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A tangled web of lies: reflections on ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian Turkmen women on the side of a road in Beirut

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author reflects upon the performances of *kizb* (lying) she and Syrian Turkmen women acted out on a street in Beirut. The women worked informally selling tissues as well as potentially other services that were deemed as too immoral to be explicitly and publicly spoken as the truth, at least in front of an ethnographer. Meanwhile, the author had her own morally problematic behaviour to conceal. Over time, plot-holes in each of their narratives inevitably started to surface. Yet none of them were willing to call out the other's performance of *kizb*. This essay considers some of the reasons behind this *kizb* reciprocity between the women and the author. In doing so, the author also explores briefly some of the complexities that arise in the relationship between the ethnographer and her interlocutors.

KEYWORDS

Lies; reciprocity; street ethnography; informal labour; migrant labour; gender

When Umm Jamal finally invited me to sit on the pavement next to her, one of the questions she asked was if I lived with my then fiancé. I shook my head and lied, and explained that until we were married, I would continue to live with my parents at their apartment, some 10 km outside of Beirut. Umm Jamal nodded approvingly, 'Good girl'. I continued in earnest with a variant of a tale I frequently told relatives and friends in Lebanon who found it morally problematic for unmarried couples to cohabitate. I concluded the story by way of noting that whenever my fiancé visited from Germany, he stayed with a relative. Umm Jamal's eighteen-year-old daughter, Salwa, interrupted by asking, 'So have you ever seen his [my fiancé's] bedroom?' Her mother frowned, but Salwa did not seem to notice as she laughed loudly. I blushed. When I elaborated upon my interests to learn about their informal work selling tissues on the street, Umm Jamal lowered her head and voice as she spoke of their misfortunes that had begun with the siege of Aleppo in 2012. She and her family were forced to leave their homes in Syria and seek refuge in a Beirut suburb a few kilometres from where we sat. She ended her narrative by informing me that they have since registered with the United Nations and claimed refugee status.[1]

As research progressed, 'cracks' in our stories began to surface. On a frosty morning, we huddled together for warmth and the women hoped it would soon start to rain so they could leave work early. With chattering teeth, I let out a sigh in agreement, and stated that when I left the house that morning, my fiancé was fixing up a pot of coffee and warm breakfast for himself. I abruptly stopped talking, realizing the gaping plot-hole I had just created in my story of locally appropriate courtship. The ladies did not say anything but Umm Jamal asked that I get some tea from the kiosk from around the corner. Upon returning, we resumed our chat about the cold, and thankfully my now satisfied fiancé (he had most likely eaten breakfast) was not so much as given a mention.

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By this stage of fieldwork, I had also quietly noted discrepancies in their accounts. When Salwa's husband, a missing Syrian regime soldier, suddenly reappeared, she became visibly pregnant within just two weeks. Not long after, Salwa miscarried, telling me that it was self-induced and that she was moving back in with Umm Jamal because the *ibn al-kalb* (son of a dog) refused to provide for her and her daughter, Hiba. These incongruous elements in our narratives to one another were sustained for a total of eighteen months. During that time, none of us seemed prepared to take apart any of our stories fully and call the other out as *kazzaba* (liar).[2] Why did we tell each other lies and carry on with this performance of belief?

These acts of *kizb* (lying) reciprocity that took place between the women and me must be understood more diligently in connection to the gendering of public space along particular lines of morality (Deeb, 2011; Deeb & Harb, 2013). Unlike other women who sat on stools in front of their shops and not far from their homes, Umm Jamal and Salwa were closely associated to the street rather than the domestic sphere: a distance from the hearth that was further amplified by the fact that the women were displaced Syrian Turkmen and spoke to each other in Turkmen. Some of the more sympathetic people in the neighbourhood described the selling of tissues by Umm Jamal and Salwa as a cover: the women were not really working but were in fact beggars who at least tried to earn a living through work. It was implied that the women had no choice but to sit on the side of the street.

A majority of my interlocutors however, warned me not to trust the women. They referred to them as '*niswan min al-sharì*' (women from the street), a term used locally to imply a lower morality most likely due to a public display of sexual promiscuity. When I asked for further details as to what specifically made Umm Jamal and Salwa 'women from the street', my interlocutors often changed the subject or responded with silence. Socially unacceptable behaviour that could not be officially accounted for in the social fabric of 'moral registers' (Schielke, 2009) was, at least in the context of my relationship with the street, rendered as almost unspeakable—if not completely so.

Nevertheless, as time went on, plot-holes in residents' narratives began to surface and it became increasingly apparent that this *kizb* reciprocity extended to other people in the neighbourhood. Once, when requesting a falafel for Umm Jamal, the Egyptian sandwich-maker immediately realized who my special order of no parsley and extra tomatoes was for, and warned me not to believe any of the stories told by the 'old lady' and her daughter: 'They [the women and daughter] are *kazzabin* (liars) … they are not refugees and make plenty of money from the street.' After I asked him how the women could possibly make large amounts of money from selling tissues, he averted his eyes and said with a smirk, 'We work them hard.' He handed me the tightly wrapped sandwich smeared with *harr* (red chilli paste)—despite my protests—and the conversation was firmly drawn to a close. Although the sandwich-maker was unwilling —or unable—to fully expose the 'hidden realities' the women's lies were concealing, his complicity was nonetheless suggestive of the centrality of *kizb* as a reciprocal manoeuvre to conceal the reality of certain morally questionable forms of behaviour. *Kizb* reciprocity belonged to a web of social significance that I, as an ethnographer, a woman, a regular on the street and potential friend of the women had become enmeshed within.

At the start of Metcalf's auto-ethnography documenting his experiences of living with a Berawan Longhouse community in Borneo, he writes, 'It is a matter not only of lies told by anthropologists, but also of lies told to anthropologists' (Metcalf, 2002: 1). Metcalf goes on to illustrate that as a social and quite possibly universal phenomenon, lying, in its different guises, poses certain problems for anthropologists and ethnographers. Not only are we faced with the question as to what type of understanding can be reached if people (including ourselves) are potentially telling 'untruths'. But also, how do lies impact upon the ways in which we collect and document our data? Few anthropologists have reflected—or at least written openly— about the epistemological and methodological difficulties that lying brings to the fore. Lies, after all, are a thorny issue to tackle. Anthropologists who either admit their lies or suggest interlocutors are not telling the truth open themselves up to a whole number of vulnerabilities (Dresch, 2000).

Such exposure often brings out inevitable but valid criticism about the ethical repercussions of a researcher lying during their fieldwork (ibid). Gilsenan's study of labour hierarchy in the Lebanese

village of Berqayl during the 1970s is a case in point (1996). He received a scathing review from Fawaz who questioned the genuineness of his relationship with villagers because Gilsenan had lied, telling them that he was studying for a doctorate (Fawaz, 1997). Fawaz is right to question Gilsenan's integrity but there is still something to be said about the roles of lies within the process of trying to explain to interlocutors the merits of conducting participant-observation.[3] Similarly to Metcalf, I do not only have in mind the lies told by anthropologists but also those that are conveyed by interlocutors.

When I first spoke of my intentions to study their work selling tissues, Umm Jamal contextualized her precarious position on the side of the street in relation to the Syrian conflict, claiming that she was registered at the United Nations (UN). Over time and as conversation began to flow, Umm Jamal complained constantly about the difficulties of keeping a *kafil* (sponsor) for a work permit. When I decided to ask about the UN, she told me that she had never registered there. While unclear if Umm Jamal simply forgot about what she had told me during our first meeting, it is still of significance that as I became potentially more of a friend than a researcher, she seemed to speak less of what she might have expected I wanted to hear and more about the intimacies of her life. I too was not inclined toward drawing too much attention to her lies. Similarly, it emerged not long after I met the two women that Salwa was not her real name. Without questioning this name switch, I simply began to call Salwa by her other name.

Significantly, while some truths such as fake names and official statuses in Lebanon surfaced throughout the course of fieldwork and were treated as such without further inquiry, there were other lies that continued to stick and to which none of us was willing to reveal as *kizb*—and this included cohabitation with my fiancé. My decision to start my engagement with Umm Jamal and Salwa with lies was a methodological one. Drawing from professional and personal experience, I felt that there were certain aspects of my life that could not be discussed with people I had just met, and most especially on the side of a street. I expected the 'truth' of my unmarried cohabitation could lead to certain conclusions about my own sexual behaviour. I also anticipated that my presence on the street would draw unwanted attention from men who might make assumptions about my sexual availability. I therefore thought it wiser to conceal certain morally questionable aspects of my life. While this mutual awareness of the importance of maintaining the status quo of certain *kizb* might well be due to a shared local and tacit understanding of how to present oneself within Beirut's public arenas, the social significance of *kizb* has still to be unpacked.

It is Gilsenan who has taken the analysis further by arguing that lying can in fact be treated as a site for ethnographic study. He suggests that lying is an open-ended process and a form of mediated knowledge that falls both within and outside of individualized intent (2016). For men in the of Berqayl *kizb* was an important narrative device in the playful entertaining performances of public social biographies of status and honour. This notion of *kizb* continues to play a central role in the social reproduction of gendered subjectivities on the Beirut street—and beyond fieldwork to include experiences in my everyday life. During my time with the women, we were constantly confronted with the question of whether each other's claims were based on truths or falsities. Calling someone out as *kazzaba* had the potential to break down moral orders, social status and even relationships. There were certain statements, which, if discovered to be untrue, could therefore have greater repercussions than other smaller 'white' lies. With this in mind, playful and teasing tactics were often deployed in order to divert attention away from these dangerous truths.

As the plot-holes in the narratives of Umm Jamal and Salwa grew deeper and wider with every visit, the women engaged me in joking relations rife with sexual innuendos that became increasingly graphic. Whenever they heard that my fiancé was visiting, it was Salwa who took the most pleasure in asking if I had eaten any cucumbers and yoghurt earlier that day, or perhaps during the previous night. Umm Jamal also participated in these performances, often raising her hand as if to hit Salwa but instead breaking out into a shoulder dance and eyeing me as she asked, 'So is it up or down today?' I laughed, pointing in the direction of the university where I taught and said, 'I have work down there today.' We were all in hysterics. These teasing relations about sex and the body were potentially ways through which the women revealed to me that they had noticed the plot-

holes in *my* story (for more on joking relations, see Graeber, 2007). They knew what truth my performances of *kizb* were trying to conceal. By instigating these joking relations, however, the women were also, somewhat teasingly, revealing to me what truths their acts of lying were trying to conceal.

Not long after joining Umm Jamal on the street, some of the men passing by would ask—somewhat predictably—if I were Ukrainian, a nationality of women in Lebanon often stereotyped as sex-workers. On one occasion, when a man slowed down in order to inquire if I had an Eastern European background, Umm Jamal quickly spoke up, 'How are you, Mister M.? She's my daughter!' The man smirked, 'Like your daughter Salwa?' Umm Jamal responded, 'No, she looks after her parents and comes to sit with us sometimes.' When the man drove off, we were silent until Umm Jamal started smiling, speaking softly from under her breath, '*Nihna shirkit ksas*' (colloquial for 'we are a company of pussies'). For once, Salwa remained quiet. She looked at me from the corner of her eyes, I smiled, and we all laughed loudly.

Fellow anthropologists have asked why I never confronted the women about their sex work. Opportunities had clearly presented themselves, such as after the incident with 'Mister M.' It was also difficult not to notice certain men in the neighbourhood presenting Salwa, who wore a black *`abaya* and *hijab,* with styles of clothes she might only wear privately. Along with the sparkly stilettos and miniskirts, she received money, sometimes up to the amount of 30,000 LL (approximately 15 British pounds).[4] The man would usually respond to her sweet gratitude by nodding and saying that he would return shortly—i.e., after I had left. Umm Jamal would then thank him for his generosity and encouraged his imminent return. After the man drove off, Salwa regularly broke out into fits of laughter, with Umm Jamal slapping her gently to quiet her down. I found it of significance that during these exchanges, both the clothes and money were given directly to Salwa's young daughter, Hiba. Once, after vocalizing my observations, Salwa looked me straight in the eyes and asked, 'These gifts are for Hiba, not me!' I became impatient with Salwa's teasing but she refused to answer my question when I asked what Hiba might want from these elaborate clothes. Salwa responded playfully demanding how I could possibly not believe her.

There is of course another obvious question to be raised. Why did I not eventually tell Umm Jamal and Salwa the truth about my living situation with the then fiancé? The simple response is that the women never explicitly demanded the truth—even after the numerous trip-ups in my narrative. A longer answer is that the women did in fact continuously remind me of my *kizb* through joking relations directed toward me. At times, these forms of joking relations intensified. Salwa was most especially active in carrying out joking attacks where she would become quite physical, grabbing my breast or around my groin area to check if I had recently 'worked them'. I was initially very indignant but soon became quick enough to slap her hand away. Only once did I reciprocate Salwa's violent advances. I was particularly tired that day and without thinking, pretended to reach for *her* breast. Salwa recoiled angrily—if not painfully—before quickly hiding her reaction behind a smile. I was instantly filled with regret. Instead of asking for further details, I opted for offering to fetch the tea. She demanded why I had not done so already.

Whereas the lighter types of joking relations about cucumbers and yoghurt reproduced an implicit but shared understanding of the values of *kizb*, 'joking attacks' intermittently carried out by Salwa challenged my performance of *kizb* and diverted attention away from her plot-holes and questionable morality: she was not the only one who was 'working' her sexual organs. Yet, if they completely disclosed my *kizb* of living with my fiancé out of wedlock, I could potentially retaliate and reveal theirs. But there was clearly more at stake for the women than for me. Even after we became friends who confided in each other about our worries for the future, the possibility of me getting up and walking away from the street to work somewhere else was far greater than theirs. I was after all the researcher who had sat down next to Umm Jamal and Salwa in order to document their lives.

In truth, writing this paper feels like an act of betrayal to Umm Jamal and Salwa. The sense of guilt is not necessarily the same as Gilsenan experienced when he lied to his interlocutors in Berqayl in that I do not fully regret starting my relationship with lies. Rather my shame is in exposing their lies. And in

writing these sentences, I wonder if that is the reason why anthropologists rarely want to speak about lies. In hindsight, talking about truths or denying their existence (and thus lies) seems far easier (Metcalf, 2002).

I doubt that Umm Jamal and Salwa will ever read my reflections—even if these thoughts are one day translated into Turkmen or Arabic. They are illiterate and their lives are consumed with making ends meet so that their daughters, sons and grandchildren might no longer be associated with work on the street. But they still have dreams and aspirations. In the words of Umm Jamal on a hot day while car exhaust pipes spat fumes into her face, 'Oh for a wooden house surrounded by trees, away from all this work. And of course, a good looking man … you know like the ones you see in American films.'

Notes

1. Refugees in Lebanon hold an ambivalent and complicated status because the country has not signed the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nor its 1967 Protocol. Lebanon may have accepted other human-rights treaties concerning refugee protection and has taken these agreements to take constitutional precedence over domestic law, yet it is apparent that there remains a minute application of these regulations (see for example: Agosti, 2016).
2. In this paper I am using the colloquial term *kazzaba/kizb* for the standard '*kadhaba'* from the root *'kadhib'*.
3. These challenges of trying to define anthropology to a perplexed audience are of course not limited to fieldwork. It took years, if not a decade, before my family came to understand my interests. Extended family members in Lebanon who were proud of the fact that I, along with some cousins, were the first generation to attend university, often questioned my choice of profession: 'Why not study something more useful like law? Better yet, become a medical doctor.' Meanwhile, certain friends initially confused anthropology with the study of ants. Still, I am fortunate that despite their on-going bewilderment, family and friends continue to support my decision to pursue anthropology as best they can.
4. Salwa's gratitude for these gifts was different to the display of deference when a generic member of the public made a charitable donation usually of 1000 LL (approximately 0.5 British pounds).

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