⁴⁴ Belnap, Jeffrey, and Raul Fernandez. *Jose Marti's "Our America"*. Duke University Press, 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Blij, Harm de. *The Power of Place Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape*. Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 235

come together to impact culture and to be impacted by the “context.”¹⁴⁶ The culture of Beirut cannot be summarized or boiled down to a neat summary, but it can be told and explained through the stories and memories of the coffeehouses and cafes of Ras Beirut, providing the framework for understanding the motivations and movements, both political and social, of Beirut.

¹⁴⁶ Schudson, Michael. *Politics as Cultural Practice*. Political Communication - POLIT COMMUN. 18. 421-431. 2001. 10.1080/10584600152647128.

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