

**Love, Lebanese Style:
Towards an either/and analytical framework of kinship
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Abstract.

My article draws on a yearlong fieldwork conducted in Lebanon and builds on the existing literature on love and marriage in the Arab world in order to reiterate the unison of the imaginary with the material when thinking through romantic love. In addition, it prioritizes positive interpretations of kin relations by highlighting the equally important inclusive and relational qualities that external kin relations conduce. By doing so, it adds an important layer to our understanding of the role and scope of kin relations vis-à-vis the couple. Kin approval ought not be seen as either/or divisive/conditional. For many couples, kin relations constitute an arena where they can disseminate their affective bond. Such analysis is three-fold. In addition to embracing the multiple subjectivity of my interlocutors, it moves beyond the strict political economy approach that informs marriage studies in the Middle East and dismantles monolithic perceptions of Middle Eastern kin networks.

Keywords. Romantic love, Kinship, Intimacy.

I Love You But...

I love you, but you'd better come up with convincing answers soon... my mom and dad are growing tired.ⁱ

Although the interview was being taped, I noted down Yasmine's statement in my notebook. In addition, I underscored it twice. Yasmine and Imad are one of two-dozen cis heterosexual couples with whom I conducted in-depth interviews whilst researching everyday practices of romantic love in contemporary Lebanon. I developed a close bond with Yasmine and Imad, oftentimes sharing my views on matters of concern they raised with me. On that particular day, the general mood that engulfed our meeting was particularly bleak. This is because we were discussing the "shortcomings" of Imad, yet

again, and I had run out of suggestions and recommendations on this occasion. Imad's "shortcomings," according to Yasmine's parents, can be summed up in his reluctance to complete his university education. Whilst pursuing a degree in construction engineering from the Lebanese University, Imad successfully "revamped" his father's business, which consists of contracting heavy machinery to major construction sites. By doing so, Imad forged an esteemed and reputable name for his father's business, which led him to cease his studies and to dedicate himself fully to his newly-found vocation. Although Yasmine and Imad grew up in households of comparable income, evident in the comparable patterns and history of spending they shared with me, pursuing higher education has been a constant in Yasmine's family for no less than three generations; Imad, on the other hand, is the first among his immediate kin to enter university.

For the majority of the couples I interviewed, whose details I relate in my methodology section, their immediate kin did contest their relationship at some point for a myriad of (often gendered) reasons, including financial ones, such as the "groom's" inability to provide housing on his own, social ones, such as the "bride's" negatively-perceived social standing, or economic ones, whereby upwards social mobility is deemed minimal. The case of Yasmine and Imad, alongside the "love stories" I recount hereafter illuminate us on the multifacetedness of intimacy in contemporary Lebanese society. Not only is intimacy compatible with materiality, as Viviana Zelizer (2000) has previously demonstrated, further "measurable" variables contribute to constructing malleable and adaptive forms of intimacy, as I soon show through the concept of "inclusive intimacy." Seeing the centrality of informal networks, rather than the state, in social, political, and civil participation in the Middle East (Singerman 2006), the self is best understood as an extension of others, notably close kin (Joseph 1997). The enmeshment of relationality with materiality produces an affective regimen where closeness, both in physical and conceptual terms and material security constantly inform each other. Since one is more likely to seek protection from the state within their kin boundaries (Joseph 2000), as opposed to seeking the state for protection, social mobility, futurities and imaginations are constructed from an early age following internal (re)circulation of affective exchange. Whilst financial negotiations are central to courtship

periods (Singerman 1995; Hoodfar 1997), they do not devoid the couple from affectivities. When Hoodfar (1997, 67) examined marriage negotiations in low-income Cairo, one of her interlocutors stated:

If parents conduct a good and smart marriage negotiation for their children, it is most unlikely that the marriage would end in disaster.

Such negotiations ought not be read in opposition to the couple. Instead, they endow the couple with the very support system it will eventually rely on. This view, I believe, has not been given the importance it merits in the literature on marriage in the Middle East, hence my emphasis on the unison of the material with the affective when examining the couple-space. This unison resonates with Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 77) who, following her examination of the intersection of society and subjectivity states:

Transformations in the outer (spatial, physical, built, material) environment through political means provoke qualified forms of inside (interior, inner, subjective) experience that are expressed in embodied and metaphorical forms.

In addition, it is capable of accounting for the ontological dimension of the everyday, by *not* taking for granted my interlocutors' aspiration, desire, and enjoyment (Sehlikoglu 2017, 87) (*my emphasis*).

The Price of Love and Marriage in the Arab World

The relationship between man and woman in the Middle East is often examined within a reproductive or political economy framework (Singerman 1995; Hoodfar 1997; Hasso 2011; Inhorn 2015). In addition, a thorough scan of the literature unveils "the couple" as a "social dyad for which there is no term in Arabic" (Inhorn 2008, 144). Even when romantic love itself is examined, it is aptly measured in relation to notions that are pertinent to the region, including the nation (Abu-Lughod 2008; Joubin 2013, 2016), modernity (Abu-Lughod 1998, 1999; Kreil 2016a), or religion (Menin 2015). For instance, and whilst examining the love tribulations of young Ghizlan in a mid-sized Moroccan town, Laura Menin (2015) captures the role of divine destiny in meeting a suitable partner; and in his examination of the intersection of class with romantic love in Egypt, Aymon Kreil (2016a, 129) devises the concept of "love modernism," or the "linking of love marriage with imaginations of progress." It is important to note that

the examination of romantic love vis-à-vis meta-narratives is not limited to the Middle East. In a South Korean context for instance, Jean-Paul Baldacchino (2008, 103) suggests that we think romance as “a narrative device in the construction as well as the contestation of modernity.”

Recent scholarly works examining heterosexual romantic love in the Middle East place particular emphasis on the relevance of materiality, including class, religion, and kin relations to individuals’ articulation and experiences of love. They do so by “zooming in” on the couple-space whilst accounting for locally-informed love practices. For example, Sandra Nasser El-Dine (2018) focuses on the practice of gifting in order to show how young men with limited financial sources in Amman find their subjectivities as “compassionate partners” *and* as “manly men” highly impacted. Still in a Jordanian context, Fida Adely (2016) captures the importance of “*insijam*,” a specific form of compatibility that designates the couple’s level of comfort with each other. *Insijam* is an indicator of what to expect from a potential partner, in addition to constituting a way “to negotiate between the perils of love and resistance to traditional marriages” (Adely 2016, 118). Similarly, the couples interviewed by Kreil (2016a) on the occasion of Valentine’s Day in Cairo grapple between their love feelings, their financial situation, existing traditional values, and their wider kin’s expectations. Such works successfully reconcile between the couple’s agency on the one hand, and its often divisive relations to their external kin, on the other hand. Conversely, the couple emerges as an agentic dyad whose love commitments are capable of undermining, without fully disabling, patriarchal values. The example of Yasmine and Imad above, for instance, shows that kin opposition is not in absolute. That is, despite Yasmine’s parents’ opposition, both she and Imad continue meeting and working towards countering the impasses they face. Having said that, it is important to stress that such possibility was irregularly recorded during my fieldwork, since it is highly dependent on one’s very intersectionally-informed subjectivity, with class, sect, geographical location, and the very nature of their relationship to their kin, all intersecting.

The emerging literature on romantic love in the Middle East could be described as being partial at least and uninterested at best in the metaphysical component of love (as a feeling). Rather, it is alert to

the ineffectiveness of ontologically-oriented discussions on love, exemplified by Eurocentric depictions of love as “free from” – a point it shares with critical scholarly works on intimacy (De Munck 1996; Constable 2003, 2009; Illouz 1997; Zelizer 2000). Like Viviana A. Zelizer (2000), who debunks the myth that materiality, particularly money, is incompatible with intimacy, it carefully balances the immeasurability, or what Martha M. Ertman (2009) terms “pricelessness,” of passion with the material conditions that underpin it. Moreover, and in addition to recognizing the mutual construction of gender, nation, state and citizenship alike, it showcases the relevance of each to individuals’ articulation of romantic love. As noted by Hilary Kilpatrick in her examination of love and sexuality in modern Arab literature and society, “much more than in most West European literatures, discussions of love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature (and in the larger society by extension) are intricately connected with ideas about society and the individual’s place in it” (Kilpatrick 1995, 15).

A misreading of the intricate connectedness between the notion of love, the individual, and the larger society that Kilpatrick accentuates could result in ethnocentric conceptions of Western societies as “progressively more loving” (Fortier et al 2015, 97) and of Middle Eastern ones as “trapped in sexual and affective repression” (ibid). Marcia Inhorn (2008, 142) succinctly captures this state of affairs by observing that “the challenge for anthropology is to interrogate the very real possibility that love exists in ‘unlikely places,’ including, from Western eyes, the supposedly violent and loveless Middle East.”

Where “affective repression” is concerned, Western ethnocentric analyses at times depict Middle Eastern patterns of connectivity, notably kin relations, as an obstacle to “true love,” through their portrayal of arranged and forced marriages in a linear, nuance-less stance, and in opposition to “love.” The interplay between conjugal life, global economy, and western hegemony has been examined in works that are invested in challenging universalist interpretation of love as “pure”, and “free from,” inasmuch as they recognize the extent to which social relations have become “evermore mediated by and implicated in broader political-economic or capitalist processes” (Constable 2009, 49).

Where kin relations are concerned, Inhorn (2008, 142) cautions us against the division of “conjuality” into the “oppositional types” of “arranged versus love,” especially since marriages around

the world “combine features of both simultaneously.” In this regard, Lila Abu-Lughod (2008), Viola Shafik (2007), and Rebecca Joubin (2016) pay attention to the question of choice and agency in their examination of love depictions in Arabic-speaking TV series and films. All three authors inject the practices of arranged marriages, love-marriages, and forced-marriages with important nuances that Eurocentric and reductionist understandings of married life easily overlook.

Couples often construct love as an impossible pursuit by contrasting it with the responsibility and reality of marriage. Such findings have been documented by Adely (2016) in Jordan, by Samuli Shielke (2015) in low-income rural Egypt, and by Kreil (2016b) in Cairo. Shielke (2015) shows the discursive oppositions of romantic love and marriage in the context of young men transitioning into adulthood; whereas romantic love is mostly imagined, marriage emerges as a result of social pressure and of one’s duty to ascribe to parental wishes.

Inclusive Intimacy

My paper builds on the existing literature on love and marriage in the Arab world in order to reiterate the unison of the imaginary with the material when thinking through romantic love. In addition, it prioritizes positive interpretations of kin relations by highlighting the equally important inclusive and relational qualities that external kin relations conduce. By doing so, I hope to add an important layer to our understanding of the role and scope of kin relations vis-à-vis the couple. Kin approval, I argue, ought not be seen as either/or divisive/conditional. For many couples, kin relations constitute an arena where they can disseminate their affective bond. They rely on their extended kin to help publicize their feelings, negotiate contested areas, and solidify their communities’ pre-existing socio-political connective patterns. Such analysis dismantles monolithic perceptions of Middle Eastern kin networks, in addition to embracing the multiple subjectivity of my interlocutors. As far as the couple is concerned, it is in the “constant doing of little things” (Das 2000, 214) that allows them to reposition themselves vis-à-vis their kin.

In order to achieve its task, my paper conceives “inclusive intimacy” as the active incorporation of proximate others (imminent kin and friends) by the couple, thus stretching the boundaries of the couple-space. The newly-defined boundaries are achieved through the channeling of the couple’s desires and affections through those proximate others, and vice versa. This channeling can be evoked in material, emotional, and/or socio-political terms; in order to maximize our understanding of inclusive intimacy, I examine it in relation to each. This examination captures the paradoxical entanglement of power with romantic love in Lebanon, evident in the intricate negotiations recorded throughout my fieldwork, where gender, age, class, and sect are sensibly handled. What emerges is a system of value informed above all by pricelessness. Although I examine the pricelessness of each of relationality, social standing, and care separately, it is important to note their overarching significance, especially since, as Zelizer (2000, 819) points out, “people routinely differentiate meaningful social relations; among other markers, they use different payment systems to create, define, affirm, challenge, or overturn such distinction.”

Notes on Methodology and Fieldwork

Like feminist scholars working on the Middle East before me, I, too, find myself caught between advancing women’s rights at “home,” and “talking back” to Western scholarship (Abu-Lughod 2001). Critical feminist research is interested, partly, in challenging the Eurocentric knowledges that structure our world. It questions the myth of objective knowledge, pays particular attention to the lived reality, and understands knowledge as “always situated” (Hill-Collins 2000).

The empirical findings I relate in this paper are based on a yearlong fieldwork conducted in 2014, and during shorter periods in 2015 and 2016. In total, I interviewed 24 self-identified cis heterosexual couples both jointly and separately in the cities of Tripoli and Beirut. Each couple was interviewed a minimum of four times, with a period of two months at least separating each of our meetings. Such intervals allowed me to “accompany” the couples on their love trajectory, and to capture the multitude of obstacles, opportunities, and bargains that informed their courtship period. For many, a love that is

driven by lust or is intent on defying societal expectations will inevitably dissolve quickly. Not only did they deem such love irrational and unrealistic, many viewed it as a “selfish” act that alienates kin and friends. At the same time, many of my interlocutors remained ambiguous about their views on love, particularly where their material, professional, and emotional aspirations are concerned. In many ways, my interlocutors brought forth Henrietta Moore’s (1994, 57) reading of the “engendered subject” as a site of “multiple” differences and subjectivities and competing identities,” and where differences of race, class, gender, and in my case sect, are shaped.

In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, I accompanied my couples-interlocutors on some of their outings and social activities, which allowed me to interact with their circles of kin and friends. For many, kin relations translated in ambivalent terms; although some did blame their kin directly for the dissolution of their love relations, many found a great degree of support in them. This was the case for those who had “esteemed” kin members living and working abroad, and whose “cosmopolitan” testimonies were highly valued, albeit being subjected to a credibility test whereby each of age, gender, degree of success, and social standing is accounted for.

Also important to note is that the majority of my interlocutors are in “official relationships,” which endows them with a relative degree of freedom during the period of *ta’aruf*, or courtship. Official relationships, although not officiated by a religious authority yet, are socially endorsed, particularly by the couple's larger networks of kin and friends. This is not the case of non-official relationships where social scrutiny prevails. Further, my interlocutors’ age ranged between twenty and thirty-five years old. With the exception of four women, all had pursued some level of education upon graduating from high school (either by following a vocational pathway or pursuing higher education). Last but not least, most of my interlocutors came from middle-class families. It is imperative that we view the middle-class status of my interlocutors along a spectrum of precarity, and to recognize the imprecision of class categories. This is because, and I borrow from Adely (2016, 108) in this regard, “being middle-class can be a precarious position and is often an aspirational status closely linked to higher education marriage.”

The Pricelessness of Relationality

Salwa and Ahmedⁱⁱ are Sunni Muslims and live in Tripoli with their corresponding families. They are originally from Denniyya, an area erroneously depicted in mainstream Lebanese media as rampant with “Islamist terrorists.” Paradoxically, Denniyya, alongside neighboring Syr, constitute a summer residency for thousands of conservative Sunni Muslim Tripolitans. Salwa and Ahmed are distant cousins and have been encouraged to “give it a go” by their close kin. Salwa is twenty-four years old and holds a degree in English literature from the Lebanese University, and Ahmed is twenty-nine years old and currently works as a food and beverage manager for a catering company in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Salwa and Ahmed are illustrative of a young generation embodying “pious modern” selves (Deeb 2006). Ahmed told me that he had recently declined a “great” job opportunity in Dubai because it involved “alcohol and bad behavior.” In Jeddah, he doesn’t have to compromise his beliefs with his work:

There’s no drinking and no debauchery in my workplace. Everyone is respectful. It’s a lot of work, but it pays well. After we get married, I will move to a larger house, which is paid for by the company.

Indeed, many young Lebanese men who migrate to Gulf countries for work purposes benefit from considerable incentives, including paid accommodation, or the use of a private car. Like Ahmed, many pious modern Muslim men prefer to migrate to Saudi Arabia or Kuwait for work, where the consumption of alcohol is prohibited, as opposed to Dubai for example, and where the lifestyle is perceived as more aligned with their faith. Faith aside, Ahmed and Salwa were “finally” going to be able to plan their wedding, which was due to take place in August 2014 in Denniyya.ⁱⁱⁱ Salwa and Ahmed had their *katb ketab*^{iv} almost a year ago and have been repeatedly postponing their wedding because of the intense armed conflicts that took place in Tripoli, where many of their relatives and friends reside, for most of 2013 and 2014.

Ahmed and Salwa were to pick me up from my place at nine thirty in the morning. I was late to my meeting, having spent considerable time assuring mother, who found it difficult at times to appreciate

the full meaning of my fieldwork, that “nothing bad was going to happen to me.” I told Ahmed and Salwa about my discussion with mother, and Salwa remarked that her “mother would do the same.” Ahmed simply remarked, “may Allah protect your mother.” My mother’s reaction is symptomatic of the long-lasting paradigms that post-civil war parenthood had to grapple with, including an intense preoccupation with safety, and unfounded doubts and claims about unfamiliar others. Still, my mother’s concerns strictly arose whenever I conducted fieldwork in my native city, Tripoli. Since Lebanon’s distinct sectarian communities reside within well-defined geographical perimeters, social associations are easily traceable, in addition to being highly regulated, particularly class-wise. My fieldwork naturally led me to access neighborhoods I was not particularly familiar with, and to forge lasting relationships with individuals I would not necessarily socialize with or relate to outside of my work – two points that sat uneasily with mother. Furthermore, my status as a single woman, and the association of marriage with maturity and adulthood in Lebanese society instilled further unfounded concerns in mother, despite me nearing forty. Conversely, and like the majority of my interlocutors, I too found myself constantly weighing the ins and outs of my fieldwork against mother and my wider kin’s anxieties.

Salwa chose Hamed, the event planner, because she was familiar with his work, having attended her cousin’s wedding the year prior. Although the main goal of today’s visit is to decide on the menu, the conversation covered most aspects of the wedding. The event planner’s office consisted of a large office space and an upper mezzanine. It was located on the ground floor of a major avenue in Tripoli. It had large glass panels, making its inside visible to drivers and passers-by. Portraits of wedded couples adorned the walls. There were at least two dozen of them. Although most of the portraits showed veiled brides, there were many non-veiled ones. The event planner, Hamed, told me that since starting his business six years ago, he has “yet to plan a single Christian wedding,” before adding that “since Christian weddings involve alcohol, they are held outside of Tripoli.” Still, many Sunni Muslim Tripolitans seek restaurants, clubs, and leisurely places outside of Tripoli whenever alcohol consumption is involved. Although no official decree prevents food and beverage businesses in Tripoli from serving

alcohol, most of businesses refrain from doing so. Additionally, the short yet brutal reign of the *Tawhid* party over Tripoli during the Lebanese civil war, which aimed to convert it into a Sunni emirate (Lefèvre 2014) crystallized the image of Tripoli in the eyes of its inhabitants and Lebanese society as a city with a seemingly strict Islamic conduct.

In addition to portraits of wedded couples, a large wooden exhibit of heavily ornamented and individually wrapped confectionaries occupied the middle of the room. A number of low tables were scattered in front of two large dark leather sofas. On top of them sat a number of catalogues featuring the many services provided by the wedding planner. An overly sized wooden desk, where Hamed sat, occupied most of the right wing of the office. On top of it was a laptop connected to a large screen that customers could look at from where they were sat on the sofas. Hamed's work could be described as a glamorized commission-based type of work. He relies on his network of photographers, chefs, waiters, florists, hairdressers, make-up artists, bridal dressmakers, and the likes. His main role consists in liaising between them and his paying customers. Apart from Hamed, a young woman, his assistant, remained standing most of the time behind his desk. Her posture reflected a mostly uninterested attitude: she was chewing on a gum, and she kept her arms mostly crossed. She regularly eyed Salwa from head to toe, as if evaluating her aesthetics in order to assess them with a final mark. As we entered the office, Hamed was most welcoming. He shook our hand, starting with Ahmed, followed by Salwa, then me. As we sat on the sofas, Ahmed placed his left arm around Salwa. He initiated the conversation by stating that "everything [was] to go according to Salwa's wishes."

The first thing Salwa inquired about was the full cost of her cousin's wedding, before adding that she liked "everything about it, especially the *barzeh*"^v. Hamed observed that he could not recall the price, and that plenty of weddings have taken place since then. In return, Salwa asked, "you know, how much, more or less?" Hamed is aware that Salwa had attended her cousin's wedding. Not only did she mention it when she phoned to book her appointment, most often, cousins imitate each other's weddings, often seeking the very same planners and businesses involved. Consumption-as-mimicking encompasses the centrality of upward social mobility in Lebanese social life and is reproduced at a rapid

rhythm because of the very patterns of connectivity to others in Lebanon, where the economy (read businesses) and the social are intrinsically intertwined. The business of Hamed would lose significant volume if his network of closely-knit clients decides to go elsewhere. This is why, and unlike big businesses that are standardized and whose services are neatly priced, Hamed, like many small and middle business owners rely on their bargaining skills when closing deals with clients. Although the catalogues in his office showed the prices of the different services involved, they are a mere façade to showcase a business that is well-planned. In reality, they allow him to make extra income from those clients who do little bargaining with him.

The enmeshment of business with sociability in Lebanon results in the channeling of aesthetics through relevant others. Consequently, individual taste is frowned upon. By expressing her wish to imitate her cousin's wedding, Salwa is acknowledging her ties to her wider kin. Her views must not be mistaken for feelings of envy per se; rather, the feeling of envy must be understood in relational terms, with leisurely activities acting as a space that reproduces one's community's aesthetics and patterns of consumption. When Hamed remarked that the cost of Salwa's cousin's wedding amounted to "roughly fifteen thousand US dollars," Salwa immediately eyed Ahmed. Clearly, they had expected a lesser amount. Ahmed remarked to Salwa that "it was too early to speak about the price," and that the price will be "arranged." Salwa, in her turn, remarked "Oh my! Why so much? It was a nice wedding, but it was *'adeh* – normal."

Hamed was well-versed in bargaining and negotiating. What struck me most were seemingly clear-cut concerns that Salwa repeatedly enquired about. Among the questions she raised, I cite "is there going to be enough food and drinks for those present?" or "do you have a back-up power generator in case the power current shuts down?" or "is the photographer going to have enough storage space for the full duration of the wedding?" Similarly, when Hamed displayed slide after slide of the *mezeh* to be served on the large screen, Salwa asked about the precise number of plates per table of each of the *hummus*, *tabbuleh*, *kofteh*, and the rest. Hamed seemed little preoccupied with Salwa's scrutinizing, undoubtedly due to him experiencing it daily. Ahmed confirmed Salwa's anxieties by remarking that "we

don't want to lose face in front of our guests. There will be important guests, including a member of parliament."

What Lebanon's Members of Parliament (MP) lack in legislative accomplishments, they make up for by attending social events, particularly weddings. Connectivity to significant others is essential for social mobility in Lebanon, and Lebanese citizens expect their corresponding MPs to be present on important social occasions in order to renew their loyalty to them. This pattern of sociability is intensified whenever elections are nearing. Ahmed informed Hamed that he will hand him a "CD" of pre-recorded "political songs" with lyrics celebrating the MP in question, and Hamed remarked that he will make sure to communicate said info to the "DJ." Politicians aside, Salwa related her concerns in relation to each of the design of the chairs, the total number of waiters, and the duration of the *zaffeh*^{vi}, by asking questions such as "are they going to be wooden chairs or plastic ones? and if so, will they be wrapped?" or "what will be the color of the waiters' uniforms?" When Hamed offered a degustation of the individually wrapped confectionaries available, Salwa insisted on a particular type. I personally struggled to swallow it, and Ahmed remarked that it was "inedible," to which Salwa replied, "I don't care if they taste bitter! They look bigger!"

It is important to not mistake Salwa for a "bride-zilla." Her wedding day is an opportunity to crystallize the social and political bonds among her community members. For Salwa and Ahmed, it is important that their wedding "fills the eye," and that food and drinks are plentiful. Salwa's obsession is reflective of the "relational" aspect that co-constructs individuals' desire in Lebanon. Likewise, Ahmed's scarce interventions emphasized social connectivity and the presence of influential figures in their wedding. Salwa and Ahmed's interaction with the wedding planner clearly unveils the wedding as a space that recognizes the coming together of two distinct clans whilst consolidating their socio-political and religious ideologies.

At this stage, I reiterate the unison of the imaginary with the material when thinking through intimacy in Lebanese society. It is also clear from the data I have related so far that it would be futile to precisely

measure each of the emotional, socio-political, and material dimensions of intimacy, because each is interpreted and practiced in relation to the other, in addition to being sharply impacted by the intersection of an array of societal constituents, including class, gender, level of education, and personal beliefs. Similar analysis can be found in the section that follows.

The Pricelessness of Social Standing

Najwa^{vii} is twenty-eight years old and works in a women's clothing boutique in Dbayyeh. She was recently promoted to the position of assistant manager. She was "ecstatic" about her new job because she no longer had to "fold clothes from morning till evening," and could "interact with customers more." Najwa met Selim through an acquaintance of hers. Her acquaintance told her that Selim is "*adami*," a gentleman, and that he would be "a great match for her." Selim had a "stable" life, and was looking for a potential marriage partner, according to Najwa's acquaintance. Selim works as a clerk in the Dbayyeh branch of an important bank that is located, like many other banks, along the not-really-highway highway between Tripoli and Beirut. He was in his sixth year already, and although the bank does move him between branches, he came "recommended," in the sense that his network, by virtue of Lebanon's "patriarchal connectivity" (Joseph 1997) played a direct role in him being hired.

Najwa and Selim had known each other for almost a year. The first time Selim saw Najwa was on the day he accompanied his younger sister to the boutique where Najwa works. They had not been introduced to each other yet. Such impromptu visits are widely practiced, and both men and women take part in them. Often times, mothers accompany their offspring in order to catch a glimpse of their potential sons- or daughters-in-law. The main goal of these visits is to assess the other's "erotic capital," defined by Catherine Hakim (2010, 501) as a "combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to ... members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts ... and it includes skills that can be learnt and developed, as well as advantages fixed at birth."

On our first meeting, Najwa proudly showed me a necklace that Selim had gifted her a couple of weeks earlier. It was a simple necklace consisting of a thin chain with a hollowed cylindrical charm endorsed with sparkly crystals for a pendant. I commented to Najwa that it was pretty, and she informed me that it was a “Swarovski.” I asked Najwa if Selim made the “right guess” or whether she is considering exchanging it. Najwa eyed me in disbelief:

It’s from Selim. If I were choosing the necklace myself I probably would have chosen *shi ybayyen aktar* –more eye-catching, but I like it a lot, and it would be *‘ayb* –rude to exchange it. What would I tell him in that case? That I exchanged it? Do you realize how bad that would make me look?

The expression *shi ybayyen aktar* translates as eye-catching and is prominent in everyday talk. Lebanese consumers expect others to compliment and comment on their possessions. The constant complimenting and commenting on material objects is meant to consolidate social ties through common aesthetics and patterns of consumptions. For instance, and when buying an item, one weighs its price not against its value, whether perceived or real, but by how it will be assessed by others. In this sense, we are reminded of the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) on “habitus.” For Bourdieu (1990), habitus is concurrent with the accumulation of symbolic capital, a synthesis of economic, social, and cultural capital. These capitals, following Bourdieu, are exchangeable in the sense that one can be invested in order to accumulate another. The notion of habitus allows us to understand how certain tastes are valued, since Bourdieu views individuals’ agency as linked to that of the group.

What will they [Selim’s family] think of me if I exchange the necklace? I don’t want them to say that I am taking advantage of him, or that I am difficult to please. You know, last week was Selim’s mother’s birthday. I bought her a kilo of chocolate from a confectionary near my house. She told me, “oh! are you trying to save money?” She thought she was being funny, but she wasn’t! *Sammetleh badani* –she poisoned my entire body, but what can I do? She’s my mother-in-law.

Interestingly, Najwa is already referring to Selim's mother as her mother-in-law, although they are still in the *ta'aruf*, or courtship, period. This is reflective of her already identifying with Selim's kin. I asked her if she refers to Selim's mother as such all the time. She had to pause and think for a few seconds. She seemed puzzled and could not remember when she started referring to her as such. Still, she clarified that whenever she is with Selim, she refers to his mother as "your mother," as if not to impose herself between Selim and his mother. When she is not with Selim, she simply calls her "mother-in-law." Najwa strategically chooses her camp depending on the situation she finds herself in. By doing so, she is slowly introducing her wider circle to her future married life.

The kilo of chocolate in question, which is a most conventionally accepted formal gift, hit a wrong note with Selim's mother because it was not bought from an upmarket confectionary. Most people in Lebanon would agree that upmarket confectionaries are not always palatable. Najwa told me that she was trying to get closer to Selim's mother by gifting her "her personal favorite." One could argue that for the younger generation, gifting others following one's personal taste is becoming increasingly accepted, but such shifts are yet to be widely accepted, following my fieldwork. When I asked her about Selim's position, she said he told her in private soon after to "let it go, for his sake, and to be patient with his mother."

Selim is arbitrating between his mother and his wife-to-be. After all, his mother is soon to be a mother-in-law, and the status of mother-in-law in the context of the Middle East is a powerful status that many women anticipate, considering the "cycle of power of the household" from daughter, to wife, to mother, to mother-in-law (Kandiyoti 1988). Moreover, Lebanon's "patriarchal connectivity" (Joseph 1997) elevates the elders, regardless of their gender. Interestingly, both Najwa, and Selim's mother are already interacting like daughter and mother-in-law; Najwa by referring to her as such, and Selim's mother by exerting her power upon her. Having said that, Najwa's narrative is reflective of how Najwa and Selim cultivate their intimacy by including outsiders whilst repositioning themselves. Should Najwa exchange the gift, she would be sending the message that she is ignoring Selim's entourage of

significant others. In some ways, couples in Lebanon often find themselves compartmentalizing their intimacy between their couple-space, and their larger network.

Layla was in her final year towards a degree in nursery when she got engaged to a distant cousin of hers. As an “official couple,” they were negotiating their partnership on the long-term. At some point, Layla’s fiancé (she never informed me of his name) suggested that she quit working once they are married.

In the beginning, he used to talk about it jokingly by disguising with romantic talk. He’d say a *malakeh* –queen does not work. *Ya te’teereh* –oh silly me! It turned out he meant it. It made me both angry and sad. Why on earth would I quit my work? My father worked really hard to pay for my degree!

For Layla’s fiancé, a “well-off” man in his thirties, the status of Layla as a working-woman runs contrary to the ethos of his upward social mobility. According to Layla, her fiancé had “nothing” when he started his trade business eight years ago. Today, his business has branched to four of Lebanon’s main coastal cities. For Layla’s fiancé, to be able to provide fully for her is a “privilege” that few men can experience. Eventually, he simply resigned himself to “accepting” her choice. There was no forcing her into giving up her degree. To this day, her father continues to trade with him, and they remain on “good terms.”

Eventually, Layla returned the gifts to her fiancé. Although her fiancé insisted that she keeps them, her father made sure contrariwise. By insisting that Layla keeps the gifts, her fiancé was upholding his good relationship with her extended network, particularly her father. Moreover, he was sending a message to possible new partners that he is *adami*. When I contacted Layla the ensuing year^{viii} for a follow-up interview, she informed me that she has introduced her ex fiancé to her paternal cousin, before jokingly adding that it was her cousin’s “destiny” to get married to her ex.

Following Layla’s narrative, education acquires the meaning of a bargaining tool, which she deploys when mediating with her partner on the long-term in order to assert her views on women’s access to the job market. For Veronique,^{ix} a fifty years old divorcé with cynical views on romance, the most important element of a degree is the educational body from which it is awarded, because it reflects

one's level of affluence and politico-sectarian loyalties. Earlier, we saw how Imad's acquisition of a university degree has caused friction between him and Yasmine's kin. For those readers eager to know, Imad and Yasmine eventually had their *katb ketab*, and although Imad did not and "will not" pursue his higher education any further, he relied on his father's reputation as a trusted merchant, and on a hefty *mahr*^x. One could argue that Yasmine's parents substituted Imad's university degree for a considerable sum of money. However, and had it not been for the social standing and ethical entrepreneurship of Imad's family, Yasmine is adamant that her relationship with Imad could not have progressed any further. Imad and Yasmine's case is telling of the intricate links between intimacy and materiality. In many ways, Imad's good reputation is "priceless," so to speak. Similar intricate links, and immeasurable qualities can be found in relation to work. Imad's "good reputation" brings forth Bourdieu's (1990) symbolic capital. However, and unlike Bourdieu's exchangeable capitals (economic, social, and capital/symbolic), it is non-redeemable and non-convertible. Such slippages compel us to rethink what counts as evidence in our endeavors as social scientists examining the Middle East. Whereas I am not in a position to "measure" Imad and Yasmine's emotional bond, I am capable of capturing the socio-political underpinnings of their emotions, and the latter's impact on ordinary citizens' everyday. This reiterates my earlier argument, where I recognize emotions as a credible source of knowledge, and where I call for an onto-epistemological approach that recognizes the union of the material with the imaginary in our examination of ordinariness, including romantic love.

Access to work, following my fieldwork, constituted a major point of contention for both my couples and their wider kin. Most of my interlocutors emphasized the importance of having both partners contribute to the household financially, especially in light of the current economic climate. In this case, financial contribution constitutes an opportunity to strengthen the couple's partnership and to cement their emotional support for each other. Similar findings have been reported by Adely (2016) in the context of Jordan. An important point to reflect on in this regard is to carefully evaluate the gendered aspect of women's financial contribution, particularly where the trope of the male as the ultimate breadwinner is concerned.

The traditional view that holds that adulthood emerges alongside marriage is increasingly seen as ludicrous, following my fieldwork. This novel understanding deviates from widespread depictions of the Arab woman as confined to her household. Concurrently, we should avoid viewing it from a celebratory stance exclusively. After all, many of my female interlocutors could not help but reflect on the financial difficulties in which their male relatives, including their fathers, but most importantly their brothers, often found themselves. In addition, most of them had at least one relative living and working abroad, and all lamented the distance between them and their loved ones.

Further affective considerations have been recorded throughout my fieldwork. Morality, religion, and male fragility are among the main threads that informed my interlocutors' love tribulations and aspirations. In addition, each encompasses the simultaneity of material and imaginary configurations of intimacy.

The Pricelessness of Care

Mireille^{xi} and Bilal had only known each other for six months when I interviewed Mireille, who described their relationship as "semi-official". Bilal is six years older than Mireille and owns and manage a *MoneyGram* franchise. Mireille was in her final year towards a BTS^{xii} degree in Accountancy. Mireille was growing increasingly weary of Bilal because she sensed he was no longer interested in her.

If he is no longer interested, he should let me know! He can't play games with me! That's 'ayb –dishonorable.

Following Mireille, 'ayb, or shame, is used to evoke the social rubrics related to Lebanese society's broad interpretation of morality^{xiii}. By not telling Mireille that he is no longer interested in her, Bilal is still making a claim on her, so to speak. Still, close friends and family members can, and they do, inform kin and friends who are in Mireille's semi-official position of potential suitors, without necessary introducing them.

Interestingly, *'ayb* was equally evoked by my male interlocutors. I say interestingly because the affect of shame is often depicted in gendered terms, especially in the context of the shame/honour binary that saturates the literature on gender in the Middle East, whereby women's behavior is tightly linked to men's honour.

When I interviewed Elias^{xiv}, he had uncoupled from Carmen roughly a year ago. Just as Mireille was dismayed by Bilal's treatment of her, Elias, too, thought it disrespectful that Carmen did not tell him promptly that she no longer was interested in him.

There are *ussul* –customs. I am not a puppet for her to toy with. I would have brought her the moon had she asked for it.

Gifting and being at the other's service are symbolic of the level of protection and comfort that the man will potentially provide during the couple's married life, and both practices serve first and foremost to consolidate the man's relationship with the male kin of his wife-to-be. What's more, the provision of services and the gifting of material goods are an occasion for couples to foster their couple-space in a purely affective sense, and it is important that we acknowledge the unison of the material with the imagined when thinking through intimacy. This unison is well-illustrated in the aforementioned story of Yasmine, and in Layla's.^{xv}

For Layla's fiancé, a "well-off" man in his thirties, her status as a working-woman runs contrary to the ethos of his upward social mobility. According to Layla, her fiancé had "nothing" when he started his trade business eight years ago. Today, his business has branched to four of Lebanon's main coastal cities. For Layla's fiancé, to be able to provide fully for her is a "privilege" that few men can experience. Eventually, he simply resigned himself to "accepting" her choice. There was no forcing her into giving up her degree. To this day, her father continues to trade with him, and they remain on "good terms." When I contacted Layla the ensuing year^{xvi} for a follow-up interview, she informed me that she has introduced her ex fiancé to her paternal cousin, before jokingly adding that it was her cousin's "fate" to get married to her ex.

In line with the works of Adely (2016) and Menin (2015), my interlocutors, too, linked their feelings of love to divine intervention. Divine intervention does not necessarily evoke religiosity in disciplinary terms. If anything, my fieldwork informed me that the main culprit behind the dissolution of romance is financial duress, rather than repressive interpretations of religion, be it Islam or Christianity^{xvii}. Similar findings have been documented in the context of Cairo by Kriel (2016a). Kriel (2016a) adopts a cynical tone whilst debunking orientalist approaches to religion, notably Islam. He states that “even if it should be obvious, it sometimes seems necessary to underscore that, like elsewhere in the world, people living in countries with Muslim majorities do not act exclusively according to religion” (Kriel 2016a, 131). Equally, Schielke (2010, 2) urges us to deviate from the projection of Islam as a “perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline, at the cost of the majority of Muslims who – like most of humankind – are sometimes but not always pious and who follow various moral aims and at times immoral ones.” More recently, Sertaç Sehlükoglu (2018) reiterated similar views in her assessment of feminist anthropologists’ work on Muslim women’s agency. In light of such recommendations, I argue that fate is evoked by my interlocutors as an escape mechanism in order to cope with the rigidity of the obstacles they encounter, be them social, political, economic, or else.

Fate is also evoked in order to crystallize unlikely unions, as in Ghassan’s ^{xviii} case. Following Ghassan, he and Maria had been engaged for a year and a half. It was a difficult period because Maria’s mother had been ill, and Maria was her sole caretaker. Maria’s only family consists of an older sister who lives in Ghana with her husband and two children. According to Ghassan, it was his uncle who introduced him to Maria. His uncle knew Maria’s father from a business they ran together until the latter passed away. Following Ghassan, his uncle told him that Maria is a “good woman” from a “good house,” and that he would do the “right thing” by marrying her, “especially since she no longer has a male to rely on.”

I was very close to getting engaged once, but then I got a job in Kuwait and soon left. She [referring to an ex] wasn’t necessarily young and could not wait until the end of my contract. We tried to make it work but the logistics were against us. *Ma kan fi nasib* –it wasn’t meant to be. So, when my uncle told me about Maria, I told myself “why not? I am

doing Ok.” Besides, I knew Maria from when we were children. We grew up in the same neighborhood.

By accepting to marry Maria, Ghassan is reinforcing his community’s ties. After all, it was his elder uncle who recommended Maria. In the case of Ghassan, he took it rather badly – and rightly so – when I asked him if he is marrying Maria because he “felt sorry for her.”

Are you serious? You think marriage is a game? What class of question is this? This is so wrong!

Needless to say, I felt deeply embarrassed when Ghassan reprimanded me, and I apologized endlessly for being abrupt. He was eventually receptive, and like Veronique, cautioned me against Hollywoodian idealizations of love as “free from.” For Ghassan, love consists of “many beautiful things,” including “caring for one’s family and extended network.” When I asked Ghassan to elaborate on “the many beautiful things,” he replied that “we are lucky in Lebanon because marriage preserves familial bonds, unlike *barra*, or abroad, referring to the west, where “*ma fi ‘ayleh* –families are dysfunctional.”

The multi-subjectivity of both my interlocutors and their wider kin emerges at distinct intervals throughout the period of courtship. The dialogically-construed relationship that informs my couples’ interactions with their wider kin directly defies ethnocentric conceptualizations of Middle Eastern kinship as monolithic and overbearing. This point is well-illustrated in an episode that Najwa shared with me:

I don’t know what took him! He said I *must* accompany him. Accompany him as what? We barely knew each other at that stage! We were not engaged! Our parents were just beginning to know each other!

According to Najwa, Selim insisted that she accompanies him to a work gathering during the first weeks of their courtship, and at some point, he *‘ayyat ‘alayyeh* (raised his voice). Najwa distanced herself from Selim in the weeks that followed.

He was deeply remorseful. He eventually went down to visit my dad at his shop to apologize and to ask for his forgiveness. I hadn’t even told my parents about our fight!

Najwa told me that Selim's actions on that day crystallized her feelings for him. The fact that he put himself in a "vulnerable" situation by admitting his actions to Najwa's father was, according to Najwa, "the moment that changed everything." By by-passing Najwa and apologizing to her father instead, Selim took a considerable risk. Seeing that this particular episode occurred in the first weeks into their relationship, Selim was eager to amend himself, and he did it by admitting his shortcoming to Najwa's father, the "original" male protector, so to speak.

The relevance of societal construction of masculinity can also be found in the narrative of Fadwa^{xix}. Fadwa wouldn't tell me her precise age, but it was "less than thirty for sure." Fadwa hailed from a lower-middle class family from Tripoli, and was "grateful to Allah for everything." She was highly pious, wore the veil, and loved going to the café with her friends "above everything else." Fadwa holds a degree in Arabic literature from the Open Arab University, and teaches Arabic grammar in a number of primary schools around Tripoli. She has one brother who is "doing well" in Abu-Dhabi, and who regularly sends remittance to his family. Her father recently decided to invest some of this remittance into buying her a car because, according to Fadwa, "he wants me to be independent and self-reliable."

Samer didn't like the fact that I was getting a car at all! He kept asking why I needed a car when he would drive me anywhere I wanted. He says he will teach me how to drive, but he won't let me drive him because it is *'ayb*. He believes I should only drive in situations of emergency.

Samer conjures feelings of *'ayb*, or shame, if and when he is seen being driven by Fadwa, which would, following his logic, diminish his male presence. Based on my own interactions with Samer,^{xx} Samer exhibits a sincere male fragility when Fadwa does not ask him for favors. Similar conclusions have been reached by Nasser El-Dine (2018) in her examination of young men with limited financial sources in Amman.

I am not the richest man in the world. There is only this much I can give Fadwa. *Alhamdulillah* she is accepting me for who I am and what I have. And I give thanks to Allah

for bringing us together. I can't take her out every day, but I sure can do little things for her.

Samer's stance could be described as "protective jealousy," a quality that my female interlocutors highly cherished, and equally appreciated in the context of Morocco (Menin 2015). The idealization of protective jealousy embeds love with a gendered power dynamic whereby men cultivate a simultaneously caring *and* controlling masculinity. Yet again, the entanglement of love with power constructs spaces and opportunities for undermining or contesting pre-existing patriarchal values.

Concluding Remarks

Romantic love does not operate in a vacuum. It is neither universal, nor strictly individualistic. A successful examination of romantic love must take into account the material conditions that construct it in the first place. This is because one's lived reality directly inform the larger paradigms that dictate their everyday. Where kinship is concerned, my paper sought to deviate from monolithic views of Middle Eastern kinship. Whilst acknowledging the rigidity of patriarchal customs across Arab societies, it is also important that we recognize their malleability: many of the factors that contribute towards the production of patriarchal ideologies are assemblages of material, affective, organic, and non-organic bodies whose meanings shift over time in addition to coinciding with technological, economic, and mobile novelties. That is, the "social" acquires its meanings, including its systems of reference, from the constant circulation of subjects, objects, and the spaces in-between them at each and across the micro, meso, and macro levels. In the Bedouin setting of *Awali 'Ali*, for instance, Abu-Lughod (1999) demonstrates how love poetry becomes a medium that captures diverging inter-generational attitudes towards modernity and tradition, and during the turn of the 19th century in the Mountains region of Lebanon, Akram Khater (2001, 38) shows how financial necessity, following the collapse of the silk industry, resulted in more girls working in factories: "money was needed, and honor was malleable." My analysis is not meant to discredit the findings of those works that rely exclusively on empirical – in the tangible sense, data in their examination of everyday interactions in the Middle East. Instead, my call is to complement them with an affective approach, where affects act as "those visceral forces

beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 3), in line with the growing number of the literature on affect from/on the Middle East (Georgis 2013; Salih 2016; Nassif 2017).

The intersection of relationality with a patriarchal order results in an affective paradox in Lebanon: love becomes entangled with power. This entanglement results in the cultivation of a multiple subjectivity that is constantly in flux, in addition to requiring constant repositioning, respective of the power structures in question. Crucially, this entanglement results in multifaceted experiences and practices of intimacy, where the material and the abstract converge, and where care and money exist in tandem. It is reminiscent of the concept of “hard bargains,” as conceived by Lina Hirschman and Jane E. Larson (1998, cited in Zelizer 2000). They apply a feminist bargaining theory to heterosexual relations in order to advocate a new sexual in which “men and women can recognize the age old political nature of their negotiation over sexual access as well as their more recent commitment to equality and begin to develop workable processes for resolving their differences and making a fair division of the goods of their sexual cooperation” (Hirschman and Larson 1998, cited in Zelizer 2000, 839).

Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to push for an ever-nuanced analysis of intimacy, especially in an increasingly globalised world, with humans, objects, ideals, and labour circulate beyond and outside the narrow and hindering frontiers of nation-states, in addition to producing highly hybrid and at times volatile identities. This can be achieved by embracing an either/and framework rather than an either/or one. Not only is this approach capable of uniting seemingly unrelated subjects and objects, it easily accommodates the increasingly transnational character of everyday living.

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ⁱ. Interview with Yasmine and Imad, Tripoli, December 2014.

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- ii. The data related in this section were recollected on 17 May 2014, on the day I accompanied Salwa and Ahmed on their visit to Hamed, the wedding planner. The names Salwa and Ahmed are borrowed names, and so are the names I use throughout this work.
 - iii. Ahmed and Salwa had to postpone their wedding yet again. They got married in July 2015, on the second day of *'eid el-fitr*.
 - iv. *Katb Ketab*, for Sunni Lebanese Muslims, is the solemnization of marriage through the corresponding religious authority, and generally takes place in the weeks preceding the wedding.
 - v. A *barzeh* consists of an elevated platform occupied by the groom and the bride throughout the wedding ceremony, in addition to serving as the center piece of the wedding venue.
 - vi. A *zaffeh* is a musical procession accompanied by heavy percussion and chants celebrating the wedded; it usually precedes the entrance of the groom and the bride.
 - vi. Interview with Najwa, Dbayyeh, February 2014.
 - viii. Skype Interview with Layla, via Skype, March 2017.
 - ix. Field notes and unscheduled interview with Veronique, Hamra, June 2014.
 - x. A *mahr* is a mandatory payment, be it symbolic or concrete, paid by the groom or the groom's father to the bride at the time of marriage that legally becomes her property. The value and scope of a *mahr* is often negotiated by the couple's parents. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered *mahrs* ranging between 1 USD and 180'000 USD. In the case of Imad, the agreed sum amounted to 100'000 USD.
 - xi. Interview with Mireille, near Beirut, June 2014.
 - xii. BTS is the French acronym of *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur*, which is often translated as Technician Certificate in English. BTS degrees are reflective of the enduring legacy of the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon, which lasted from 1923 until 1946.
 - xiii. In their examination of leisurely activities in the context of Shi'a youth in the neighborhood of Dahiya in south Beirut, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2015) identify a "flexible morality" that operates under multiple rubrics, to name social, political-sectarian, and religious ones:

The social rubric is based on values (and acceptable behavior) shared across Lebanese society ... the political-sectarian rubric reflects the conflation of sectarian identity and political allegiance in Lebanon as well as ideas about the differential morality of Lebanon's political-sectarian communities ... Finally, the religious rubric is related to ideas about piety and religious commitment. (Deeb and Harb 2015, 19) (my emphasis).

^{xiv}. Interview with Elias, Beirut, March 2014.

^{xv}. Interview with Layla, Jbeil, August 2014.

^{xvi}. Skype Interview with Layla, March 2017.

^{xvii}. It is crucial to note that this analysis does not hold in the case of interfaith love, where the category of sect acquires an existential dimension, in addition to being deployed in historically-specific socio-political terms. In any case, sect and religion are not interchangeable concepts, and for an in-depth differential diagnosis of sect in Lebanon, see Mikdashi (2015).

^{xviii}. Interview with Ghassan, Beirut, May 2014.

^{xix}. Interview with Fadwa, Tripoli, August 2014.

^{xx}. Interview with Samer, Tripoli, September 2014.