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## Exile, Gender and Empowerment in Jocelyne Saab's Films: *Gender Café* and *One Dollar a Day*

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*Corinne Fortier*

Was this a story about the sacred? The sacredness of human life?  
– Opening credits of *One Dollar a Day*, Jocelyne Saab, 2016

Jocelyne Saab deals with three main topics that are central in all her work: war, exile and gender. The theme of gender is also one of the central topics of six short documentaries of 4 minutes each, made in 2013 and brought together under the title *Le Café du genre (Gender Café)*, which was commissioned by the Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (MuCEM) located in Marseille, France. This series of films deals with expressions of gender, body and oppression. In this chapter, I will focus especially on the fifth film of this series, entitled *Table de la danse et de l'orgueil*, or *The Table of Dance and Pride*, with the subtitle 'Interview with the Dancer Alexandre Paulikevitch in Beirut', a short that deals with homosexuality in the Arab world. I will also analyse Jocelyne Saab's last artistic production, entitled *One Dollar a Day* (2016). In this short art video of 6 minutes, the filmmaker observes daily life in a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon, and especially those of women and children, dealing with anthropological issues related to gender, disaster (Glowczewski and Soucaille 2011) and survival.

As an anthropologist and film director, I will discuss and compare these two different works in an anthropological way. I hope to show that even when Jocelyne Saab delves into very different topics – a homosexual dancer on the one hand and refugees on the other – her overall concern is with the oppressed, those on the margins of society. The two films discussed in this chapter both engage on a deep level with emotional and physical pain, and even if they are different in subject matter and approach, the common element is the expression of suffering and the corporeal pain of a way of being that is non-normative.

Bringing these oppressed people into the centre of her film world, Jocelyne Saab shows her humanism and empathy with those who suffer from repression and the failure of the world to look after its people, especially those most in need of support. Nevertheless, her films also show the agency and strength in the people she puts at the centre of her screen. Ultimately, these two films are about empowerment and accountability.

#### *THE TABLE OF DANCE AND PRIDE*

*Gender Café* is set after the 'Arab revolution' in 2013 and portrays a number of Middle Eastern artists and researchers, specially from Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and the Maghreb, dealing with women's realities and also with homosexuality. The first one is entitled *The Table of Walid Aouni, the Green Mad Man*. After having danced with the French choreographer Maurice Béjart, Walid Aouni became the director of the Egyptian Modern Dance Company at the Cairo Opera House, creating engaged shows dealing with the oppression of women, topics that, after the 'Egyptian revolution', force him into exile in Beirut. In this film Jocelyne Saab is particularly interested in his performance dealing with the status of women wearing the veil due to the influence of Islamist movements: since the 1970s, the hijab was promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the niqab was introduced by the Wahabites of Saudi Arabia in the 1990s (Fortier 2017a).

The second film of *Gender Café* is entitled *The Table of the Painter of the Pharaohs and the Dancers*, with Adel Siwi. Adel Siwi is an Egyptian painter who is also worried about the progress of fundamentalism in his country, which promoted the defiance of women's bodies as related to pleasure. The third film, *The Table of the Magazine on the Body*, with Joumana Haddad, is a portrait of Joumana Haddad, who created in Lebanon the feminist magazine *Jasad (The Body)*, which was censored because it promoted the freedom of women. The fourth film, *The Table of the Golden Okra*, with Melek Ozman and Cuneyt Cebenoyan, is about a competition in Istanbul, named the Golden Okra – the word 'okra' refers locally to a vegetable looking like a little penis – organised each year by an association that promotes gender equality in Turkey, which rewards the films considered the most macho of the year. The sixth film, *The Table of Exigency*, with Wassyla Tamzali, is an interview with the Algerian feminist Wassyla Tamzali, who asserts that emancipation of women in the Arab world depends on their own control of their bodies.

In this study, I focus on the fifth film of this series, entitled *The Table of Dance and Pride*, with the subtitle 'Interview with the Dancer Alexandre Paulikevitch in Beirut'. In this 'interview', as in the others in the series, the

spectator never hears the voice or sees the face of Jocelyne Saab, but only those of the subject – there is no explicit interaction between them. The filmmaker follows the protagonist, the Lebanese choreographer Alexandre Paulikevitch, when he is dancing and when he is protesting for women’s rights and is preoccupied with his LGBTQI activism. Saab films him as he puts on make-up to prepare himself for a performance and cross-dresses during his performance. Saab films two of Paulikevitch’s performances, as she did with Walid Aouni, the famous Egyptian choreographer in the first film of *Gender Café*. In this case, however, the performance is not public but accomplished for the purpose of the film. And through the work of Paulikevitch, the focus is less on women’s oppression than on discrimination against the gay community, and its physical and emotional suffering.

Alexandre Paulikevitch dances the *baladi* dance, literally meaning ‘local’, and he does not call this dance a ‘belly dance’, most likely because of the colonial and female connotations of that term. In the Arab world, men’s and women’s dance is very similar. For example, it is not unusual for men to dance together during weddings or at private celebrations, tying a scarf around their pelvis to emphasise the movement of the hips (Fisher and Shay 2009). But this type of dance becomes transgressive when it is performed by a cross-dressing dancer, as is the case of Paulikevitch when he presents himself cross-dressed during his performance in Jocelyne Saab’s film. At the beginning of *The Table of Dance and Pride*, Paulikevitch is looking at himself in the mirror and putting on make-up, especially kohl, a staple of make-up in the Arab world. He is transforming himself for his performance, a gesture that corresponds to a type of feminisation. And in the filmed performance, he is dancing in a red ‘oriental costume’ usually used by a feminine dancer.

At a performance at the Institut du Monde Arabe in 2017 in Paris, he wore a red tutu. That costume has connotations of the female ballerina, but Paulikevitch does not hide or cover the bulge of his genitals, the way a transvestite would. This can be read as conforming to the Lacanian process of masquerade, which carries echoes of Judith Butler’s gender performance. I refer to the notion of ‘masquerade’ as it was first introduced by Joan Rivière ([1929] 1994), and which was taken on by Jacques Lacan ([1964] 1973), according to whom the masquerade refers to a certain portrayal of femininity – a notion that echoes Judith Butler’s notion of ‘performance’ in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

As such, Alexandre Paulikevitch’s dance does not constitute a sexual inversion, but rather an over-exposure of his masculine virility, as he emphasises his muscles and the visible bulge of his penis when he moves. It is not a feminine but a masculine body that appears and asserts itself by dancing as an object of desire. In an interview with *Le Monde* he explained: ‘it is also a tool of gender liberation. By surfing on the codes of the feminine and the masculine, by playing

with them too, we subvert them, and we get out of the gender binary. I am sure that in the future there will be a multitude of genders' (in Boisseau 2018). As such, the dancer questions the codes of gender and of the genre of dance in his performance.

The feminisation of men is forbidden by Islam, as the Qur'an provides a clear affirmation of sex difference, exemplified in the verse (92: 1–4): 'That which created the male and the female' (Arberry 1980: 595). Already in Medina, at the time of the Prophet in the seventh and eighth centuries, the classic Arabic term *mukhannath*, which means 'the effeminate', was known through a Hadith stating that Mohammed 'cursed effeminate men (*al-mukhannathin mina al-rijal*) and mannish women (*al-mutarajjilat min an-nisa*)' (Nawawy 1991: 435). The *mukhannath* also practised music, singing and dancing (El Feki 2013). The etymology of this term, *mukhannath*, refers to sweetness, curvature and languidness, qualities that were considered specific to women (Boudhiba 1979: 55). But despite its protestations, this Hadith actually provides evidence of the existence of men with effeminate behaviour. A *mukhannath* does not necessarily cross-dress, but he does demonstrate erotic movements (Lagrange 2008). As American historian Everett Rowson confirms, 'There is considerable evidence for the existence of a form of publicly recognized and institutionalized effeminacy or transvestism among males in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabian society' (1991: 671).

The figure of the Medinese *mukhannath* existed throughout the Persian, Ottoman and Arabic worlds (Fortier 2019a). Although this figure was referred to by a vernacular term specific to each society and historical period – with the exception of Iran, where until the nineteenth century the word *mukhannath* itself was used (Najmabadi 2005: 5) – these terms often have the triliteral Arabic root k-n-th (e.g. in the word *khuntha*, which designates the 'hermaphrodite' in Muslim jurisprudence), indicating the Arab-Persian influence of the *mukhannath* figure throughout time and space. These various figures share characteristics with the *mukhannath*, such as being beardless and practising singing and dancing. In general, facial hair is considered an immediately perceptible element that clearly demonstrates the physical differences between the sexes. The beard, and to a lesser extent the moustache (*shārab*), are the visible markers of masculinity, and of the superiority that is attributed to men. Likewise, their particular practice of singing and dancing makes them stand out as effeminate, especially in ritual ceremonies where they become objects of desire for other men (Fortier 2020). Similarly, in Jocelyne Saab's film *Alexandre Paulikevitch* did not appear as a hairy man, he has no beard or moustache, but he has long, feminine hair that he uses as a visual and moving element during his performance, which actually makes him look 'effeminate'.



Figure 12.1 Alexandre Paulikevitch sensually uses his hair while dancing

In *The Table of Dance and Pride*, the performance by Alexandre Paulikevitch is accompanied by some sentences spoken in Arabic over the music. In the music, we hear the words ‘I’m going to fuck your sister.’ As Paulikevitch explains in the film after this performance, it refers to insults that he has overheard in the streets, referring indirectly to his homosexuality. This type of insult, as I analyse it, is an indirect way of saying ‘I’m going to fuck you’ but the person who says it is masking his repressed homosexuality by stating that he will fuck someone’s sister. Paulikevitch explains in the film that he incorporated this insult and the stigma in order to exorcise – through the dance – the violence related to homophobia. By dancing, he turns shame into pride, as indicated by the title of the film. In his performance, he shows a homosexual body that is proud to dance a feminine dance through a masculine body. Embodying that paradox, he allows himself to experience and perform on the stage, challenging international audiences, not only Lebanese ones but also those of Europe, where it is also still a taboo subject.

At the end of the film, Alexandre Paulikevitch explains that he belongs to the Lebanese association *Helem*. This Arabic word means ‘hope’. *Helem* was the first LGBTQI association in the Arab world. It was established in 2004, before other similar organisations saw the light of day in the Middle East.’ Jocelyne Saab’s film shows Paulikevitch during a protest with *Helem* against women’s virginity tests, which are seen as constituting a kind of rape. These virginity tests were carried out by the Egyptian police on women who were protesting in Tahrir Square in 2011. The action of the tests served to deny the women access to the public space (Fortier and Monqid 2017). In the Arab world, there is a

counterpart of this female test for homosexual men. The police in Egypt and in Lebanon are allowed to conduct anal tests on men, through which they enter an egg-shaped object into the anus, in order to check its elasticity, as ‘proof’ of the man’s practice of sodomy and of his homosexuality.

Whereas the term ‘homosexuality’ has been in use in the West since the nineteenth century (used either to refer to a particular sexuality, or to the attraction of a person to someone of the same sex), in the Arab-Muslim world the term only really emerged recently, in the 2000s, under the influence of international LGBTQI associations.<sup>2</sup> As such, the practice of naming masculine homosexuality in terms of anal intercourse is still common (Fortier 2017b). Alexandre Paulikevitch claims in the film that homosexuality remains penalised in Lebanon, to the extent that one can be imprisoned for a year for homosexuality (Art. 534 of the Penal Code). As such, he denounces the hypocrisy of his home country, when he explains that bisexuality is almost normative for men not only in Lebanon but throughout the Arab world.

In a second sequence of Alexandre Paulikevitch’s performance, his whole body is bandaged like a mummy. He continues to dance despite these restraints: first with an arm, then with his shoulders, and then the torso and the abdomen, in an astonishing vertical serpentine movement. At this moment, the spectator understands that the dancer is performing not only an erotic dance but a contemporary dance. As Paulikevitch explains just after the performance, this for him represents his mutilated body in reference to the numerous wars in Lebanon. As such, his body becomes the metonym for the pain suffered not only by a gay man in the world, but by a gay man in Lebanon and in the Arab world as a whole. Being from a country ravaged by war, Paulikevitch links his pain as a gay man and a gender-defying physical dancer to the scars of his country, but also implicitly testifies to his own and his country’s strength in persisting in spite of the pain and the wounds. Jocelyne Saab films Paulikevitch’s performance when he shows his body in pain. At the start of the film her camera maintains a distance from this suffering body, but progressively, she comes closer as if she wants to assist him, and she comes even closer when he frees himself from his ties, thus underlining his victory. The woman filmmaker treats the body in pain not with pity but with empathy. Saab’s gaze is not curious or intrusive, but it is a concerned and caring gaze; it is not a ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1975) but a ‘female gaze’.

#### ONE DOLLAR A DAY (2016)

As in *The Table of Dance and Pride*, the main issues dealt with in Jocelyne’s Saab last film *One Dollar a Day* are violence, discrimination and war, but also dignity, resistance and survival. At the start of the film, the opening credits

present the context in a mix of objective narration giving information about places, dates and statistics, and in subjective narration, where Saab affirms her physical presence in the field: 'In the autumn 2015, I went to the Beqaa valley, near the Syrian Border. The war in Syria had been raging for four years. Over 500,000 people had already died. Six million people were now refugees [. . .]'. Saab has in fact devoted several films to the wars, especially the one that ravaged her country, Lebanon, for fifteen years (1975–90), the ramifications of which are still felt acutely throughout the Arab world.

Beyond the Lebanese civil war, she has also shown a consistent interest in the displaced, in refugees and in the people's struggles. She has a special interest in the Palestinians, whose struggles she discusses in three films produced around 1974: *Le Front du refus* (*The Front of Refusal*), *Les Palestiniens continuent* (*Palestinians Keep Fighting*) and *Les Femmes palestiniennes* (*Palestinian Women*). There was also a special interest in the Saharawis, depicted in her 1977 film *Le Sahara n'est pas à vendre* (*The Sahara is Not for Sale*). The making of these films did lead to incidents, including censorship by French television, the confiscation and destruction of her camera equipment, as well as violence against her, for example at the film festival in Tangier in Morocco, which she attended with her son, seventeen years after filming in the Western Sahara (Brenez 2016). The filmmaker asserts:

I have often been ready to put myself in danger in order to create and bear witness to the great moments of history that I found myself witnessing. Nevertheless, I believe that what makes my journey so special is that I have always wanted to remain consistent and have always been ready to fight to defend what I believed in, to show and analyse this Middle East in the throes of change that fascinated me. (Saab in Rouxel 2019)

As a result, Jocelyne Saab's biography (Rouxel 2015) echoes that of the exiles, to the extent that she came to settle in Paris and in Cairo after the bombing of her house in Beirut in 1982, and filmed herself amidst the ruins of her home in *Il était une fois Beyrouth* (*Once Upon a Time, Beirut: Story of a Star*, 1994). In an interview I conducted in Paris with Jocelyne Saab in 2018, she told me she had lost all her 'souvenirs' (photos, pictures and objects of her family . . .) in the bombing of Beirut. Unlike war's destruction and erasure of memory, filming is a way to reconstruct and recreate memory. In addition, while Saab could have died in this bombing, filming her body in the middle of these ruins is also a way to affirm that unlike her house that has been destroyed, she herself is still standing, feeling more creative and combative than ever, as shown by the making of this film. By shooting *One Dollar a Day* in a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon in 2015, for one of her last artistic productions three



years before her death, Saab testifies once again about human disasters created by the successive conflicts in the Arab world, and – most importantly – about the resilience of the displaced populations. Saab believed that as a filmmaker, she could change the gaze of viewers and raise awareness of civil society; as she said, ‘We cannot legislate, but we can act where they do not act, and mobilise public opinion’ (in Rouxel 2019).

In *One Dollar a Day* we do not witness any men. The spectator can deduce from this absence of men on the screen that most of them died in the war in Syria. The film’s opening credits remind us that in 2015, 500,000 people had already died in this war. In the film we see only women and children, and they testify to the social role of women for the survival of the group. According to the point of view given by the woman filmmaker, in this film (and unlike the patriarchal dominant ideology which affirms that men are pillars of society) Saab makes visible that women are in fact the pillars and guardians of the perpetuation of society. In this film she emphasises the empowerment of women, even in extreme and desperate circumstances. In the refugee camp, despite the disaster, women continue to manage daily life and raise the children. We are spectators of their everyday life: a woman cradles her child, children play ball games. The spectator perceives the quietness of this refugee camp.

But a shrill soundscape contrasts sharply with the ostensibly peaceful day-to-day images, pointing out that danger is imminent, and that behind this seemingly peaceful daily life hides a past of war, a war which is still present in Syria. One sentence of the opening credits confirms this meaning of the ‘sound contrast’ experimented with in the film: ‘Over there, the overwhelming noise of fighting, here only deafening silence.’ The shrill soundscape also evokes an uncertain future for the children of the refugee camp. The refugee camp appears as a *non-lieu*, a non-place, a concept coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1992), who used it to express a transient space, a place with no spatial or temporal referents, where time is suspended and where there is no future.

*One Dollar a Day* also does not contain any words: not from the people filmed, nor from the filmmaker in voice-over. The women of the refugee camp do not complain about the disaster of their situation and do not speak at all, but they are living. They do not beg but they claim their rights and show their empowerment by holding up a document from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) testifying that they are entitled to one dollar a day per woman and child to live off, a small sum that they do not always receive in reality, and which gives the film its title.<sup>3</sup> Although the direct gaze is often discouraged in documentaries, Saab films these women and children that way: they are looking frontally at the viewer and challenge him or her, awakening his or her responsibility and the fact that he or she is concerned by their dramatic situation. The document from the UNHCR, which testifies



Figure 12.2 When an advertisement billboard becomes a home

that the refugees are entitled to one dollar a day per woman and child to live off, contrasts strikingly with the huge billboards advertising jewels and other luxury items. The contrast between these two worlds comes to a head when the irony becomes tangible in the fact that the refugees' tents are made of the plastic advertising tarpaulins for Louis Vuitton bags.

The simultaneity of such paradoxical images in the same space is shocking. Jocelyne Saab takes this logic to its end and then reverses it. She takes the camera to Beirut and confronts the viewer with the contrast between the daily lives of the people in the camps on the one hand, and those in the city on the other hand. Through this contrast she establishes a juxtaposition of values and images, and thrusts the truth of inequality upon us. Beirut is a city dominated by advertising imagery, and Saab takes up the public space of these images of luxury with images of the humanitarian slogan 'How to live with one dollar a day'. As such, she opposes the consumer logic of the city with the reality of survival in the camps.

Moreover, while many might not want to be confronted with stark images of the Syrian refugees in Beqaa, Jocelyne Saab represents them in the very heart of Beirut, in an almost heroic way. As such, she succeeds in ensuring that the plight of the Syrian refugees in these camps is not forgotten by the people of central Beirut. Her black and white photographs of the children in the camps are blown up to a very large format, and are adorned with gold and bright colours, like Byzantine icons. These icons are very present in Lebanese Orthodox churches, which may have inspired Saab, who came from a Christian family.<sup>4</sup> Then she



Figure 12.3 Sacred images of Syrian child refugees in the port of Beirut

exposes them in the middle of Beirut, suspended from cranes. It is a gesture that aims to give back to these children – whose portraits stand out against the azure sky – their majestic, sacred, angelic and iconic character, in contrast with the media images, which often portray these children as a possible danger. The term ‘sacred’ is used by Saab herself in one of the sentences in the opening credits of the film when she asks, ‘Was this a story about the sacred?’

Through these large images, placed in central Beirut, that confront the privileged Beirutis with the harsh reality of the Syrian refugees just beyond the limits of their city, Jocelyne Saab highlights not only the presence of the refugees, but also the consumerism of the city dwellers. The installations of the humanitarian slogan and the painted photographs enable the artist to resettle the space of the camp – at least in images and words – within the city itself, in a spatial and political sense. It is hence not a question of inserting advertising images into refugee camps as permitted by cinematographic effects, but of inserting the very material of the camps, where the tents are made from billboards, into Beirut. Likewise, it is not a matter of merely inserting the slogan ‘How to live with one dollar a day’ or photos of children from camps on billboards in the sky of Beirut, but rather of installations made within and of the city’s urban material. This film is based on artistic interventions in the core of the city, which the inhabitants of Beirut cannot ignore, and as such, it has the potential to directly impact social reality.

The strength of these installations lies in the interpenetration of two contiguous worlds that coexist: the consumerist world of Beirut, and the precarious

world of the refugee camp. In its turn, the film that shows and juxtaposes these images brings together two realities that coexist without intersecting. Lebanon carefully keeps them apart, both spatially and socially. It is as if the film, and therefore its artist, confronts us with our ability to forget about what we do not see. What we do not see is 'lost in sight', in both the real and in the psycho-analytical sense – that is, it does not exist (Pontalis 1999). In Jocelyne Saab's hands, film has the immense power to show us what we cannot or do not want to see. Her art testifies to what we would like to ignore. She makes appear that which we would like to see disappear (Fortier 2019b). The cinema screen, like the migrants' tent canvas, is undoubtedly a fragile refuge, but it allows them to survive in images and can save life from indifference.

### CONCLUSION: THE 'SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE'

In *One Dollar a Day*, although we witness the human disasters created by the successive conflicts in the Arab world and especially in Syria, as in *The Table of Dance and Pride*, which portrays Alexandre Paulikevitch, a dancer struggling with the stigma of homosexuality in Lebanon and in the Arab world more widely, Jocelyne Saab puts emphasis on the vitality and empowerment of the people. Her films allow us to question our responsibility, our resignation or our mobilisation. Until the end of her life she worked courageously to produce films that reflect the struggles of people to control their territory as well as their own bodies.

Her films also show the struggle of people to survive, especially in her last film, where the struggle for staying alive with 'one dollar a day' for Syrian women refugees in the Lebanese camps reflects in a *mise-en-abyme*: Jocelyne Saab herself struggled to stay alive at that time. While filming *One Dollar a Day* she knew she was seriously ill. Like the future of the children of the camp, which is compromised, the future of Saab herself was at stake, as she explains in the opening credits of the film: 'At the time I had no idea that this would become a part of my own inexorable struggle, as my life slipped through my fingers . . . Was this a story about the sacred? The sacredness of human life?' The 'sacredness of human life' is the key concept at the heart of all Jocelyne Saab's films. Even if the films cannot save lives, they can give to the protagonists and to the filmmaker a kind of eternity, and so restore to life the sacred dimension it deserves.

### NOTES

1. Such as the following movements and organisations: *Lambda Istanbul* in Turkey in 2006, *Kif Kif* in Morocco in 2008, *Bedayā* in Egypt, Iraqi LGBTQI, *Abū Numās* in Algeria, *Aswat* (the voice) and *Qaws* (the rainbow) in Palestine.

2. The term 'homosexual' in modern Arabic is the words *mithlī* and *mithliyya*, masculine and feminine derivatives of the word 'same', antonyms of the term 'heterosexual': *ghayrī* and *ghayriyya*, which refers to the notion of otherness. The word 'bisexual' in Arabic is also built on the notion of 'two': *thuna 7* and *thuna 'iyya*.
3. Personal communication with Jocelyne Saab, Paris, 2018.
4. Jocelyne Saab also set up an exhibition of these photos at the French Institute in Beirut in 2017.

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