HAIRY CHEST, WILL TRAVEL
TOURISM, IDENTITY, AND SEXUALITY IN THE LEVANT

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry explores questions of movement and tourism in relation to sexuality within the context of Lebanon's nascent gay travel industry. The first section examines how imagery of Arab men is mediatized and circulated, with (un)intended effects. Many of the images take form through hypermasculinized men and within the subculture of the "bear." The second section explores this specific sexual subculture in the context of two demographics of men (both bearded and able to pass through heteronormative spaces), the ethnographic encounters of male tourists who have traveled on tours with LebTour from 2007 to 2011, and those men in the region who are increasingly identifying as bears. This research hopes to complicate the oft cited local/global bifurcation of sexuality. What becomes most interesting are the changing affinities, conceptions of rights, and aesthetics of desirability in the negotiations of the Middle East.

After a long day of travel to northern Syria, followed by a walking tour of the citadel crowning Aleppo, one American tour participant noted: "This is all so amazing! After all of this I don't care if the rest of day is just sex."[1] Impressed by the historical and cultural sites visited during the previous two days, he relinquished the remainder of the day to flirting. This middle-aged tour participant expressed that, although the possibility of having sex was not one of his primary interests in choosing the tour, his "sexual orientation" was a motivating force. According to him, this specific six-day trip, Bear Arabia Summer Trip:

Lebanon & Syria 2009, would put him in contact with "Arab men" and ensure him safe passage with a group of friendly likeminded gay individuals. Perceptions of sexuality and desire were an impetus for him to enter that which he viewed largely out of his reach alone: the "new gay Middle East."

There are growing venues of conspicuous gay consumption in the Levant, Beirut being the focus. Within the last decade, bold entrepreneurs hoping to profit, most clearly through increased consumerism and commodification, have carved a niche into this market in parallel with escalating rates of travel and tourism. The first section of this article begins by contextualizing LebTour and its programs for gay tours in the Levant throughout the last five years.[2] Beyond exposing the novelty of such a business existing openly within a region largely perceived as hostile towards non-traditional sexualities, this work aims to illustrate the subtle convergence of identities, gender categories, and conceptions of rights in these flows. The tours in Lebanon and Syria cannot be strictly classified as examples of sex tourism that rally exclusively around libidinal pleasures. Yet, they create a grey zone between marketing in an overtly sexual register, enticing a specific sexual demographic based on their identities as gay males, and operating a cultural tour. The desires and expectations of those who arrive via the iconic advertisements into which the creators tap produce an ambiguous engagement between cultural and sexual tourism. This grey zone produces a new modality of imagining the region, practices, and people of the destination. In fact, it reveals something unique about the intertwined and co-constitutive nature of non-heterosexual tourism in the Levant—the relationship between travelers and those to be "toured."

Given that organized gay tourism is now an option for independent travelers to enter not just Lebanon, but also Syria, one must question the "routes/roots" of identities and the reconstitution of culture (Clifford 1997). Much like the work of Jasbir Puar (2001), part of the contingencies that emerge via these accelerated networks of movement and circulation must preemptively be explained; these tours are not only marketed to gay men but more specifically to "bears."

The bear is a subculture that emerged decades ago in the American gay community to counter what was seen as stereotypical gay culture. Many of these men felt they did not, and could not, conform to the

body image, mannerisms, or aesthetics of desirability prevalent in the gay community. The outward appearance of bears often includes: "hairy bodies and facial hair; some are heavy-set; some project an image of working-class masculinity in their grooming and appearance…. Some bears place importance on presenting a hypermasculine image; some may shun interaction with men who display effeminate style."[3]

The second section of this article explores this sexual subculture in the context of two demographics of men: male tourists in Lebanon and Lebanese and Syrian bears, both of which are bearded and able to pass through heteronormative spaces. First, I discuss the ethnographic encounters of male tourists on LebTour programs from 2007 to 2011. This section serves not to profile these men but rather interrogates how they imagine the region, focusing on their sense-making as they try to interpret their travels in Lebanon and Syria. Conceptions of repressive states and liberated homosocial interactions evoked a tension that overshadowed much of these men's travels—danger and fear imbricated alongside excitement and desire. The implications of such global encounters illustrate in part how these men see themselves in opposition to their perceived local counterparts on the tours. As Dana Collins (2005) shows in Manila, the constitution of gay identities for local populations often has tourism lurking as an offstage actor whose presence plays a part in larger local negotiations.

Second, I question what the category bear might mean for Lebanese and Syrian men. While individual subjective understandings of the category deserve more attention, it is compelling to consider how the idea of the bear is gaining usage, emerging with its own meaning within the local community, and how businesses and social entrepreneurs construct such imagery that is then redirected out from Lebanon. The historical significance of hair in the region (Bromberger 2007, Daoud 2000, Najmabadi 2005, Ze'evi 2006) also plays a role in this research. For example, beards are depicted as a marketing tool, a desired sexual trait, and a way to pass through heteronormative spaces (see Figures 1, 2). The significance of these beards signals a changing indexicality between hair and the contingent meanings of proper masculinity. Thus, notions of the Middle East are refracted in multiple ways: potential gay tourists' presuppositions and tourism agents' appreciations of such desires.

Finally, from this tripartite analysis, I show how this tour opera-

tion, the accompanying flow of men, and changing gender categories all act as springboards signaling larger issues concerning masculinities and sexualities. How are such travelers commercializing spaces in Beirut? How do such changes dovetail with changing aesthetics of the male body? How has the fight for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Lebanon become aggravated and aided by such mobilities: first, by the perceived duel between Beirut and Tel Aviv for capital of the gay Middle East, and second, by the narrative of Beirut as a liberal, tolerant, and cosmopolitan haven—despite extensive experiences by Lebanese nationals to the opposite.

LEBTOUR: IMAGERY AND IMAGINATION, REPRESENTATIONS IN FLUX

The traveler sees what he sees; the tripper (tourist) sees what he has come to see. (*G. K. Chesterton*)[4]

Much to the fanfare of many Lebanese, the *New York Times* declared Beirut the best place to visit in 2009.[5] Tourism in the Arab world is prone to the whims of local political turbulence; nonetheless, from 2000 through 2006, the average yearly growth rate for the region rose 10.6 percent per year (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2007). A significant portion is attributed to the growing industries in the Arabian Gulf and to the numerous established networks of travel that were altered by September 11th. Many Arab tourists reoriented their travels to neighboring countries, rather than to Europe or North America (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner 2004, Hazbun 2008). Tourism has also captured the attention of academics in the Middle East (Daher 2006, Hazbun 2008). Beyond a purely statistical approach of entries and departures, a growing narrative indicates that Lebanon has entered a tourism boom (BBC News 2009, *Daily Star* 2010, 2011). A 2009 article anticipated two millions visitors—in a country of roughly four million—with most coming during the summer months (Yazbeck 2009). Nada Sardouk, director of the Ministry of Tourism, said that the ministry recorded over one million entries in July 2009, noting that this "is enormous, we have never seen this before" (NowLebanon 2009). From a record-breaking year in 2009, tourism in 2010 increased by 17.6 percent, and now tourism in 2011 looms to break another record (*Daily Star* 2011).

Figure 1: Courtesy of LebTour

LebTour's director Bertho Makso proudly remarked his appointment as "the ambassador" of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) in Lebanon and is in charge of its Arab world, Cyprus, and Malta portfolios. While the Lebanese government might
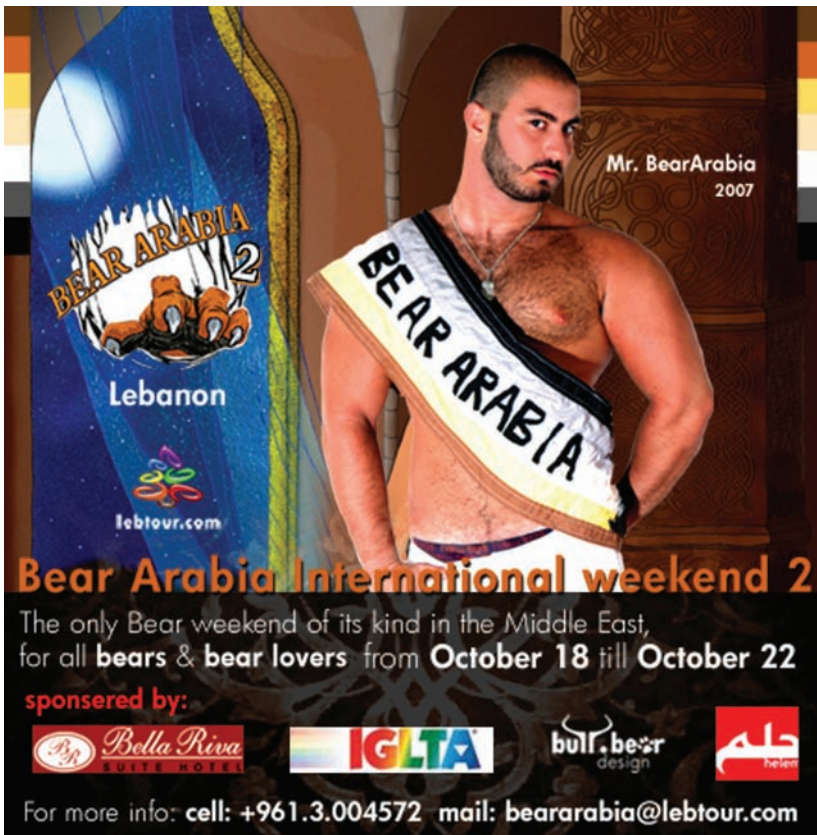
Figure 2: Courtesy of LebTour

seem to welcome gay tourists, its arms are likely open only to the travelers' dollars rather than to their identities or behaviors. In 2007 LebTour was invited to Beirut's Annual Arab Tourism and Transportation Fair, which is surprising given the ambivalent state of gay rights in Lebanon. According to Maya Shehayeb, the fair's project manager, "[T]he market [for gay tourism] is there…. [W]e won't promote it in a shocking, provocative way, but it doesn't make financial sense to simply ignore or neglect it either" (Fassihi 2007). These signals from the national level might also be interpreted as validation of his business model, and Makso's hopes for acceptance are pinned predominately on his travelers' economic prowess. As human rights activists in Beirut anecdotally noted, the government will crack down neither on growing gay spaces nor on the underbelly

that has developed from increased tourism because so much money is at stake on a national level.[6] This money is the lifeblood of the economy.

Most notable, in the last four years, Makso has spearheaded the marketing campaigns of bears in Lebanon. He has held numerous programs that include hotels, bus transportation, sightseeing, and events for participants such as nightlife outings and *hammam* (bathhouse) visits. All of his publicity is done via the Internet and with many nationalities in attendance: French, Americans, British, Scottish, Australians, Spanish, Italians, Cypriots, Venezuelans, Jordanians, Saudis, Qataris, Norwegians, Swedes, and Canadians.[7] Makso notes that he "prefers to work with Westerners" and that most of his clientele hails from Europe, Australia, and the United States.

Recent political situations, namely the Israeli attacks in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the fighting in the north of Lebanon in 2007, have impacted his business. Makso noted: "[S]urely the war affected the event, especially for example I was supposed to be having a group of forty participants [during the *Nahr al-Bared* conflict]… but due to the war, I simply got twenty." Yet, twenty participants during a time of internal conflict, when Beirut was on near lockdown with checkpoints across the city, may illustrate is the market's strength—or rather how much interest is being culled in such trips through his promotions. His flyers are distributed via an e-mail list of "over 10,000" people and posted on numerous web sites and bear portals worldwide. Overall, Makso hosts between 70-150 people a year either on group tours or small privately planned trips.[8] The fact that participants continue to attend during arduous times indicates that his information is reaching interested masses and that his undisguised and unbridled operation can hardly be considered of little consequence.

In 2006 LebTour was mainly structured as a gay travel agency but in the last few years has had a redefining focus on bears.[9] The imagery that the agency uses has developed as quickly as the directions of tourism have shifted. Transnational forces are numerous on many flyers as international bear groups and gay web sites and organizations pepper the bottom of Makso's flyers (see Figure 2). Perhaps they represent a link with outside communities or a validation that his operation is legitimate. Such legitimacy might be based on keeping the tourist safe in what is perceived as a dangerous region or linked to a visual discourse with

which the tourist is familiar.

Most compelling is not the significance of "pink dollars,"[10] the permissibility of either the Lebanese or Syrian governments for gay tourism, nor praise for gay men's presence as evidence of an opening-up on a teleological scale measuring what defines liberal civil societies. Rather, it is compelling that an actual place, namely Beirut, is made iconic and representational in popular imaginings of non-heterosexual spaces. Partial credit is due to tourism and to, as Alyssa Howe (2001) notes, the gravity of emergent tourist narratives and the manner in which they form larger conceptions and narratives of place. In this regard a recent *New York Times* travel section article, "Beirut, the Provincetown of the Middle East," produced huge outpourings of both positive interest and disdain within the LGBT community in Lebanon (Healy 2009). It categorized Beirut as little more than a nightlife stop on the global circuit of a certain class of men mobile and affluent enough to frequent the profiled commercialized locations.[11] This article speaks concurrently in language strengthening a touristic narrative of Beirut as well as in terms largely ensconced in globalized conceptions of sexuality and identity, such as "gay," "out," or "liberated." The seemingly totalizing categories posited in Patrick Healy's (2009) article prove problematic as the following two sections discuss.

Makso noted that visitors coming through LebTour had many reasons for choosing Lebanon: "Some came for fun, others to discover a new country and society; others came for checking what has been made during the war." Yet, much of what he uses for publicity is blatantly sexual. In the summer of 2009, as the bear tour entourage sat on the public bus, Makso noted that imagery is necessary and that one "has to use an image" to promote tours. Further, he pointed out, regarding his flyers, "If [they are] cultural no one will look." Clearly the use and importance of suggestive imagery illustrates a dissonance between cultural and sexual tourism, while simultaneously highlighting the tension of their coexistence. Makso finally declared that he must "hint" at what the tour might entail. It is this hint that becomes interesting not only of what is growing in Lebanon—the "dubbing" (Boellstorff 2003) of new gay identities—but a reminder of what sells. Chris Rojek (1995) reminds us of the power of "seduction" that often finds expression in the image of the depicted place of leisure. John Urry (1990) notes how tourists see, experience, and then

remember vis-à-vis the image.[12] Their work highlights how travel and imagery are interconnected as these pictures become linked with a sense of place—or the imagined fantasy of a place. The extent to which desire is not merely a layer of these pictures but their cornerstone raises questions of how such yearnings find expression in the image and how sexual undertones affect production so as to be legible by various individuals.

The linchpin of many of the images is the Orientalized man. Given the historical depths of Orientalizing imagery (Massad 2007, Said 1979) with inaccurate and misconstrued depictions of sexuality in the Middle East, it might come as no surprise that a business would mobilize such conceptions to gain market share. Similar to gay tourism in Barbados, gay tourism in the Levant at times seems inclined towards the "social, political and economic inequalities with very deep roots in the socio-historical firmament we refer to as colonialism" (Murray 2007, 50). Take for example the slogan that these tours are "Bear Arabia." The reference of Arabia most closely corresponds to the Arabian Gulf countries rather than the Levant. Nonetheless in popular conceptions it might evoke visions of mystical, exotic, and dangerous places that consolidate a semblance of the larger exotic Middle East. The term seems pinned on totalizing the agency's work to the whole region as well as capitalizing from the stereotype of a pre-colonial era. Thus, this travel operation has seemingly become a social entrepreneur engaging in "commodity images," namely the "affect management" (Mazzarella 2003, 35), of not just the associated imagery, but also of the associated category, the bear.

Accordingly, the leading page of the IGLTA's July 2007 newsletter displays a similar "commodity image."[13] The man has a hairy chest, large muscles, and wears a *kaffiyeh* headscarf that falls from his head. The fact that the newsletter plays off notions of Arab and Middle East is problematic. Yet, what becomes interesting in this modern-day portrayal is not just how foreign entities represent the region but also how actors within Lebanon do so. When images are produced within Lebanon, by Lebanese who espouse to represent the region though such categories, the origins, values, and meanings of the concepts at play are blurred. Tracing the lineage of the concept bear to the Middle East and now back abroad with neo-visions of the East, via such images, dispels unidirectionality. Rather, in this case, it raises commercialization as a motor of how representations and certain scripts "sell" and contains characteristics with

which consumers can associate and "read." This image from the IGLTA newsletter is also a leading picture on the back of an American produced pornographic movie (See Figure 3). Thus, perhaps it is ironically appropriate that what is used to represent the fledgling gay community to an American audience of Lebanon comes from a depiction of the region through an American produced sexualized view of the Other (Cervulle and Rees-Roberts 2008, Mahawatte 2004).

This is not to imply that bears in Lebanon signify the same thing as bears in Amsterdam or New York, nor do men understand them in the same way. Rather, terms such as "gay" and "bear" are appropriated, transformed, and in this case remarketed for export back out to the foreign community for consumption. This hints towards more complicated issues than "authenticity" (Massad 2007) in globalizing sexualities (Boellstorf 2005, 25 – 30, Hasso 2005). Whether true or not, the purpose of such actions is meant to project a certain image of Lebanon and to spur new travelers to come. LebTour is exploiting the comparatively permissive political environment in Lebanon, and there seem to be few limits thus far. By playing off Beirut's multifaceted reputation as both natural haven and cultural homeland, and now within increasing narratives of the city as an anything-goes international playground, LebTour is building a gay tourist niche economy within the region, playing off changing localized versions of gay identities and acting as an alternative activist.

HAIRY CHEST, WILL COME

An Italian college professor who participated on a tour[14] expressed little to no disenchantment with the images he saw on the flyers versus what he perceived on the streets of Damascus. As he talked about the "Arab" men he knew back in Italy, he admitted that the images were "probably a dream" but he also hoped "something like this would appear." He continued, "but most Arab men really are quite masculine." For him, it seemed the dissonance between what imaginations and desires such advertisements created, versus his experiences, were neutralized as the tour unfolded. These images became emblematic of what was imagined as an authentic Arab man—not just phenotypically—but also of one's behavior. Looking and perceiving were crucial parts of not only participants' travels but their readings of these images. The tourist "gaze" (Urry

Figure 3: Courtesy of World of Men

1990) often guided men's interactions as their perceptions of local Arab men railed around strong, fierce men.

As the public bus passed through the center of a village along the coast in 2009, an older German participant noted that some of the local Syrian men looked ready to "fuck us up." In response to this, a rowdy and flamboyant Italian perked up from his seat to follow such a provocation by saying: "That's what makes them the hottest guys. Anyways, isn't that what we all want?" These conceptions of violence, hypermasculinity, and hostility existed as one side of a duality as a reason to fear the tour. Yet, these conceptions also lurked on the other side of this duality as an attraction and advantage of the tour. Continually, participants' discourse on the bus, on walking tours, or around the dinner table returned to theories that this region was "dangerous" to them because of their perceived sexual identities. "I would never come by myself; it just isn't safe if you don't know how to act," said an American tour participant who admitted limited knowledge of how he should "hide" his sexuality. Homophobia might scare, but it also "encourages a continuity of colonial constructions of tourism as a travel adventure into uncharted territory laden with the possibility of taboo sexual encounters, illicit seductions, and dangerous liaisons" (Puar 2002, 113). Puar (2002) continues that this often falls under what Rosaldo (1993) calls "imperial nostalgia."[15] There is a force of desire behind the sexualization that gets triggered by interpolating the Other as dangerous, but this marker then seems to ignore the power dynamics of such a relationship. In a recent discussion a colleague noted that it seemed the fear that the tourists would get "fucked up" by local men (perhaps as victims of hate crimes based on their perceived sexuality), was also present concomitant with the hope that the same might happen in bed. What then becomes interesting in a tangential manner is how violence—performed by men perceived as hypermasculine and thus homophobic—becomes desirable in multiple ways through a frisson of emotion but also a fission of their enlightened "out" and "liberated" selves.

Likewise, just as tension lurked between danger/safety, so did it between sexual/cultural agendas for the tour. The tension might be summarized by a Scandinavian who stated: "Sure this is all fun (referring to the ancient mosque we had just visited), but I'm ready to go back to the hammam." Quiescent sexualized energy was never far from emerging on what was predominately a cultural tour. Most often this took shape through blatant objectification of the Other. One Australian's understanding of male-male sexual relationships in the Middle East was

understood as, "Men here just need to get it out!" Such a reference to pent-up, unbridled sexual energy was also encapsulated by one French participant's comparison of Arabs to "real men," because, as he seems to imply, perhaps in opposition to another nationality, "they aren't gay; they just like to do things sometimes."

Fantasies of "sexual fluidity of preidentity, precapitalist, premodern times conjoin nicely with the tourist agenda," and the tourists lacked sustained depth in their engagements with the men they met (Puar 2002, 113). Makso said his entire operation is "like [a] normal tour," and he explicitly emphasized it is "not sex tourism." Yet his normal work as a group leader required him to give them the opportunity to "hunt" during their visits. The hunt implied a moment of sexual encounter—or at least the promise of one. While such illicit encounters were openly discussed, it was tacitly understood by both the tour participants and the group leader that such temporal and spatial opportunities would be made available. Nevertheless, many men on each tour came not for the prospects of sexual activity but to gain insight into the region and its LGBT issues and to support gay activism.

Perceptions of gender rights in the area provoked men to note what seemed like split sentiments. One strong thread characterized the region as repressive and violent toward their non-heterosexual counterparts in these countries.[16] Men noted that the region needed to "develop," "step forward," and "come into the twenty-first century." While such expressions revealed how these individuals conceive of parts of modernity and rights, they also highlight a direct comparison to their perceived statuses in their home countries. Gabriel Giorgi (2002, 58) notes that gay tourism creates a "discourse of authority and witnessing that validates political progress, historical advances and dimensions of the visible in foreign lands." How tour participants imagined the region was indicative. References to Turkey, Iran, the Arabian Gulf, or many places where homosexuality was viewed as repressed (i.e. Kenya, India, Sudan) were jumbled together as if to imply a singular area worldwide where counterparts were repressed—even if it were not in the general vicinity of Syria and Lebanon. It set up a totalizing way of viewing those counties who grant rights versus those where there is still a perceived struggle. Nelson Graburn (1989, 34), strongly influenced by Emile Durkheim, compared tourism to "magic" in so far as the movement and trip becomes "enhanced by group identity." In other words, the

collective consciousness of these men was strengthened by being together and sharing a common sexual orientation and trajectory. These men were united in railing against what seemed a common enemy—repressive states and the cultures that stifled open expressions of non-heterosexual desires. A French lawyer and tour participant said, "The law is clearly not in our favor." While each tour has taken a different tone, each has also followed a general discourse of hostility to "us."

In the face of such hostilities, "we," "our," and "us" worked on various levels. It might be the immediate reference to the group on the tour. Likewise, it might suggest participants' understandings of men associated with non-heterosexual inclinations in the region. Such blurring of a normative us seems to presume that their counterparts are struggling for the same rights, values, and futures. Thus, are they (the nationals in Syria and Lebanon) on a teleological progression to what these traveling men already have in their home countries? Should they be? Do they want to be?

One Scandinavian tour participant noted that the tours were a glimmer of "pink in the larger blackness" as these tours took participants through what were imagined as dangerous and hostile spaces. Moreover, many of the men were endlessly curious about and enthralled with the prospects of gender separation, male dominated spaces, and the gestures and embodiment of men who were, in some ways, as a German lawyer and tour participant said, "more liberated.... They hold hands and link arms." An American catching up on the same current a year later noted that "American masculinity is so homophobic in comparison.... There is just no touching. I love it here." The tour participants perceived these communities in the Middle East within their own sense of community. In this context, the term "gay" was evoked often as a totalizing category under which they could approach and understand the region.

In one breath, the participants were criticizing homosocial practices as somehow backwards, but in the next the same practices were idealized. Masko's work was credited as "great," "brave," "really something," and "important for the region." Many of these men expressed that the tours were good because they opened the county to the inflows of their money and to their presence as mature out men. They seemed to equate their presence with how a country could be measured as an open liberal society, giving much importance to their meetings with local men—seemingly a paternalistic encounter—in which there was much to

learn from the more emancipated visitor. These observations and snippets of conversations are not offered as judgment of these travelers. Nor do I hope this adds fuel to the simmering narrative that such identities and behaviors are imported by such men.[17]

The context of these tourists is raised because they render a glimpse of the fusing of the complex issues at hand: pre-conceived stereotypes based on a long history of colonialism and Orientalism, marketing that plays into such notions, followed by the experiences and pitfalls of a brief tourist encounter. All of these coalesce within larger negotiations of subjectivities becoming more interesting through a lens of "homonationalisms" (Puar 2007). The manner in which many Western states have constructed definitions of so-called proper sexuality and created, in opposition to an Other, definitions of what officially sanctioned homosexuality might look like. These notions that render homonationalsims so powerful are the dual sentiments often expressed by these men. The men might view themselves as privileged or liberated—but largely in opposition to the men whom they met. Thus, what existed on the tour was a constant juggling between desire/fear, liberation/concealment, and excitement/danger within an imagined space that often posited these men opposite their counterparts.

Despite such issues, Makso's operations are vital to Lebanon. The men on these tours leave with a cultural and historic view of the country and a glimpse into gender issues they would not have gained without such mobility. He operates a business, albeit one that hopes to inform foreigners of the region and ultimately work towards sexual rights in Lebanon. The presence of these tourists can add to the growing reputation and narrative of Beirut as playground to the rich and "sin" capital of the Middle East (Yazbeck 2009). Yet how do such tours, emphasizing fixed and digestible products, affect the "relationship among commodities, consuming desires, and sexual practices," (Curtis 2004, 95) especially when the fact remains that our negotiation of sexual subjectivities is "best understood as a process which is always in the making, is never finished or complete" (Alexander 1994, 278)? Can such commercialization stymie quests for rights, and how do the threats of non-heterosexual desires become swathed behind a nation's perceived financial gain?

LOCALIZATION OF SEXUALITIES: THE BEAR?

> What strikes me is that within a given country… the range of constructions of homosexuality is growing. (*Dennis Altman*)[18]

Mustafa, a middle aged Syrian bear who came to meet the tour groups passing through Damascus casually remarked: "*Ya'nni, al bears shi tabiy'i mish mithl al gay* (Bears are something natural, not like gay)." Can one say that bear is a broadening of gay identities, a resistance against a perceived hegemony of gay, or rather just a pluralization of how men might explain their own subjectivities in terms of the changing landscape of masculinities?

What a term, like "bear," comes to mean at various times, how it is challenged, and what other terms come into relational usage becomes important. As Boellstorff (2005) notes, in Indonesia the transformations of sexual categories should be viewed as a "dubbing," whereby no exact copy can be made, rather than a "translation" across cultures. Work concerning sexuality in the Middle East must emerge from the ashes of a strict examination of identity politics. The manner in which these men affix such terms to themselves, communities, and spaces is relevant—insofar as it illuminates the "desires" that underlie such moves (Brennan 2004, Rofel 2007).

As mentioned before, the bear movement was formed as resistance by men who felt they did not fit conceptions of the gay community. Bear seems to provide the phenotype of a man that could be considered common within the region and a man that is generally validated within the socio-cultural and gender hierarchy. Bears often have facial hair, are heavyset, and have hairy chests. However, these characteristics are common among many men. A Lebanese friend recently noted over chat, "There is a bear trend now in the gay community. Hairy masculine guys [He] can be muscled or not. But [he] should be masculine!" This indication that they must be "masculine" serves to layer the bear as one cultural acceptable ways of embodying one's proper manhood in larger ideas of heteronormativity. The characteristics of the bear mark one as achieving part of the trappings of successful manhood in an environment of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Moussawi 2008)—namely, an outward appearance as passable.

Ulf Hannerz (2003) notes the "multivocality of place," in that space

becomes something unique for disparate groups. Given that this phenotype conforms to great lengths with certain characteristics of heteronormative masculinity, how then do men come to "pass" as something else—hiding or accentuating aspects of their sexualities, nationalities or class—while also "passing" through various spaces of Beirut? (Epps, Valens, and González 2001, Schlossberg and Sánchez 2001). This idea of passing is important because bear has anchored much of its value on the contingency of heterosexuality. Moreover, the growth of these communities allows access to another option in which to express belonging and community.

Yet, to what extent is bear a local way to be gay? How much is this a localization? Whose locality? While there might be a broadening of the range of sexualities, I refrain from calling this a localization.[19] Bear is far from a unified category, and there is still much variation locally within Lebanon as to what it might mean. In the broadening spectrum of such identities it becomes salient to consider how, and under what circumstances, people draw divisions between those who fall into and out of categories. Bear seems not just related, but oppositional in some ways, to gay. Given its existence and growth in the region it seems to show a desire to be affiliated with a non-heterosexual community or to obtain partial visibility, while avoiding the full stigma that is associated with more outward pronouncements of one's sexuality. How these "presentations of self" (Goffman 1959) play out, especially with language, can inform boundary-making. As Susan Gal and Judith Irvine (1995) note, "[S]peakers and observers notice, justify and rationalize linguistic differences, placing them within larger ideological frames that link them to the properties of 'typical' persons and activities." Thus, terms such as "bear" and "gay" illustrate some of the tension that runs between notions of effeminacy and masculinity. Such questions of masculinity remain largely unexamined in the region except for works such as Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (2000)?[20] Further, if a bear is to embrace all that is so-called masculine, then in what way might it be considered misogynistic? Perhaps a bold assertion, but the bear begs analysis of a hypermasculine position by which one can position oneself in opposition not just to "inferior" effeminate males, but also women.

Some men have said that bear allows a way to "half" come out, while other bears have mention that it allows them to be "men"—seem-

ingly claiming some semblance of authenticity. Therefore, implicit in coming out as a bear are different linkages with belonging, passing, aesthetics, and heteronormative masculinity. Future work must examine what the bear indexes and how it is understood by individuals and across the contexts of various countries. This work is but a first signpost of these directions—a teaser of the many orientations of future work.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

> Connected lives are lives that link the global and the local, bridging distances and linking questions of sexuality and intimacy to issues of rights and responsibilities, to social justice. (*Jeffrey Weeks*)[21]

"I never thought it would be so easy," remarked an older English participant as we crossed the border from Syria back into Lebanon. "I mean, I thought this was a hostile land for us. I've met so many nice guys." Perhaps that was exactly the point—the tour had provided us with safe passage and an interesting cultural tour, as well as with contact with local men. What emerges from these tours are hints of how categories and identities are being repackaged, re-glossed, and commercialized, which produces a meeting of men.

Addressing gender and sexuality in the Middle East is often fraught at best.[22] Journalists have been interested in male gender negotiations in the Middle East not only because they go along with the narrative of the troubled region, but also because "gay" and "Arab" have become oxymorons in common Western usage. Yet, there is more to this picture than a vigilant organization based in Beirut, handfuls of middle-aged and middle-class men from abroad, and Lebanese men redrawing the aesthetics of gayness. There is more to garner from this analysis than toting the urgency of flows, nodes, and vectors all in adulation of global connections. Each section of this paper could largely be its own inquiry: the implications of gay tourism, the contexts from which these tourists embark, and the ways in which Lebanese men negotiate and perform the bear. This inquiry has likely raised more questions than it has answered, but the overlap and interconnectedness of beards, bears, and Beirut does not stop here. This research acts as a springboard, and in lieu of a conclusion it is necessary to signal three other areas that emerge from this analysis that are pressing for questions of sexuality and masculinity in the Levant.[23]

First, commercialization and marketing dovetail with movement, creating many directions for inquiry. Despite the historical foundation of bears against a perceived hegemonic gay identity, there are recent calls that the bear movement has lost touch with its roots and become mainstream and "sold-out"—too commercialized (Wright 1997, 2001). Peter Jackson (2009, 387) notes that "global queering can be seen as the sum of the many local transformations that have emerged from the intersecting influences of both national and transnational forms of capitalism." Thus, how do people, and the associated categories and identities, enter into the folds of the global capitalist machine? Note, for instance, the pageant for Mr. Bear Arabia that is held concurrently with a tour every June (see Figure 2). While the title lacks much formal responsibility, the symbolic weight that one Arab man is chosen, idealized, valorized as peerless and exalted for exhibiting characteristics deems him fit to represent a category. Such a pageant—far from democratic—speaks to how commodified notions of beauty, gender norms, and displays of sexuality become intertwined with the market and how, through visibility, consumption is what comes to reign. For that reason, can money and the market bring rights to the region? Or are such public provocations as LebTour temerity? One might associate such unabashed commercialization to Massad's (2002) "Incitement to Discourse," which examines the ways in which the narratives of Western non-governmental organizations have forced discussions of gay rights to be taken up. Could these pressures, tied to economic shoestrings, incite discourse or will they dampen ideological cries against homosexuality?

Second, further work must be done on the rights and experience of Lebanese under the law. Tourism seems meretricious to sexual rights as the economy privileges those who transit versus those who remain. If there is a growing discourse of Beirut as the friendly gay capital of the Middle East, the extent to which this is the case largely rides the coattails of an individual having another nationality and/or enough capital to erase concerns of one's sexuality. This vision of Beirut as a utopia sidelines the reality of many men to whom Lebanon is not a permissive liberal environment, nor a constant party.

At the recent IGLTA Fam Tour, which took place in Beirut in 2010, a speaker from HELEM, the local gay rights organization, raised questions of inequality and social justice related to tourism.[24] He questioned

how the presence of this foreign business association could help the local community and individuals when its interests revolved around business connections rather than local communities. The response by two IGLTA board members returned to two points: First, these visitors would have little understanding of the situation of Lebanon had they not visited. Second, the IGLTA's goal is for visibility—largely using the spending prowess of the community as a way to call for rights. Thus, the hope for a more just approach to the legal framework becomes complicated when the ability to command market share is pinned on visibility and when such acknowledgement then becomes the impetus for claiming rights and validation in one's country. As such, the ways in which the pink dollar becomes a way to claim rights versus obfuscating concerns of inequity must be counterbalanced by viewing tourism beyond solely a definition of avariciousness.

Third, future work should examine the narratives that surround Beirut. When I began writing this article in 2009, the crusade for the title of capital of the gay Middle East was just emerging. Building off the symbolic battles between Lebanon and Israel for the largest hummus bowl,[25] the right to claim the origins of tabbouleh,[26] and squabbles over which might be the Mediterranean capital of cosmopolitanism, there is now a battle not just for the rights of LGBT but the right to claim this symbolic jewel in the crown of the Middle East. In 2009 the IGLTA hosted a Fam Tour trip in Israel, which resulted in much hesitation by activists in Beirut the following year when the Fam Trip Beirut 2010 was announced. There was much speculation that questioned the links of an international organization that largely tuned-out, and thus colluded, in the "pinkwashing" of Israel's gay community. Pinkwashing is largely portrayed as Israeli acceptance and embrace of the LGBT community as proof of their commitment to human rights yet, activist would say, it conveniently sidelines the context of the Palestinian struggle (Puar 2010).[27] While this begets more unpacking, it signals how geopolitical issues become fused in wide ways with gender/sexuality and illustrates the importance of imagination in these narratives. It is the crafting of such visions that guides this paper—between individuals and communities. The desire of a place, of bodies, of the self and how one wants becomes grafted to a space through imagination. Thus, while this inquiry has only started to highlight the many directions surrounding beards, bears, and

the context of Beirut, the fight for the capital of the gay Middle East is just beginning. The stakes are vastly interconnected and will speak to changing contexts of not just sexualities but masculinities across the region.

NOTES

1. I participated on the following tours for three consecutive years as a researcher: From Beirut to Damascus in 2008, Bear Arabia Summer in 2009, Bear Arabia Fall in 2010, and International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) Fam Trip in 2010. At the beginning of every trip, I announced to the participants that I was a graduate student researching tourism and that these organized tours were part of my research. Quotes from participants were recorded during this first-hand research on these tours. Often, this served to open and broaden our conversations as the men asked about my history in the region and the background of my research. Participating on the tours was a unique way to see how these men experienced the Middle East. There was a sense of camaraderie between many of the men and myself. At times I was asked about issues of gender, history, and politics in the region and was seen by many to have a more candid view because I was not Lebanese. Strangely, this fictive way of conceiving my own relationship to them served as a way for me to engage how and why they were interested in such travel by questioning their presuppositions about the region. Having visited all the locations on the tours multiple times I helped participants bargain and ask for directions and provided touristic snippets along the way. I quite enjoyed getting to know many of them. It was their monologue/dialogues together with my participants' observations that unites my role on these tours. Harvard University's International Review Board requirements were met by ensuring the anonymity of those involved. While providing ethnographic details of the tours, I provide little information that could identify any of the participants. However, Bertho Makso, the organizer of these tours, has not been given a pseudonym. He is forward with his business and has been interviewed by numerous publications locally and abroad. He clearly offers his name, title, and goals. He has seen drafts of this work as it developed.

2. LebTour works in the Levant (predominantly Lebanon and to a lesser extent Syria and Jordan). More information can be found at www.lebtour.com.

3. Wikipedia offers one of the best folk definitions of the various usages of the term "bear": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_community (accessed on May 4, 2011). Also see Wright (1997, 2001) for historical contextualization of the bear community.

4. See Chesterton (1988).

5. See http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/01/11/travel/20090111_DESTINATIONS.html (accessed on March 30, 2011). Note that Beirut also appeared on the cover of *OutTraveler* in 2006: http://www.outtraveler.com/features.asp?did=447 (accessed on May 31, 2011).

6. Many Lebanese friends joke that their county has "sold out" to money. The "underbelly" is a reference to commercialized heterosexual sexual outlets, spe-

cifically to Super Night Clubs. If Beirut has in fact become a "playground" for the region then there is a shortage of inquires into such ineffable topics.

7. Few if any Lebanese from the larger diaspora participate. Many of these men are presumably aware of their options in Beirut and have the linguistic and cultural competency to navigate the city. They would likely also shun a public tour. However, a growing number of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Lebanese with few links to the country are finding entry on the tours.

8. Makso notes that there are many more reservations than people who show up, and often cancellations coincide with perceived security threats.

9. For a general reading of gay tourism see Cantú (2002), Giorgi (2002), Hughes (1997), Pritchard, Morgan, Sedgely, and Jenkins (1998), Visser (2003), and Waitt and Markwell (2006). For an excellent study of sexuality and tourism see Brennan (2004).

10. "Pink dollars" indicate the spending prowess of the gay community.

11. See Richard Ammon's remarks for a critical review of Healy's article: http://www.helem.net/node/19 (accessed on May 31, 2011).

12. See also MacCannel (1999).

13. See www.iglta.org/documents/europesep07.pdf (accessed on March 30, 2011). This newsletter also announced the first FamTrip to Israel, which later sparked much controversy in 2010 during the Lebanon IGLTA Fam Trip.

14. Most of the tour participants were between 30-50 years old and many identified as bears. Likewise, most were upper-/middle-class white-collar professionals. This was this man's first trip to the region, but he has since returned many times to Beirut having made local connections.

15. See also Murray (2007) and Gregory (2001).

16. This is undisputedly often the case. See Human Rights Watch (2009).

17. Joseph Massad (2007, 163) notes that the Gay International's agenda, fighting for liberation and sexual rights, "produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology." This statement drastically overlooks the local negotiations of men and essentializes the influences of these foreign agents. It overlooks a distinction of here/there, which is problematic in a country such as Lebanon with huge emigration, international migration, and diaspora. Further, it oversimplifies the way in which local men appropriate and negotiate their own sexuality. See also Boellstorff (2005, 25 – 30).

18. See Altman (2001, 3).

19. I also refrain from calling this a regionalization as there is robust bear community in Istanbul and growing usage across the Middle East in the last five years.

20. Tangentially related (but perhaps at the heart of this discussion) is how hypermasculinity is tied into negotiations of manhood in Lebanon with abundant use of steroids and a history of militarized masculinities.

21. See Weeks (2008, 27).

22. See Whitaker (2006) and Bradley (2010). Most deeply in the trenches of such Orientalism is Luongo (2007).

23. Shortcomings emerge when one attempts to combine these three projects. First, the context of Lebanon has stolen the spotlight from a very different context in Syria. Second, similar to many studies of homosexuality, a lurking erasure of women and their non-heterosexual community runs parallel to these issues (see Babb 2003).

24. The speech delivered at the IGLTA symposium in Beirut on October 14, 2010: http://www.helem.net/node/121 (accessed on May 4, 2011).

25. See http://www.yalibnan.com/2010/05/09/lebanon-wins-the-hummus-war/ (accessed on April 13, 2011).

26. See http://wn.com/Largest_Tabbouleh_plate_prepared_in_Beirut_Lebanon (accessed on April 13, 2011).

27. See also Hochberg (2010), the introduction to a recent issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* that deals with the Israeli and Palestinian queer communities.

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