6 Structure, Reception, and Identity

On Arab-Western Dialogism

I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.

—Salman Rushdie

Modern Lebanon is a bundle of paradoxes. Relations between its numerous confessions have ebbed and flowed between peaceful coexistence and violent conflict.¹ Mirroring these changes, public discourse in the West and the Arab region has alternately extolled Lebanon as the “Gateway to the Orient” or the “Paris of the East” (in the 1950s and 1960s) and denounced the mayhem of “Lebanonization” and the “orgy of violence” during the 1974–1990 war. Lebanon’s political system is at once ostensibly democratic and subject to neofeudalist networks of patronage. Also, despite being one of the smallest nation-states, Lebanon’s national identity has been contested under myriad banners, secular and religious, progressive and reactionary. Finally, the delicate interconfessional demographic balance and precarious political equilibrium have historically made Lebanon vulnerable to both endogenous and exogenous forces, including internal strife, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Cold War superpower rivalry, and Syrian claims over Lebanon. These quandaries have ensnared Lebanon in a permanent identity crisis, leading to occasional flare-ups that culminated with the 1974–1990 war.

The Maronites have until recently played a major role in Lebanon’s convoluted politics. Maronites adhere to religious teachings that developed in the fourth and fifth centuries around Saint Maron, spiritual leader of a group of monks in the valley of the Orontes River in present-day Syria (Valognes, 1994, p. 370). At Maron’s death around 410 A.D., his followers institutionalized his doctrine, and effectively started the Maronite confession, which became a branch of Catholicism. Due to
persecution by other Christian groups and later by Muslims, Maronites moved to the Lebanese mountains, a relatively safe homeland they shared for centuries with other ethnic minorities like the Druze and Shiite Muslims. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the wake of World War I, strong relations with the French, who controlled Lebanon under a League of Nations mandate, and demographic preponderance in the Lebanese mountains helped the Maronites occupy a leading position in the Lebanese polity, consolidated in the 1950s with U.S. assistance against pan-Arab forces. Maronite clout was reflected in the unwritten but nonetheless binding 1943 National Pact, which stipulated “an independent Lebanon with an Arab face” (wajh arabi) but nonetheless open to Western civilization, and notably reserved the Lebanese presidency for a Maronite. Some Maronite leaders at times maintained a neutral stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which alienated many Lebanese Muslims and some Christians and contributed to Lebanon’s descent into protracted violent conflict in the 1970s.

The balance of political power shifted away from the Maronites in postwar Lebanon. During the war, some predominantly Maronite factions occasionally allied themselves with Israel and Iraq, which in addition to inter-Maronite fighting in the late 1980s considerably weakened the community’s bargaining power in negotiations toward a postwar settlement. In 1989, with U.S. blessing and Saudi sponsorship, the Document of National Understanding, better known as the Ta’if Agreement, put an official end to military conflict. Ta’if’s core focused on reforming institutions and on national reconciliation, and the text of the document officially settled Lebanon’s identity dilemma by asserting that “Lebanon is Arab in belonging and identity.” Among other amendments to the 1926 Lebanese Constitution, the Ta’if Agreement shifted the seat of executive power from the presidency of the Republic, a position by tradition reserved for a Maronite, to the Council of Ministers, customarily headed by a Sunnite Muslim, effectively sapping the institutional bases of Maronite political power. Fifteen years after Ta’if, in a postwar environment of economic depression, political subservience to Syria, rampant politico-economic corruption, and rising confessional tensions, the Maronite community is undergoing an internal crisis experienced by its youth in an environment of media proliferation.2

This chapter explores cultural reception by Maronite youth in the postwar Lebanese media landscape as a case study of the role of mediated communication in the dynamics of cultural hybridity. I focus on the Maronites, and not on any of the other Lebanese confessions, because of
the peculiar role of the Maronite community in modern Lebanese politics I have just summarized, and also for the practical reason that this is the Lebanese community to which I have a high level of access, which has enabled me to probe locally sensitive and controversial issues at a time when the wounds of the war have not yet healed. My local empirical focus is not conceived as a counterpoint to globalization, but as a site of existential and epistemological engagement with a local-to-global continuum culturally manifested in terms of hybridity. I therefore posit locality in all its complexity and explore how local manifestations of hybridity are best analyzed and what importance communication practices have in their constitution. What are the structural and ideological forces that bear upon local cultural hybridity? Does global culture loom larger than regional and national culture over Maronite cultural reception, and what roles do these different realms play in hybrid Maronite identity? As I address these questions, a critical objective is to situate empirical audience data within the political economy of Lebanese media.

This chapter draws on field research conducted mostly in the districts of Kisirwan and Matn, located to the north and east of Beirut, between 1992 and 2004, including dozens of in-depth interviews and a total of sixteen discontinuous months of fieldwork. I make significant use of data obtained during a three-month research trip in the summer of 1993 in the form of fifty open-ended multipage questionnaires, each containing ten self-reflexive (one-page) essays about media consumption and cultural identity, in addition to extensive field notes over a period exceeding ten years. Informed by these initial data, since 1994 I have conducted dozens of interviews with viewers, television directors and producers, journalists, and academics, the latest during four months of continuous fieldwork in Lebanon between March and August 2004. My objective has been an in-depth understanding of what it means to have a hybrid cultural identity on an everyday basis. To achieve a grasp of hybridity as an existential experience, my analysis will focus on ten relatively sophisticated, mostly middle-class participants, five male and five female, referred to by pseudonyms, with each of whom I conducted several in-depth interviews and participant observation over a period of three years. Finally, my study draws on selected television programs and songs and other texts from among hundreds of hours of television and music that I have collected in Lebanon over the last decade.

As a Christian community in a predominantly Muslim Middle East, the Maronites may not appear to be the best case study of media-related hybrid identity, because they seem to have been always already hybrid,
a factor that marginalizes the role of communication in the formation of hybridity. This view, however, rests on the assumptions that (1) there are hybrid cultures and nonhybrid cultures, and that (2) Maronite identity is stable across history. In contrast, as I have already discussed in Chapter Three and further elaborate in Chapter Seven, I consider cultural mixture to be pervasive and focus on hybridity as a matter of degree, direction, and implication. In other words, I am not concerned with the question of whether a culture is hybrid, because I believe that all cultures are to some extent hybrid but that in each case hybridity requires a firm grounding in its particular context. My interest rather lies in the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and discursive contexts where local hybridities take shape. In this case, hybridity is not an essential historical characteristic of Maronite identity, but neither is it merely a result of contemporary foreign media consumption. As I briefly explain, hybrid Maronite identity has developed within a field of interacting and often contingent local and extralocal forces. Consequently, I argue against a primordial understanding and advocate instead a relational approach to Maronite identity, in whose contemporary dynamics media and communication play an active role.

Unfortunately, an essentialist comprehension of identity is manifest in some historians’ obsessive quest for the Maronites’ “true” origins. Some scholars suggest that the Maronites are the descendants of “the worshippers of Adonis and Astarte,” “Assyrians who emerged from Mesopotamia” (Melia, 1986, p. 154). Another theory claims that the Maronites are the descendants of an Arab Bedouin population, the Nabateans, who settled in the Levant during the pre-Christian era (Valognes, 1994, p. 369). A third theory, based on the work of the historian Theophanes, presents the Maronites as the heirs of an Anatolian or Iranian population, the Mardaite, who were allegedly militarily used by the Byzantines against the Arabs because of the Mardaite’s outstanding fighting skills (Melia, 1986, p. 158; Nisan, 1992, p. 171; Valognes, 1994, p. 369). According to the fourth and last theory, the Maronites descend from the Phoenicians, a claim held by some Maronite (and other Christian Lebanese) intellectuals as a key building block of their identity, which some scholars dispute (Salibi, 1988; Tabar, 1994; Valognes, 1994), and others support (Gemayel, 1984a, b; Melia, 1986; Nisan, 1992). Chabry and Chabry (1987), among others (Melia, 1986; Nisan, 1992; Tabar, 1994; Valognes, 1994), argue that Maronite claims of a Phoenician heritage are not unfounded (p. 55), because the ethnic makeup of the Maronites is a mixture of Mardaite, Greco-Phoenician, Aramean,
Franc, Armenian, and Arab elements (p. 305). In spite of this mixed origin, the Maronites are said to have maintained a presumably unchanging identity—fiercely autonomous from both Muslims and other Christians—and remained “untamed in their ways of living and thinking” (Melia, 1986, p. 159; see also Nisan, 1992, p. 171).

The Phoenician-roots theory parallels the belief among Copts in Egypt and Nestorians in Iraq, both Christian communities, that they have respectively Pharaonic and ancient Assyrian roots. Whether the Maronites’ ancestors were Phoenician or not is beyond the interest and scope of this book, as the emphasis is on the lived experience of present-day identity and its connection to a remembered past, not to the putatively “objective” trajectory of recorded history. All identities draw on mythical pasts as they evolve historically. In this case my research demonstrates that Maronite youth are themselves ambivalent toward the debate on Maronite origins. As much as some clung to a cultural identity distinct from that of the Arabs, only very few among them exhibited a complete rejection of Arab identity or an unconditional acceptance of Phoenician roots. Constant references by interviewees to cultural “blending” and “mixing” clearly put hybridity, and not teleological authenticity, at the heart of their everyday experience of identity. Clearly in this case, oral history is ambivalent toward recorded history.

The inter-Christian relationship between the Maronites and the West, portrayed in the written historiography as a constitutive factor in a pro-Western Maronite identity, did in fact not necessarily entail identification with the West and hostility toward Muslims. For example, in 1182 one of the earliest Maronite-European contacts created controversy within the Maronite community, when some Maronite archers joined the Crusaders while others took the Muslims’ side and fought against the European conquerors (Valognes, 1994, p. 371). In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that religious feeling became the dominant component of Maronite identity, when the “culture of sectarianism” (Makdissi, 2000) emerged in an entanglement of military, diplomatic, and religious forces between the Ottoman Empire, the European powers, and the communities of Mount Lebanon, the traditional Maronite homeland that was enlarged to form the modern state of Lebanon. As the Lebanese-born historian Ussama Makdissi explained:

The story [of sectarianism] begins ... when local Lebanese society was opened, and indeed opened itself, to Ottoman and European discourses of reform that made religion the site of a colonial encounter between a self-styled “Christian” West and what it saw as its perennial adversary, an
“Islamic” Ottoman empire. This encounter profoundly altered the meaning of religion in the multiconfessional society of Mount Lebanon because it emphasized sectarian identity as the only viable marker of political reform and the only authentic basis for political claims. The story is of the symbiosis between indigenous traditions and practices—in which religion was enmeshed in complex social and political relations—and Ottoman modernization, which became paramount in reshaping the political self-definition of each community along religious lines. (2000, p. 1)

Indeed, under pressure from the European powers in the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman authorities launched the reforms known as tanzimat, which institutionalized religious differences among imperial subjects, including various communities in Mount Lebanon. Before the tanzimat, the central marker of difference in Lebanese society was social class. Feudal lords of all confessions ruled over commoners of all confessions, many villages were mixed, and religion did not play the most important role in social relations. The advent of Ottoman reform led to a series of fragmentations and realignments that in 1861 resulted in violent conflict between Maronite and Druze villagers. It was then that Lebanese sectarianism was born. “Sectarianism,” Makdissi thus argues, “is a modern story” (p. 2, my emphasis).

The most violent episode of that “story” unfolded during the 1974–1990 war in Lebanon, facilitated by Lebanon’s already mentioned precarious political equilibrium, triggered by the influx of armed Palestinians into Lebanon, fanned by the ideological forces of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War, and fueled by the sectarian sentiment now deeply entrenched in Lebanon’s social structure. The most important aspect of the conflict as far as this study is concerned is the wartime proliferation of privately owned media. Feuding confessional factions established unlicensed radio and television stations as mouthpieces, culminating in the early to mid-1990s with more than fifty television and a hundred radio stations (Kraidy, 1998a). I now turn to events triggered by media proliferation that constitute the politico-economic context of Maronite media reception.

**History and Structure of the Lebanese Media**

Lebanon’s experience with the mass media is uniquely complex (Boulos, 1995; Boyd, 1991; Harik, 1994; Kraidy, 1998a, 1999b, 2000, 2001). Lebanon can be said to have one of the freest media systems and one of the highest
literacy rates in the Arab world, although recent developments indicate increased state repression of the media (Kraidy, 2002d). In wartime the Lebanese had access to dozens of mass media with conflicting ideological allegiances and diverse content in Arabic, French, English, and Armenian. In 1995, more than fifty terrestrial television stations and more than a hundred radio stations catered to Lebanon’s estimated three million inhabitants, who lived in a country of 10,452 square kilometers, or 4,105 square miles, only twice the size of the U.S. state of Delaware! To this day, sharing screen space with local fare are U.S. sitcoms and police shows, British comedy, French drama, German documentaries, Egyptian soap operas, and dubbed Mexican telenovelas (Kraidy, 1998a, 2003a). The growth of pan-Arab satellite services in the 1990s exponentially expanded television content, accessible at a low cost. There are no licensing fees and subscription fees are rare, so that the only expense for the Lebanese viewer is the cost of the television set and the electricity to power it. In a postwar environment where the state has more pressing concerns than enforcing intellectual property and television subscription rights, private neighborhood cable networks constitute a peculiar phenomenon. Enterprising citizens pay satellite subscription fees and establish their cable network that in some cases includes hundreds of subscribers, or even upward of a thousand. While illegal, these businesses are ubiquitous in Lebanon and promote their services through home-printed flyers and word of mouth. By late 2002, many households linked to such a network were enjoying in excess of eighty channels, including all the Arab satellite channels, some Indian networks, and the major U.S. and European cable and satellite channels. Choices have ranged from Al-Manar to ESPN to Canal Plus. This “package” typically costs around U.S. $10 per month.

This all began in 1985 when the Lebanese Forces, a Christian wartime militia and later a political party, launched the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Lebanon’s and the Arab world’s first privately owned and continuously running commercial television station. Conceived as both a profit-making company and an instrument of propaganda, LBC’s inaugural grid relied heavily on imported—mostly pirated—programs such as British comedy, French drama, and U.S. sitcoms and soap operas. I personally remember the excitement generated by the launch of LBC in the mid-1980s. As teenagers confined indoors by indiscriminate shelling and bombing, we were glued to the television set, watching The Benny Hill Show, Zora La Rousse, Santa Barbara, and The Cosby Show, hoping the next electrical power blackout would
wait till the end of the program. These programs were decisively more attractive than state-operated Télé-Liban’s stodgy diet of older U.S. police series, German documentaries, French vaudeville theatre, and the occasional local dramatic series. I also recall quite vividly the growing popularity of LBC’s local game shows, a format “adapted” by LBC director Simon Asmar from U.S. and European originals, where participants won consumer goods from the programs’ sponsors, ranging from brand-new French or Japanese cars to the winner’s weight in soap from the local Procter and Gamble agent. Numerous other stations followed, whose stripes mirrored Lebanon’s plural polity: religious and secular, national and local, Communist and probusiness, Christian and Muslim, Arabist and Lebanist. In this media cacophony, LBC played a pioneering role in introducing U.S.-style commercial television and mediated consumerism to the Middle East several years before other Lebanese terrestrial stations and half a decade before it was emulated by the now illustrious pan-Arab satellite television industry (Kraidy, 2002b).

The rise of private commercial broadcasting occurred at the expense of Télé-Liban, the national station co-owned by the state and private interests. Created in 1956 and on the air since 1959, Télé-Liban’s fortunes have ebbed and flowed with Lebanon’s political mis/fortunes (Boulos, 1996; Kraidy, 1998a). It was the only television witness of Lebanon’s golden era in the 1960s and early 1970s, when Télé-Liban explored how to operate a national television in a pluralistic nation. In this creative laboratory, dramatic productions eschewed characters with names that were clearly Christian or Muslim, such as Joseph or Muhammed, opting instead for neutral Arabic names, such as Ghassan and Ziad. In the golden years of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, several dramatic series such as 

_Ad-Dunia Hayk_ (That’s life) and _Abou Melhem_ (the name of the elderly protagonist) explored interconfessional coexistence and traditional methods of conflict resolution. Like all state institutions, Télé-Liban was weakened by the eruption of the war in the mid-1970s, and its scattered studios were claimed by the militias on the ground. As a result, in the 1980s Télé-Liban was unable to compete with LBC’s pirated programming and went through a protracted decline precipitated by political interference, rolling ownership of the private shares, and technical deficiencies (Kraidy, 1999b; 2001).

In 1994, Lebanese authorities passed the Audio-Visual Media Law (AVML), the first legislation of its kind in the Arab region. It revoked Télé-Liban’s legal monopoly over broadcasting without proposing a viable solution for the ailing station, and at the same time legalized
private broadcasting (Kraidy, 1998a). In 1996 all Lebanese television stations were forced to close, except four licensed under the auspices of the 1994 AVML. LBC, which was awarded a license after a reshuffling of its board of shareholders to include influential politicians, remains Lebanon’s leading station. Murr Television (MTV), opened in 1991, belonged to the brother of the then deputy prime minister, and was initially oriented toward entertainment programming, foregoing a news department for the first three or four years of its existence. Since 1997, when government officials attempted to ban an interview with an exiled opposition figure, MTV had become the increasingly strident voice of the opposition, leading to its permanent shutdown on September 4, 2002 (Kraidy, 2002d). At the time of its forced closure, I was told by Lebanese media sources that MTV was beginning to rival LBC’s domestic audience ratings, due largely to its oppositional stance toward the regime. Future Television (FTV), affiliated with Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, has a probusiness, pro-Saudi message, in line with Hariri’s neoliberal economic agenda. The National Broadcasting Network (NBN), controlled by Speaker of the Council of Deputies Nabih Berri, is the smallest of the stations and does not really compete at the national level. NBN was initially the butt of jokes (its acronym was derided as “No Broadcasting Network”) because it secured a license before the station existed, and the station has followed a niche approach that focuses on cultural and current affairs programming. Later, during a ministerial reshuffle in which Hariri temporarily lost the premiership, two religious stations, Télé-Lumière, affiliated with the Maronite clergy, and Al-Manar, owned by Hizbullah, the Islamic Shiite formation that leads anti-Israeli guerilla resistance in South Lebanon, were also allowed to continue broadcasting, and a license was awarded to New Television, owned by Tahseen Khayyat, a Sunnite businessman and archnemesis of Hariri.

The four initial stations obtained their licenses largely according to confessional considerations, in line with Lebanon’s consociationalist political system, where resources of all kinds are distributed under a strict formula of “confessional balance” rather than according to merit or competence: LBC was the Maronite Christian station, FTV the Sunnite Muslim station, NBN the Shiite Muslim station, and MTV a Greek Orthodox Christian station, in which the Druze community was rumored to have some influence. MTV was less confessionally typed than the other stations, because its owner and the Greek Orthodox community in Lebanon did not have a unified and predictably confessional political discourse. Consequently, MTV and Télé-Liban could have become
television stations with a national discourse that transcended confessional affiliations and loyalties (see Kraidy, 2000). Unfortunately, this potential was squandered, as MTV became increasingly associated with the mostly Christian opposition, while Télé-Liban was appropriated by some leading politicians who did not own television stations and, as I noted earlier, was eventually stripped of most of its resources and compelled in 2002 to rebroadcast old series from the 1960s and 1970s to maintain a prime-time presence.

Clearly, the decline of Télé-Liban and its original mandate to create programs meaningful to Lebanon’s plural publics constitutes a loss for which the private stations, with their narrower political and commercial imperatives, cannot compensate. The broad structural context that shapes media consumption rests on the assumption that media ownership corresponds to audience preferences along confessional lines—hence the presupposition that young Maronites would primarily watch LBC, whose programming caters to their social and ideological proclivities, an assumption that I will now scrutinize. Following Abu-Lughod’s (1999) observation that rigorous research requires that we “interrelate [the] various modes of the social life of television” (p. 114), I now ask: How do the affective links that young Maronites establish with media texts relate to the political economy of the Lebanese media? In other words, how do the dynamics of cultural hybridity relate to media texts and structures? These questions are addressed in several stages, beginning with an exploration of Maronite historical memory, followed by an analysis of how young Maronites relate their media consumption to their sense of self and community, and finally situating consumption practices in their broad sociopolitical context.

History, Memory, Identity

Collective memory, more than official recorded history, plays a crucial role in shaping the self-image of nations and communities. Inasmuch as the past is the remembered, “and not merely the recorded, past” (Lukacs, 1994, p. 32), it is often invoked by social groups for the purpose of self-construction, since “identity is formed at the unstable point where the . . . stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history” (Hall, 1993, p. 153). From this perspective, it is important to explore how young Maronites incorporate their remembered past in their present sense of identity, and the role media consumption plays in that process—hence my presumption that questionnaires and interviews with young Maronites about
their media consumption and cultural identity would probably elicit comments about history.

Indeed, the diversity of Lebanon’s historical heritage was a recurring theme in this study. In a clear hint to the Phoenician-origins theory, a young man earnestly told me that “being Lebanese is being committed to an idea, a concept, a history... [that] is six thousand years old,” and others wrote in their questionnaire answers that their country “belonged to an old and glorious civilization.” Another participant rehearsed Lebanon’s much-vaunted status: “We are the link between East and West. And we have been like that for a long time, throughout our history. This is the true aspect of civilization: one keeps one’s own customs and traditions but also tries to enrich these traditions and customs by adding foreign aspects to them. This is the true meaning of civilization.” Probing their perceptions of Maronite, and not just Lebanese, identity elicited different answers, ranging from the self-righteous to the outwardly critical. Serge, a twenty-two-year-old engineering student at the public Lebanese University with a rural, working-class, and conservative background, argued that “[v]ery few groups can claim to be the authentic Lebanese who came here before all the others. All were persecuted minorities who took refuge in Lebanon: the Maronites, the Armenians. There were some other people, maybe of Phoenician origins, a fact we cannot assert, because the Phoenicians lived in Lebanon so long ago. They lived in Phoenician city-states such as Tyre and Byblos.” Other respondents went further, questioning the premise of the Maronite-origin debate. Peter, a twenty-four-year-old middle-class medical student at the Lebanese University who lives in a northern outer suburb of Beirut, spoke of a “historical lapsus” that makes it difficult for the Maronites to “determine our ascendance.” He continues: “Lebanon has been repeatedly invaded, a lot of mixing. Genetically, we cannot trace our Phoenician roots. What about all the blond-haired Lebanese? These cannot be of purely Phoenician origin.” Others offered similar statements, such as Serge, who said: “I am neither Arab nor Phoenician. The blending which occurred throughout history does not allow me to choose one.” These representative responses reveal an ambivalent stance on the issue of Phoenician heritage: On one hand, participants do not wholeheartedly embrace Phoenician roots; on the other, they do not reject them but refer to a “mixing” and “blending” that occurred throughout history. This tacit acknowledgment of the Phoenician factor is a far cry from its mythical importance suggested in the historiography discussed earlier in this chapter.
Criticizing the Lebanese social structure, which recognizes individuals as members of a confession rather than as citizens, virtually all persons I interviewed readily conflated Maronite and Lebanese identities: “You go and ask other Muslims and they will tell you that Lebanon is merely a piece of an Arab nation,” said Fouad, a twenty-seven-year-old restaurant manager with a college degree in philosophy, thus conflating Arab nationalism and Islam. Arab nationalism, which calls for a pan-Arab nation from Morocco to Iraq, is one of several political ideologies to have laid claim to Lebanon (see Firro, 2003; Khalaf, 2002; Salibi, 1988; Zamir, 2000). Other such ideologies include Syrian nationalism (or Syrianism), which calls for the unification of Lebanon, Syria, and parts of historic Palestine into Greater Syria; the Christian-tinged Lebanese nationalism or Lebanism (see Phares, 1995), which advocates an independent and fully sovereign Lebanon; and Islamism, in both Shiite and Sunni versions. Fouad proceeded to argue that Maronites, because of their attachment to Lebanese “folklore and cultural heritage,” are more committed to Lebanon than are other confessions, a view held by some Maronite nationalists who believe themselves to be more loyal to Lebanon (a more accurate view would be that different communities may be more or less loyal to different visions of Lebanon). In contrast, Antoun questioned the assumption that the Maronites are the “authentic population” that constitutes “the essence of Lebanon.” Nonetheless, many respondents followed Fouad’s perspective with numerous examples that illustrate what they perceive to be the Maronites’ greater pride in Lebanese identity, implying a nearly complete overlap of Maronite and Lebanese identities. The chapter now continues with an exploration of contemporary expressions of the equivalence between Maronite and Lebanese identities in the remembered past.

“THE WEST” AND “ARABS” AS DIALOGICAL COUNTERPOINTS

Young Maronites perceived two competing discourses, modernity and tradition, that they saw constructed by the mass media. Sweepingingly identified as “the West” and “the Arabs,” these two discourses functioned not as a dichotomy, but rather as dialogical counterpoints, a notion I borrow from Said (1994) to refer to discursive variations that create a space where the central theme is elaborated. An overriding concern among young Maronites was their inability and unwillingness to exclusively belong to one or the other of what they perceived as two irreconcilable worldviews. This double-voiced posture embodies a
cultural version of Bakhtin’s definition of linguistic hybridization as “a mixture of two social languages within the limit of a single utterance, an encounter . . . between two different . . . consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358).

Simultaneously identifying with Western and Arab cultures and rejecting parts of both of them, young Maronites embody hybridity in that they live simultaneously on two sides of a symbolic fault line without full allegiance to either, a position verbalized by Peter, the twenty-four-year-old medical student I interviewed in a fast-food restaurant overlooking the Mediterranean Sea: “In some things, we resemble Arabs. In other things, we resemble Europeans. Nothing makes you distinct as a [Maronite] Lebanese . . . Food? You have falafel and you have hamburger. Where is Lebanon? You go to a shop and you . . . get a creative mixture of the hamburger and the falafel; . . . they put humus inside of a hamburger or some blend of that sort. Sometimes . . . you begin to see this mélange becoming homogenous, you start finding an identity . . . but . . . we are confused. From the time I was born, I haven’t been able to find an identity . . . Who are we?” Peter’s ambivalence is typical, his colorful metaphors notwithstanding (perhaps they were inspired by the sights and smells of the setting): struggling to position themselves vis-à-vis two worldviews, young Maronites used the terms “Maronite” and “Lebanese” interchangeably, expressing their vision of Lebanon as a hybrid culture. Most readily acknowledged themselves as Arabs or “similar to Arabs” because they spoke Arabic and lived in the Arab world and embraced values such as hospitality and social compassion that they perceived as typically Arab, but most also declined to identify with strong social and religious conservatism, authoritarianism, and anti-Western attitudes that they associated with Arab societies. Simultaneously, young Maronites identified with Western commitments to individual freedom and civil liberties but criticized Western individualism and sexual mores. Elham, a twenty-five-year-old video artist who worked for a local advertising agency, and her friend Karine, twenty-three, who worked at a local television production house, told me that in Lebanon “a lot of people are confused” about their identity because, in Karine’s words, “we want to be Westerners but are bound by Eastern values.” Says Elham: “We are Arabs by virtue of language and geographic location. At the same time, I do not have the Arab [value] . . . of conservatism. I fit in Western culture better. At the same time, I have some Arab facets to my identity. I blend both, I keep both and enjoy
both at the same time. This is what is so special about being Lebanese” (emphasis mine). Identifying the Arab world with tradition and the West with modernity, young Maronites uttered both discourses through the cultural matrices that permeate their use of media and popular culture.

**The Arabs and Tradition**

Arab societies are traditional in the sense that they tend to emphasize the community and the family, rather than the individual, as the core social unit. Young Maronites related to nuclear family values, social compassion, and hospitality associated with Arab society but spurned other Arab values they perceived as socially, culturally, and politically conservative, because of strict interpretations of Islam and autocratic regimes. Respondents opted for a partial acceptance of Arab norms intermixed with a selective embrace of Western values, expressed by Marianne, a twenty-one-year-old advertising major at a private university, who volunteered, rather defensively: “I want to keep my Eastern values, like hospitality and morals, but add to them Western values, like the love for freedom and knowledge. Is that a crime? I want to have both because I am Lebanese.” To young Maronites, Arab television reflects Arab values. In their view, Egyptian soap operas epitomize Arab television because of their popularity in Arab societies. In interviews, they referred to the portrayal in Egyptian serials of Arab society and its parental and political authoritarianism, social conservatism, and religious restrictions. Female viewers who I interviewed believed Egyptian television drama’s depiction of Arab society to be accurate. This led them to set themselves apart from Arab social norms while acknowledging that these norms were partly their own. Rima, a twenty-two-year-old working-class woman from a rural area in the Bekaa Valley who came to the Beirut area to study law at the public Lebanese University, said that as a Maronite “I can wear a mini skirt when I want,” adding that her parents usually granted her permission to stay out late, and concluding with a blunt reference to a Muslim practice: “I do not wear a veil. I am free.” This view was echoed in many conversations with other young women, represented by Karine, twenty-three, who felt “freer than other women in the [Arab] region. In a way, I am as free as women in the United States and Europe, but here I have to work at it,” which meant, in her words, to “keep [her life] somewhat private and hidden.” This last statement underscores how relative that freedom is in reality.
Males I spoke with were less concerned with matters of individual dress and behavior—clearly, men are subject to fewer restrictions in patriarchal Arab societies, and this includes Lebanon—and more interested in broader issues. For example, Peter said that he liked Egyptian movies and television series that “go in depth into Egyptian society” and treat some of the serious problems in it such as “corruption, injustice, and inefficiency.” These productions “explain why the bus never arrives on time and why accidents happen, because drivers are not qualified . . . and mechanics . . . incompetent.” In that statement, Peter utters a hege-monistic reading that uses Egyptian television drama as a metonymy of perceived Arab backwardness in opposition to the putative technical competence of Western modernity.

Others echoed this understanding and associated Arab productions with Latin American telenovelas. These typically Mexican but sometimes Colombian or Venezuelan serials, dubbed in Arabic by Lebanese actors, have been a popular genre in Lebanon since the late eighties and have become part of an informal cultural “industry” that includes clothing, music, gossip, and popular jokes. Ever since the first telenovela, Corazón de Piedra (Heart of Stone), was broadcast in the late 1980s, the Lebanese have simply referred to these serials as “Mexicans.” For programmers, they are a low-cost alternative to expensive local production. In addition, dubbing telenovelas in Arabic opens lucrative possibilities for exporting them to the rest of the Arab world. The popularity of telenovelas has meant good audience ratings and, in turn, big advertising revenues. However, the fact that these Latin American serials were put in the same category with Egyptian soap operas was at first surprising. Geographically, Mexico is, according to the European-centric mapping vision, in the West. Culturally, also due to Spanish colonialism, Mexico belongs to the West, albeit in a peculiarly hybrid fashion, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four. Interestingly, young Maronite viewers placed Mexican telenovelas within the “Arab” generic category. A typical telenovela story line, according to Maha, a twenty-five-year-old middle-class female who works at a cultural center, who spoke derisively, unfolds like this: “He loves her but she loves his brother, but his brother loves her mother, who cannot get over the fact that her husband is fooling around with her best friend, who is still her best friend although she is sleeping with her best friend’s husband.”

Viewers found both Egyptian and Latin American serials to be highly melodramatic, even histrionic. In what is perhaps an expression of an educated middle-class sensibility, they claimed that the screen theatrics would have been acceptable to them if the acting had been good, but
according to virtually all those I interviewed, both Egyptian soaps and Latin American telenovelas displayed poor acting. Watching a Colombian telenovela while conversing in Karine’s house, Elham de-rided the characters because they kept “crying, howling, and whining.” Whereas Maha criticized the artificially convoluted plots and the lack of verisimilitude in telenovelas, other viewers indicated that they were unable to identify with the “very remote” and “irrelevant” characters and experiences in Mexican and Egyptian serials. After subsequent interpretation, I concluded that telenovelas were being evaluated in comparison to slick U.S. television production values that epitomized a normative Western “look” against which other television programs were judged (see James, 1995, for a similar finding among Hungarians). This explains why Maronite viewers relegated telenovelas to the non-Western, Arab category, in a discursive elaboration of two genres that is itself a hybridizing act that expresses a synthetic aesthetic.

The West and Modernity

Associating modernity with the West, Maronite viewers described the latter as a locus of individual freedom and “love for knowledge,” two aspects that they associated with what they saw as a typically Maronite “openness to other cultures.” Delving into this issue, I learned that “the outside” and “other cultures,” although denotatively all-encompassing, had a more limited connotation that referred to “the West.” “It is a good thing that Francophonie is alive and well in Lebanon,” Fouad told me; he cast the space of Francophonie, a strong cultural presence in the Maronite community because of historical ties with France, as a marker of openness to the West. Prodded further, he said that openness to the West according to him was “better than wearing a veil and not seeing beyond a couple of meters.” Besides its obviously stereotypical tenor, this statement reveals an opposition between the West (here represented by the Francophone cultural space) and the Islam invoked by the reference to the veil. Fouad declined to adopt Francophonie as his own identity but nonetheless preferred it to the symbolic field conveyed by the veil, which in his opinion conjured up short-sightedness and social strictures. Several—but not all—respondents expressed similar hegemonic views about the veil, underscoring that hybridity is pervaded with processes of making Others. This selective incorporation of Arab and Western icons contributes to the hybridity of Maronite identity but at the same time is suspicious of alternative engagements with markers of Arab and Western identities. Far from reflecting a radical
openness, then, hybridity follows politicized rules of inclusion and exclusion.

U.S. productions loomed large in the media habits of my respondents who noted the ideology of individual freedom, in their view especially visible in *The Cosby Show* and *Beverly Hills 90210*. The latter program was appealing to some of my mostly middle-class respondents, who were nonetheless cognizant of the show’s characters’ upper-class status. In addition, female viewers emphasized that they did not experience as much personal and sexual freedom as *90210* depicts. Also popular was *The Cosby Show*, broadcast by LBC during Sunday prime time until the early 1990s, whose fans told me they often watched it with their families. Marianne told me how she occasionally “exploited” *The Cosby Show* to extract more social freedom from her parents: she would discuss the relationship between the parents in *The Cosby Show* and their daughters, arguing that despite the Huxtable’s social conservatism, they allowed their daughters to go out on dates because they trusted them. At age sixteen, she said, she was attracted to a young man with whom she wanted to attend a party. At the time, her parents did not let her stay out later than ten o’clock in the evening, which was a problem since the party was to start at nine o’clock on a Friday night. *The Cosby Show* episode broadcast the Sunday before the party provided Marianne with an effective negotiating tool. As she told me: “Denise [one of the Cosby daughters, played by actress Lisa Bonet] was not yet eighteen years old, and she wanted to go out with a young man to his prom party. Her parents were hesitant, but after a long discussion, they allowed her to go, as long as she promised to come back before one o’clock in the morning.” After watching the show with her family, Marianne argued to her parents that her situation was very similar to Denise’s, and as a result, she told me, she was allowed to attend the party. Marianne keenly believed that *The Cosby Show* helped ease parental restrictions.

In contrast to a generally favorable reception of *The Cosby Show*, viewers criticized “many” U.S. movies and television programs for gratuitous violence and “cheap, purely commercial, sexual scenes” (Elham, Maha), or for portraying “excessive promiscuity between teenagers” (Serge, Rima). However, Adib, a twenty-three-year-old dentistry student, argued that such scenes were “okay because, to an extent, they [reflected] real life,” and others simply recognized that some movies—*Basic Instinct* was cited by a few—effectively used sexuality for dramatic and aesthetic values. There is a subtle variation between genders here, with males more eager to claim acceptance of sexual content, reflecting
a society where gender roles remain traditional. When I probed my respondents about their own social and sexual life, they said they enjoyed less freedom than the American youth they saw on television but believed they endured fewer restrictions than other Arab youth, thus positioning themselves, again, between the “Western” and “Arab” counterpoints.

When asked about his interest in U.S. television, Antoun, one of the more conservative persons I encountered in my fieldwork, launched a diatribe against MTV’s *Beavis and Butthead*. “In my opinion,” he told me vehemently, “*Beavis and Butthead* is . . . mental pornography,” more pernicious than real porn because it is a cartoon. He proceeded to explain: “If you understand the dialogue between Beavis and Butthead, [you will see that] it is worse than porno, in many ways. They are antisocial, they are against everything, they are against all values. They have that destructive impulse, they like to break everything, violate all existing norms and rules. They show contempt for values such as family and respect for teachers.” Antoun offered his own interpretation of the antiteacher attitude glorified in *Beavis and Butthead*, speculating that it might have been influenced by Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. The British rock band Pink Floyd was popular among Lebanese youth in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, especially their hit double album *The Wall*. Antoun in effect used one Western text to interpret another. Even though he voiced harsh criticism of *Beavis and Butthead*, he asserted that Pink Floyd played some of the best music he had ever heard, and that the artistic talent of the band was undeniable. This comparison suggests a hierarchical scheme by which Antoun classified Western cultural texts and indicates that Maronite youth did not view Western culture as a monolith. Antoun argued that *Beavis and Butthead* is at odds with “Lebanese values,” thus underscoring what he saw as lower moral standards in the West, but he immediately praised Western values of “knowledge and culture,” which he then proceeded to claim as his own while avowing a difference with “self-isolated” Arabs, hence the hybrid identity between the categories of “West” and “Arabs.” Dominated by television consumption, this process of hybrid identity construction entailed three aspects: propinquity toward consuming ostensibly hybrid texts, quotidian acts of mimicry, and cultural nomadism.

**The Lure of Hybrid Texts**

The view that everyday consumption of media and popular culture is a meaning-making activity has become conventional. Indeed, some field
interlocutors expressed a predilection for ostensibly hybrid literature—betraying their socio-educational level and perhaps a desire to impress me with their erudition—and then moved on to television and music. Fouad said that he “love[d] and identified with border-crossing writers,” living “between two or more worlds” and “perpetually looking for an identity of their own,” such as Yugoslav-born Milan Kundera and Moroccan-born Tahar Ben Jalloun, novelists living and writing in France. Maha, Adib, Peter, and others favored Lebanese-French author Amin Maalouf, and to a lesser extent members of the anticolonial n´egritude formation discussed in Chapter Three. Other respondents admired Salman Rushdie as a typical “in-between” writer, which in light of the *Satanic Verses* controversy and the outrage among Muslims worldwide is an ostensible act of self-differentiation from Muslims. But at the same time, many Maronites criticized *Satanic Verses* for its offending content to Muslims, thus assuming the ambivalence symptomatic of hybridity. On yet another level, the claim to have read Rushdie’s book—which I could ascertain with only a handful of respondents—banned in Lebanon for years after its publication, reflects cultural “poaching.” In regard to television, comments about the lure of hybrid texts were more elaborate.

Since its inception, Lebanese television has relied on inexpensive Egyptian, French, and U.S. dramatic productions, and the few locally produced dramas were about rural life or historical events. Breaking with that tradition, *The Storm Blows Twice*, a 1994 T´el´e-Liban series, was a daring treatment of contemporary Lebanese society, depicting what one viewer described as “that tearing apart between Western and Eastern values” with characters, including women, struggling to balance competing priorities: family and career, conservative social norms and individual freedoms, and so on. The 178-episode series questioned religious restrictions, broke social taboos, and explicitly tackled controversial issues such as premarital and extramarital sex and the professional and private lives of divorced women. The series included bedroom scenes, adulterous relationships, daring social statements, and edgy dialogue. Unusually risqué in the Arab environment, the program aired during prime time on Wednesdays and was remarkably popular with Maronite viewers.

*The Storm Blows Twice*’s stylistic choices enact social and cultural hybridity, described by Serge as a “refreshing” portrayal of “a mixed cultural reality.” In one of our many conversations, for example, Fouad described the characters’ wardrobes as “a mixture of classical… clothing with avant-garde fashion.” The show’s production style was
characterized by fluid camera movements, dynamic editing, high-quality acting, and overall sophisticated creative execution, giving it a “Western” veneer. Ironically, the series was stylistically similar to the Latin American telenovelas that some young Maronites denigrated, which suggests that content was more important than form. Indeed, other viewers praised the series’ “realistic” and “sincere” depiction of Lebanese society more than its attractive production values. For example, Peter, the medical student with a proclivity for culinary metaphors, said that *The Storm Blows Twice* “carried a chunk of the problems of Lebanese society and its anxieties,” and Hala, whose house I often visited, elaborated a gender-conscious reading: “It is the life of a woman who got divorced. You know, in Lebanon, *divorce is taboo*. A woman who divorces is regarded negatively. Anyway, she lived around twenty years with her husband, tolerating him . . . . She cooks for him and pampers him. But whenever he feels like it, he fools around with other women” (speaker’s emphasis). Divorce is socially frowned upon and legally very difficult in Lebanon, because like marriage, birth, and death, divorce falls under the jurisdiction of religious authorities. Because marriage is outside the prerogatives of the state—the exclusive domain of the church or mosque—civil marriage is legally nonexistent. In the Maronite community, where conservative Catholic values dominate, divorce is virtually impossible, and even when couples with compelling reasons such as physical abuse or nonconsummation of the union are granted permission to separate, they sometimes remain legally wed. This system is so entrenched that even the then president of the Republic Elias Hrawi failed in 1998 to legalize civil marriage, as a result of a concerted opposition campaign spearheaded by Christian and Muslim clergymen. Male and female viewers alike admired *The Storm Blows Twice*’s strong female characters and criticized the womanizing of some male characters. Respondents supported the show’s position that divorce should gain more acceptance without, however, becoming “too easy”—that is, as in the West—and praised the writer and director for their unconventional treatment of gender roles and relations. In that context, both male and female viewers mentioned that the show brought into focus the social challenges faced by Lebanese women who combine family and work.

In sync with my respondents’ affective engagement with the locally produced *The Storm Blows Twice*, their musical preferences gravitated toward Lebanon’s most celebrated family of musicians, composers, and singers, the Rahbanis: brothers Elias and Mansour; the key figure, Assi; his wife, Fairuz; and son, Ziad. The popularity of the songs and music
of the Rahbanis, identified by respondents as “typically Lebanese,” is a peculiar exception to the preponderance of television in Maronite media consumption. The Rahbanis enjoy a mythical status in Lebanese culture, carried by Fairuz’s voice to the Arab world and Western concert halls such as Bercy in Paris and the Royal Festival Hall in London. The Rahbanis’ composition blends Lebanese folk melodies with classical Arabic and modern Western music, and Fairuz sings mostly in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. Their music is seen as a mixture of Western and Eastern influences, which to the young people I spoke with signaled “typically Lebanese.” All of them claimed to be unabashed fans of Fairuz.

Especially popular was Ziad Rahbani, Fairuz’s and Assi’s son, musician, composer, singer, actor, writer, director, satirist, and leftist social critic. During one of my interviews with Peter, he described Ziad’s music as “pluralistic” but a “harmonious mélange” and described Ziad’s so-called Oriental jazz as “the greatest music ever.” Similarly, Elham described the music as “a unique mixture of . . . conflicting cultural legacies,” and Fouad and Antoun agreed with Peter that Ziad’s music was “influenced by so many musical currents, but . . . [was] different from all of them,” unwittingly underscoring hybridity’s dual centripetal and assimilationist thrusts. In Fouad’s words: “You cannot [clearly] discern different structural musical elements in his music. You cannot say this part is jazz, this other Arabic. It is a unique and innovative blend. Just like his father was influenced by classical music but never let it dominate his music, Ziad is very subtle in mixing differences. Others have been trying to blend Western and Eastern music, but the result is artificial. It has no genius and no creativity.”

In contrast to Fouad’s technical musical dissection, Elham expressed a more emotional connection to Ziad’s songs:

Ziad Rahbani makes great music. I love straddling two cultures [she said this sentence in French and her exact words were “à cheval entre deux cultures”]. He . . . mixed jazz with Eastern music. He mixed blues guitar scales with the *taqassim* [Arabic scales] of the *oud* [a traditional Arab instrument]. He mixed Charlie Parker with Sayyed Darwish . . . He rendered “Round Midnight” with the *oud* and the *qanoun* [another Arab stringed instrument]. The result is unique, special. It is not Western, but not Arab either. It is more Lebanese than anything else. It is in between. It is more Lebanese than the cedar. (emphasis mine)

Beyond their artistic accomplishments, the emphatically reiterated assertion that Fairuz and Ziad were “typically Lebanese” due to
culturally “mixing” and “blending” underscored the gravitational pull of hybrid texts on this audience. The juxtaposition with the cedar is unequivocal: since the cedar (*cedrus libani*) is the quintessential symbol of Lebanon, the comparison posited Ziad (in addition to Fairuz) as a paramount cultural text that elicited unconditional identification from *all* my respondents. In Fouad’s exalted words: “Fairuz and the Rahbanis sing us! They sing Lebanon at its best. They sing Lebanon the mixture, Lebanon the mélange, Lebanon East and West and neither of them, Lebanon Christian and Muslim and both of them, Lebanon the in-between.” Western popular culture served tactical purposes such as using *The Cosby Show* to be able to attend a party or invoking Pink Floyd and *Beavis and Butthead* to criticize Western values. In contrast, the music of the Rahbanis was of a more enduring value, as it encapsulated what respondents claimed was the truest expression of their hybrid identity. This selective engagement with local and foreign popular culture carries implications for how cross-cultural media consumption is conceptualized, to be discussed shortly.

**The Enactment of Hybridity through Mimicry**

In the early stages of this project, it occurred to me that Maronite youth mimicked snapshots of Western lifestyles, an impression validated by subsequent observation and in-depth interviews in which several unsolicited remarks about the issue clearly implicated the mass media. For example, Antoun claimed that “the social life of the Maronites has a very non-Lebanese face. They like to live the European way, or the American way. Maybe because of all these programs on television, maybe because they travel a lot . . . . They brought different lifestyles with them or got them from television.” When I pressed him for an example, Antoun invoked the “torn jeans fashion,” which he imputed to the influence of Music Television (MTV). Peter brought up the same example when he spoke of a “tremendous phenomenon of imitation of everything Western, particularly from the United States,” and said that fads took “phenomenal proportions” among Maronite youth, who “snatched up [the fads] rapidly, as if . . . waiting for something new to swallow in order to fill an unbearable void” (emphasis mine). Invoking this “urge to imitate,” Serge confirmed what I had repeatedly observed when he told me how English phrases from *Beverly Hills 90210* became “leitmotifs, repeated over and over again: the word ‘man’ [as a greeting device], for instance. Also ‘Hi, guys,’ ‘I’ve had it,’ and others.” Serge concluded
that 90210 had become a cult series in Lebanon because “young people really ‘identified’ with that bright picture of happy shiny boys and girls.”

The pervasiveness of social mimicry notwithstanding, respondents candidly said that imitation occurred mostly at the superficial level of appearances rather than in mentalities and actions. Said Peter: “They see Beverly Hills 90210, they start imitating it. Although the lifestyle of the people in the program is different. I don’t know if at A.U.B. [the American University of Beirut] it is like that, but at the Lebanese University where I study we have different relationships with our professors than in 90210.”

Antoun went further, criticizing young Maronites who “pretend to be what they are not. They only pretend. They look Western and everything, but they have the same old archaic mentality. They just dress like that to provoke . . . and imitate, rather than live their freedom. Just to provoke and imitate; . . . we are fake” (my emphasis). In other words, this is a phenomenon of simulation. “[T]o dissimulate,” wrote Baudrillard (1983), “is to feign not to have what one has,” while “to simulate is to feign to have what one has not” (p. 5). According to Baudrillard, simulation means concealment of the nonexistence of something; in other words, it is the display of a simulacrum, a copy with no original. Young Maronites’ adoption of simulative tactics reflects a lack in their cultural identity wherein simulated action masks the absence of a clearly defined, organic identity. Thus, mimicking Western popular culture serves to symbolically fill a void. Elham explained, first in Arabic: “We have a fragmented identity lost between two or three languages, between different worldviews. This leads to a crisis. An identity crisis.” She carried on in French, using the same metaphor she used when talking about Fairuz: “Nous sommes à cheval entre deux cultures [We straddle two cultures].” Then she proceeded in Arabic: “We do not really have an identity; the stronger your feeling of not having an identity, the more you want to pretend to have one” (emphasis mine).

Hybridizing acts of mimicry and simulation were thus key to Maronite youth identities. Simulation, because “it is simulacrum and it undergoes a metamorphosis into signs and is invented on the basis of signs” (Baudrillard, 1987b, p. 59), serves to hide that a void exists and to project the impression that the emptiness does not exist. As such, simulation helps young Maronites navigate a cultural realm that irrevocably slipped into hybridity. According to Baudrillard (1987a), resorting to simulation is a manifestation of deterritorialization, which is “no longer
an exile at all...[but rather] a deprivation of meaning and territory” (p. 50). Nomadic everyday life tactics underscore that lack of meaning and territory.

**Cultural Chameleons: Hybridity’s Nomadic Expressions**

Various competing identities living cheek-by-jowl in Lebanon compel young Maronites to resort to expressions of identity that can be called nomadic, since they move between and adapt to different sociocultural settings. In formulating her “politics of nomadic identity,” political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (1994) contends that identity is relational, which in the case of the Maronites is expressed in the “Arab” and “Western” dialogical counterpoints. For example, Peter expressed his reluctance to identify himself as an Arab when he is among Westerners because of his weariness of being associated with Western stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. Antoun elaborated this context-bound nomadism: “Sometimes, yes. I am an Arab, but only sometimes. It depends. If a Christian asks me ‘Are you Arab?’ I will say yes. If a Muslim asks me the same question, my answer will be no. Why? Because if you are a Christian in an Arab country, you lose your rights and freedom... You are a second-class citizen. I am against that.” This sweeping statement underscores the insecurity felt by a member of a minority whose nomadic behavior is both empowering and defensive. In that sense Maronites are cultural chameleons.

Etymologically, the term “nomad” stems from the Greek *nomos*, meaning “an occupied space without limits,” and the Greek *nemo*, which means “to pasture” (Laroche, 1947, cited in Deleuze, 1994, p. 309). Thus, a nomad is someone who lives in an open space, without restrictions. Furthermore, “pasture” connotes a temporary sojourn in a particular location, which the nomad leaves after having used what that place had to offer. The term “nomad” does not necessarily imply physical movement from one place to another. In *Nomadology: The War Machine* (1986), French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explicate differences between nomads and migrants: “The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen and not very well localized. But the nomad only goes from point to point as a consequence and as a factual necessity: in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory” (p. 50). Conflating Maronite and Lebanese identities,
Fouad suggested that nomadic expressions of identity reflected the fact that the Lebanese “roam . . . in search of several identities . . . [because] there is no clear Lebanese identity” (emphasis mine). He then lamented the fluidity of Lebanese identity: “It is impossible to paint a portrait and point to it and say, ‘This is the Lebanese.’ It is the Lebbedeh [traditional headdress] and the Sherwal [traditional pants] now, the jeans and the T-shirt some other time, and [smiling facetiously] maybe the [Indian] sari at some other occasion. The Lebanese cannot find himself in what is around him. This mixture of all sorts of very different things is really pushed to the extreme among the Lebanese.” Fouad thus argued that circuitous practices of self-definition resulted from the absence of a holistic identity and reflected the peripatetic trajectory of synthetic cultural identities, a distinction—between holistic and synthetic—I expatiate on in Chapter Seven.

**Beyond Cultural Proximity? Texts, Audiences, Institutions**

After the exposé on the structure of Lebanese media and the analysis of Maronite media consumption, it is now useful to ask: What connections exist between Maronite youth identities and the systemic aspects of the Lebanese media? Does the resonance between hybrid domestic television programs and popular music—described as “typically Lebanese”—on one hand, and an existential experience of cultural hybridity on the other hand, constitute an example of what Straubhaar (1991) and others have called “cultural proximity”? Or is there something more to be read in the fact that the two most popular texts among young Maronites are not compatible, as will be explicated next, with the ideological orientation usually ascribed to the Maronite community?

What appears to be a lack of compatibility between audiences and texts is noteworthy in the case of the Rahbanis. While my respondents lumped the Rahbanis as one cultural text, Ziad Rahbani’s vision of Lebanon is markedly different from his parents’. The musicals created and executed by Assi and Fairuz were lavish folkloric celebrations of the history and culture of a Lebanon basking in glory that became central events at the International Baalbeck Festival in the 1950s and 1960s, putting Lebanon on the global cultural map. In sharp contrast to this patriotic romanticism, Ziad’s plays and songs in the 1970s and 1980s, in which he often parodies his parents’ creations, convey a mixture of
disappointment and cynicism, rendered in the biting sarcasm that is Ziad’s trademark. In the elder Rahbanis’ productions, the Arabic spoken is a Lebanese lingua franca that reflects Lebanon’s pride as a unified, sovereign, and beautiful nation. Ziad’s plays and songs, however, are heteroglossic reflections of Lebanon’s fractured ethnic and class landscape, as enacted by the different accents of his actors: a working-class Bastawi accent mixes with a middle-class spoken Lebanese peppered with French, in addition to broken, gender-confused Arabic spoken by Armenian characters. While his parents were not politically active beyond composing and singing both for Lebanon and, in a more limited fashion, the Palestinian cause, Ziad Rahbani, himself a Maronite, is a known leftist activist who lived in predominantly Muslim West Beirut during the war.

Ziad’s take on Lebanon’s descent into chaos is expressed in his song “Oum Fout Naam” (Get Up and Go to Sleep), in which he asks a putative Lebanese interlocutor to dream that Lebanon has become a country. The song’s disappointment at the fragmentation of Lebanese polity has a powerful resonance, albeit ironic, with Lebanese youth. Ziad fully exploits the polysemy of the Arabic language, in which words for the mathematical operations addition, subtraction, and division also mean, respectively, unity, posing (or propounding, an idea or a problem), and (sociopolitical) division, to express the breaking apart of Lebanese society. Ziad’s bitterness about the war is also clear when he sings about a youngster who shuts down a neighborhood, a reference to the (sometimes juvenile) armed thugs, domestic and foreign, who terrorized the Lebanese population during the war.

In contrast, Fairuz has declared an undying love for her homeland in the song Bhebbak Ya Loubnan (I love you, O Lebanon). Where Ziad sees evidence of irredeemable fragmentation, Fairuz sees wartime destruction as an opportunity for rebirth. That young Maronites perceived both Ziad and Fairuz as embodying Lebanon’s character reflects ambivalence about its identity. On one hand, there is the romantic view of Lebanon, replete with epithets such as “green,” “beautiful,” “proud,” sung indefatigably by Fairuz, which is counterbalanced on the other hand with a harsher but more realistic acknowledgment of Lebanon’s predicament, rendered in Ziad’s acerbic but, at bottom, melancholy songs. There is an uncanny parallelism between the two repertoires and the metaphors used for Lebanon, from “Paris of the Orient” and “Switzerland of the East” in its glory days to “Precarious Republic” and “Improbable Nation” during conflict.7
As with the Rahbani musical oeuvre, viewer interpretation of the television drama *The Storm Blows Twice* is trapped in a paradox. On one hand, the series elaborates a secular, conspicuously progressive ideology, but on the other hand it is popular with members of a community often labeled socially conservative and politically Christian. What does this contradiction suggest about the dynamics between audiences and media content in a pluralistic, multiconfessional country like Lebanon? *The Storm Blows Twice* was produced by Télé-Liban at a time when the hybrid state-private station was attempting to become a public television in the European, mostly French tradition. Under the leadership of then director Fouad Naim, Télé-Liban initiated an ambitious plan to become a public, national television, headlined by the slogan “The Nation’s Imagination.” As a dramatic series that addresses social issues between and beyond Lebanon’s confessional dynamics, *The Storm Blows Twice* can be read as one of the main components of that agenda and is in some ways reminiscent of the 1960s and early 1970s, when Télé-Liban productions like *Ad-Dunia Hayk* and *Abou Melhem* explored Lebanon’s identity as a small, pluralistic, fragile democracy.

As carriers of different worldviews that articulate a hybrid positionality, Ziad Rahbani’s work and *The Storm Blows Twice* take a predominant cultural position in the Lebanese mediascape. On the surface, they appear to be textbook examples of “local” productions whose cultural “proximity” makes them popular with Lebanese audiences. However, the local—identified as “typically Lebanese”—character of these texts is ontologically dubious. In global media research, the “local” often connotes cultural authenticity, the expression of local identity in its historical and cultural dimensions. This notion of the local as unadulterated is fundamental to the concept of cultural proximity, whose premise is that audiences tend to prefer local productions because they are proximate to their life experiences. The idea of cultural proximity can be traced back to the U.S. Foreign Service Institute in the 1940s, where anthropologist and cross-cultural trainer Edward T. Hall emphasized proxemics, or use of personal space, as an important dimension of cross-cultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). For Hall, culture consisted of stable, observable, and therefore predictable patterns of behavior. This use of proximity risks reducing culture to the idea of tradition, understood as a set of practices performed in a locale with relatively clear spatial demarcations and embodied in a local identity assumed to be unaffected or barely affected by historical change.
A closer reading, however, suggests that rather than being “local”—in other words, being typed with a distinct and particularistic cultural belonging—*The Storm Blows Twice* and Rahbani songs in fact carry inherent contradictions. The hybridity that stems from the fusion of different cultural forms suggests that proximity need not necessarily be understood in terms of being spatially near a relatively distinct cultural sphere. Rather, it may be useful to complement the idea of cultural proximity with the notion of social relevance in reference to an existential experience—in this case the Maronites’—that lacks a clearly defined identity because of cultural polyvalence. I use the adjective “social” deliberately to establish a distinction from cultural studies scholar John Fiske’s (1988) definition of relevance as when “[t]he viewer makes meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing” (p. 247). In Fiske’s view, relevance occurs in a “moment of semiosis,” which comes to be “when social allegiances and discursive practices are personified and held in relative stability on a point of relevance” (p. 247, emphasis mine). In contrast, the notion of social relevance that I am proposing shifts emphasis from the atomistic links between media texts and personal identities to the communal aspects of media consumption in its socio-politico-economic context. Whereas “cultural proximity” assumes a synchronic predictability of cultural patterns, “social relevance” in my opinion reflects a diachronic and therefore more dynamic understanding of collective identities.

Like Ziad Rahbani’s music and plays, *The Storm Blows Twice* can be read as carrying a message that attempts to transcend confessional sensibilities. However, this is not an ideology-free national/ist discourse, but rather a recasting of Syrian Nationalist ideology, which advocates the unification of Lebanon, Syria, parts of historic Palestine, and other Arab countries into Greater Syria, geographically extending “from the Taurus river to the North to the Suez Canal in the South, and from the Mediterranean to the Syrian desert” (Zamir, 2000, p. 234). In fact, the series’ writer, Choukry Anis Fakhoury, comes from a prominent Lebanese family of writers and journalists known for their Syrian Nationalist political beliefs. This is one of the reasons why *The Storm Blows Twice* was criticized in some Maronite circles for carrying a pro–Syrian Nationalist political message. In this context, the concept of “storm” is highly symbolic, since the National Syrian Party’s symbol is the *zawbaa* (which in Arabic means “whirlwind”), a jagged, thunderbolt-like star
that connotes revolutionary political action. Other signs can be read in that direction, such as a party leader referred to as the zaim, or chief, the nickname given by his followers to Antoun Saadeh, the founder and chief ideologue of Syrian nationalism.

The admiration for *The Storm Blows Twice* expressed by young Maronites, whose mainstream political leaders have historically advocated a Lebanese nationalism antagonistic to Syrian Nationalist ideology, raises important questions about the relationship between, on one hand, audience interpretations and, on the other hand, the political economy of Lebanese television. As discussed earlier in this chapter, broadcast licenses were awarded according to Lebanon’s consociational political system. The philosophy that underscores this allocation of media holds that each station will cater to its community, so LBC would have a Christian, predominantly Maronite audience, Future TV a Sunnite following, and NBN Shiite viewers. While I do not purport to generalize from a study of admittedly limited scope, this chapter nonetheless suggests that the Lebanese state’s approach to media policy may not correspond to Lebanese audience realities—hence this study’s broader implications for media policy in confessionally diverse societies.

The persistence of the confessional formula in the Lebanese polity is a formidable challenge to the establishment of a national public television station, as Télé-Liban’s demise poignantly demonstrates. The carving up of the audience on confessional lines by the political elite who negotiated and passed the 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law ensures the continuing networks of political patronage that constitute the power base of Lebanon’s political leaders (see Khalaf, 1987). More importantly, it virtually guarantees that television will not contribute, as it should, to a national public discourse whose existence is essential for Lebanon to move into sustainable civil peace. Now that militia rule has been replaced by Pax Syriana—a Lebanese security state under Syrian control—the Lebanese media and political landscape, once pluralistic, is turning monochromatic. The state apparatus exercises a large degree of control over media institutions through indirect and, increasingly, direct pressure. In 2004, a growing—and imposed—homogenization of political discourse is palpable in television newscasts and talk shows.

In the current situation, privately owned television stations are unable to contribute to building and strengthening a sense of national citizenship that over time could mitigate the political influence of confessional identities. However, the experience of a segment of Maronite youth with *The Storm Blows Twice* intimates that the right programs will
lead audience segments to “move” out of their traditionally predictable confessional lines. The popularity of a text with a decidedly secular message does not constitute a decisive crossing of confessional boundaries; nonetheless, it is ripe with potential, especially if it indicates, as I think it does, that the Maronite community itself is not monolithic but rather is diverse across generational and ideological lines.

Historical precedents of programming strategies that aim to cross the Lebanese confessional divide do exist. Since the 1980s, Maronite-owned LBC has scheduled special programming during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, such as Egyptian Fawazir Ramadan, or Ramadan quiz shows, and Arabic dramas, in order to attract Muslim audiences. A more intriguing example of “crossover” programming is the serial drama on the Virgin Mary, an Iranian production, which Al-Manar, Hizbullah’s station, aired during Ramadan in 2002. Driving on Lebanon’s coastal highway during Ramadan in November 2002, I was struck by the numerous billboards that promoted this series in predominantly Christian East Beirut and elsewhere.9

MEDIA RECEPTION AND HYBRIDITY

In this chapter I presented an empirical case study of the lived experience of hybridity in order to understand the role of mediated communication in the constitution and maintenance of hybridity as an existential condition. Three concluding insights are in order.

First, the finding that young Maronites gravitate toward cultural texts that do not cater to traditional Maronite ideology demonstrates that media reception can, in some cases, “subvert” the politico-economic context in which it occurs. Even as the structure of Lebanon’s media serves the interests of the elites by consolidating their power over their communities, the data suggest that when presented with well-crafted programs, viewers will gravitate toward cultural productions that oppose the dominant particularistic ideology of their confessional group. As British media political economist Graham Murdock aptly wrote: “although arenas circumscribe options for action, they do not dictate them. There is always a repertoire of choices” (1995, p. 92). A propensity to cross confessional lines, however, will remain fragile in a system whose raison d’être has been hijacked by a deeply rooted political confessionalism. Notably, as I elaborate on in Chapter Seven, structural changes must take place in the Lebanese media system if television is to contribute to the growth of interconfessional dialogue beyond narrow commercial considerations
dictated by the small size of the Lebanese audience. Nonetheless, the existence of audience “confessional crossover” indicates that communication practices that constitute hybridity do not always reproduce politico-economic power arrangements.

Second, this chapter provided empirical data that shows that young Maronites drew on a variety of texts, many outside their ascribed cultural space, to articulate their hybrid identities, but that the communicative constitution of hybridity, even as it subverts the broader sociopolitical context, is subject to forces of exclusion and inclusion that sometimes reflect confessional politics. In drawing on several sources, respondents related to selected media texts, and their interpretations of these texts drew boundaries of identity and otherness. For instance, Egyptian soap operas and Latin American telenovelas were dismissed for poor production qualities but also for perceived cultural irrelevance. Moreover, comments about the Muslim veil by at least one respondent reinscribe a hegemonic Western reading of this Muslim practice. While strong “media effects” were not found, this case study nonetheless suggests that the contrapuntal interpretation of media texts to articulate hybrid identities is haunted by a hegemonic echo.

Third, hybridity must be understood in its historical depth. In the context of cultural consumption, elements are selectively unearthed from the remembered past and integrated in an unstable present to make better sense of that present. Young interlocutors framed their personal narratives about identity in a historical context where they acknowledged multiple historical trajectories and cultural realities. They invoked different histories and appropriated myriad cultural bits and pieces to make sense of their present-day identity, a phenomenon that, as already discussed, casts doubt on the validity of a broadly defined notion of cultural proximity. Conversely, the present is also projected onto the past, insofar as the experience of a hybrid identity makes it imperative to construct a past that justifies the current state of affairs. In effect, communicative practices such as media consumption activate a process where the past and the present are used to mutually make sense of each other, highlighting the point I made, pace Makdissi (2000), early in this chapter that confessional identities are contingent and best understood as historically constructed relations, not as ahistorical, primordial essences. The historical haggle over Maronite origins was of marginal interest to a Maronite youth concerned more with grappling with its current-day hybridity than with teleological, mythical, and ultimately irrelevant...
origins. Hybrid identity is in effect, as illustrated by the protagonist of East, West (Rushdie, 1994) in this chapter’s epigraph, a refusal, or perhaps an inability, to make definitive identity choices. As the past is rearticulated in the present and the present is projected onto the past in an affective economy animated by media texts, it is clear that hybridity is not a negation of identity; rather, it is its quotidian, vicarious, and inevitable condition.