

ASA FIRTH LECTURE 2012

The Everyday Aesthetics of the Lebanese Transnational Family

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June 2012

Introduction

I am not sure if I am entirely correct in this, as I can hardly claim to be an expert in the literature, but my feeling is that, more often than not, when questions of aesthetics come up in anthropology, there is a general expectation that the conversation will be about literature, art, cinema, theatre, rituals and carnivals. The discussion then turns to a sociology of the aesthetic performance and its product and to questions such as: are the performers professionals or amateurs, elite or popular, cultural hybridisers or purists, cosmopolitans or parochial or something in between or a combination of all these? This is why I need to start with a negative. In this presentation, I am not interested in aesthetics in so far as it is located, as with the above, in aesthetically specialised practices and objects.

It could well be argued that, with modernity, the aesthetic dimension of life follows other dimensions of the social such as politics or the economy in becoming an increasingly specialised and autonomous field. This process has been well described and analysed by Bourdieu. But notwithstanding the pertinence of this analysis it hardly implies the existence of 'pure fields'. The existence of a specialised political field, for example, has not meant that the political no longer exists except in specialised institutions. The political is still diffused throughout the social, that is, a dimension of life remains political through and through regardless of which social domain one is examining, and despite the existence of specialised political institutions and practices. In much the same way, and despite the existence of specialised aesthetically oriented practices and objects, it can still be said that a dimension of life remains aesthetic, not only from the point of view of an observer of other peoples' practices – observers can by definition experience anything as aesthetic – but also from the perspective of the people engaging in such practices. It is to this latter, more phenomenological, dimension that I want to orient my analytic and ethnographic gaze in analysing certain social and cultural aspects of the Lebanese transnational family I have been researching. It is useful, to begin with, to indicate what this transnational family is and what it means to consider it as a space of ethnographic research.

The Lebanese Family as a Transnational Formation

I met members of this family very early in my career, in 1992, while researching multiculturalism in Sydney. In 1994 I interviewed one of them for a project on multiculturalism and food (Hage 2010). They originate from a Maronite village in North Lebanon with a long tradition of migration to Australia. More than a third of the village population live in Sydney and Melbourne. Throughout the nineties, as I did a variety of research projects which involved working with Sydney's Lebanese community, I met, mixed with, and occasionally interviewed people from that village (Hage, 2003). I also became well-acquainted with the people who ran the Sydney village association. Consequently, when in 2001 I conceived of a research project on the Lebanese diaspora, the village and its immigrants across the world as a fieldwork site was an obvious choice to make, as I was easily able to activate my Sydney contacts to facilitate working with the villagers in Lebanon.

The village itself is located in the mountains above Tripoli, the capital of North Lebanon. It is a reasonably old Maronite settlement and there are references to it in a number of seventeenth century manuscripts. It emerged in proximity to a number of small rivers but it is relatively bland as far as its geographic location and setting is concerned when compared to the more spectacularly positioned villages of the mountain around the nearby Qadisha Valley. As such, it was never part of the circuit of touristic capital that defined Lebanon's economy in the mid-twentieth century. Today, thanks to migration, quite a few people are seen driving a new Mercedes or a BMW (the ultimate Lebanese symbol of middle-classness); more than fifty per cent of the households have computers and e-mail access and most of the teenagers are totally attuned to global TV-transmitted culture (when I was there 'Star Academy' was the latest hit among the teenagers).

The village seems to have made up for its lack of touristic and other attractions by developing a reputation as a centre of learning. It has an important Maronite monastery and a school that attracted students from all over Lebanon and Syria. It also attracted students from the more immediate area around it which consists of many Muslim villages whose inhabitants, at least for most of the twentieth

century, valued the possibility of giving their children an education in a Christian school. This tradition was later continued with the building of a village private school in the early fifties.

Despite the school, life in the village is far more reminiscent of underdeveloped parts of Lebanon, dominated by a rural, non-mechanised agricultural economy.

There are many small and medium sized citrus orchards, and a few relatively substantial olive groves. Until 1956 there was also an olive press that supplied olive oil to the village and its surroundings. This now lay in ruins destroyed in the 1975 civil war. The village has in the middle of it the ruins of a silk factory originally built by a Lyon manufacturer in 1890. This is a vestige of the period, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, when the village's agriculture, like that of many Mount Lebanon villages, shifted to a Lyon-based silk economy involving the growing of mulberry trees where silk worms make a home. The factory stopped functioning in the early 1920s, but its existence was an important step in the village's opening to the world and the beginning of emigration in the late nineteenth century. Today, and despite the physical prevalence of agricultural land, the main sources of income in the village are the employment of the villagers in nearby towns as shopkeepers (21% of the village's working population), government employees (23%) and workers in a nearby cement factory (31 %), and last but not least, immigrant remittances.

The first stage of the research involved staying in the village or between the village and Beirut for an initial three month period. I wanted to get a sense of how a village 'experiences' its diaspora. One learns a lot about immigrants just from being in the village. Very early on, for example, I was given a tour of the village's 'real estate' where houses, or the 'villas' – as the villagers like to call them, with an accentuation on both the 'i' and the 'l': 'veallah' – were referred to by the geographic location of the immigrants that funded their construction: this veallah is Saudi Arabian, this veallah is American, this veallah is Australian, Brazilian, etc... One can very quickly learn where immigrants actually make money and where they don't from the size of the houses. The diasporic culture and the diasporic imaginary of the village is grounded in those houses. It is also grounded in those immigrants who have left but who are still present in absentia

through the money, commodities and letters they send, the stories people tell about them, and their photos hanging on walls or above television sets. And there are also returnees, and accents: for instance, people with Brazilian accents when speaking Arabic, or Australian accents when speaking English. There are also various touristic memorabilia: here a photo of the Sydney Opera House, or of the Statue of Liberty, or an American Indian dream catcher, or an Australian Indigenous didgeridoo. Very quickly it became clear to me that just as the village as a 'home' was present in the diaspora all over the world, the world of the diaspora was equally present in the village. It is such reality that drew me to try and find an understanding of diasporic culture that differed from the common definition which saw diaspora as a dispersed population united by their real or imaginary relation to an original home, though excluding that home from the diasporic space itself. At least in the Lebanese case, I found it more useful to think of a definition that emphasised what immigrants and non-immigrants shared and made them both part and parcel of the same transnational culture. I wanted a conception of diasporic culture that included both the person dreaming of leaving and the person yearning to return. I wanted a conception that highlighted a sense of 'spatial haunting' as a unifying diasporic mechanism: both the fact of being haunted by the spaces one could go to and the spaces that one has left behind. The question this immediately raised was of a practical order: How does one do an ethnography of such a culture?

By staying in the village, knowing who are the members of the diaspora that are most permanently in touch with the village, using records accumulated by the local mayor's office over time, I developed a good sense of the way the village was spread around the world. I also established contacts and friendships with immigrants living in the various global locations and was already sensitive to a transnational cultural dimension that the villagers shared together and which constituted them into a diasporic formation.

After a three months stay in the village, I had one month left from my research leave which I used to return 'slowly' to Sydney via some of the key international locations where immigrants from the village were concentrated: Sao Paolo, Cabudare (Venezuela), Boston, and Montreal. I spent a socially intensive

four/five days in each location meeting and getting to know people I had already met or got connected to while in the village. This was enough to give me an initial concrete feel of the diasporic conditions of existence in each of these locations. But it was also enough to give me a sense of the impossibility of the task of doing an ethnography of the whole international diasporic space. What's more I was becoming increasingly critical of the facile usage of notions of 'transnational community' to any village diaspora without there being any empirical evidence that such community existed (Hage 2005). In my case, I could clearly see how the villagers within each diasporic location related to each other enough to form what can be called a community. But I could not see much evidence of transnational relations between each of these nationally located diasporic communities. For example, while there were village associations in each of the international locations I went to, there were no transnational relations whatsoever between those village associations. The only real intensive and permanent web of transnational relations that existed in the village's diasporic space was familial. This was how the idea of taking one extended family as an ethnographic site grew in my mind as a study of a transnational form of sociality that actually existed, and one that was practically possible to study.

Having formulated the idea, the initial phase of finding families with whom I could conduct my ethnographic work was far from easy. First of all, this involved finding a family whose members are located in most of the global locations where the villages' migrants are concentrated. More importantly, and this was the most difficult, it involved finding an extended family whose various household members across the globe were willing to have me living with them, in their houses, as an eternal voyeur, for considerable periods of time during occasional visits that could go from a few days to a few weeks, twice or three times a year, over many years. My stay in the village, some research into the background of some of the families and my Sydney location found me going back to people I first met, as mentioned above, in the early nineties. It was through them and after some trial and error that I finally managed to get 'my family': an extended family mainly located in Cadubare, Boston and Sydney, and in the village in North Lebanon, of course. In the first three years of the research, and while I was funded by the Australian Research Council to do so, I was doing two

or three around the world trips where I stayed in each household for various length of time according to how much room I could make between my other teaching, research and family obligations. For many years I became very much a family member often invited to important transnational events such as weddings and christenings, which have been an important source of ethnographic data to me.

The family were relatively speaking among the richest in the village. They were even perceived as a quasi aristocracy. Historically, they had owned both the silk factory and the olive press. They also owned and operated the village's private school. But clearly, even when the olive press was still operating, the profit generated by it was not enough to distribute around and the migration of the family to Venezuela began in 1920 and to Boston in the 1940s. The family suffered further during the civil war when, in 1976, the whole village was attacked and burnt to the ground by militias from neighbouring Muslim villages. The generation of immigrants from the family that were the centre of my attention moved principally to Cadubare (Venezuela), Boston and Sydney, as a result of that late migration. They were Jameeleh and Ya'koob, their three sons Lateef, Waheed and Mario, and three daughters Maya, Hoda and Badi'ah (red lines in the family chart below).

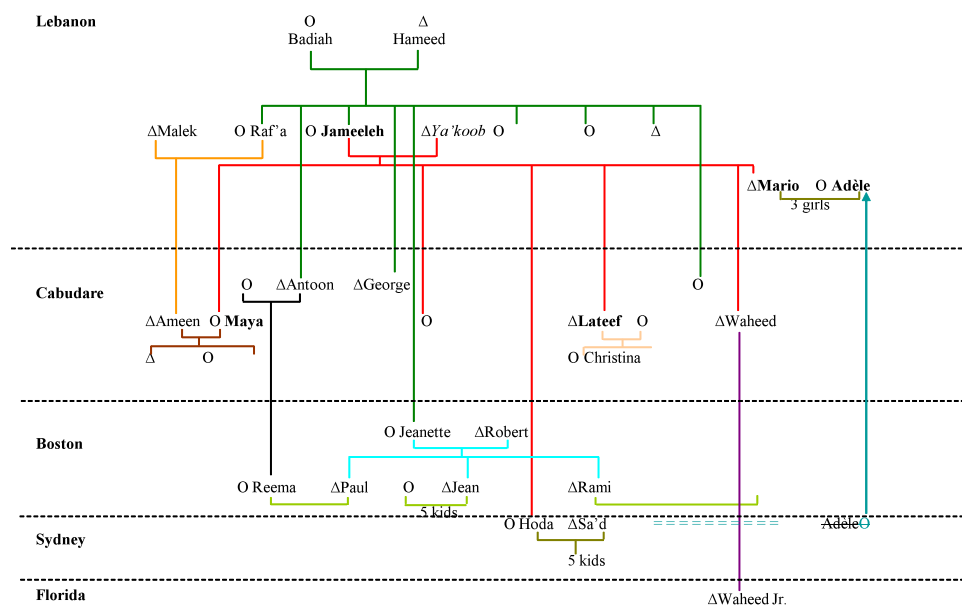


Fig. 1 : Family chart

Jameeleh's brothers, Antoon and George, had migrated to Cadubare in the 1950s and had become reasonably successful owners of rice farms in areas around Caduabre. Jameeleh's sister's son, Ameen, also migrated in the 1960s and owned a furniture store nearby. So, when the village was destroyed, Jameeleh and her husband decided to move to Venezuela. Jameeleh's sister and her husband Robert and their three sons also migrated at the same time to Boston where Robert's mother's family were born and raised (blue line in family chart). An unforeseeable event happened at Beirut Airport. Jameeleh's husband Ya'coub was totally petrified by the plane and refused to go on it. The whole migratory trajectory of the family was changed there and then. Rather than a total and final migration as planned, Jameeleh decided on the spot to leave Ya'coub behind and settle some of the children in Venezuela before returning to Lebanon.

After a six month period in Cadubare, it was decided that Hoda (the eldest daughter) and Mario (the youngest of the boys) will go back to the village with their mother. A couple of years after going back to the village, Hoda married Sa'd, a village man who had migrated to Australia ten years earlier and owned a restaurant in Sydney. She went to live in Sydney. What's more when Sa'd came to the village to marry Hoda, his cousin, Adèle, born and raised in Melbourne, came with him. She and Mario fell in love and married, and Adèle ended up staying in the village. Around the same time, Paul, the eldest son of Jeannette and Robert who had migrated to Boston, married his cousin Reema, the daughter of his maternal uncle Antoon who had migrated to Venezuela earlier on, creating new kinship ties between the Boston and Cadubare parts of the family.

Ya'coob died of a heart attack seven years after the initial migration.

Theoretically, Jameeleh could have moved to Venezuela at that time but a number of things made her stay in the village. First, by that time the village was rebuilt and Jameeleh also rebuilt the private school where she invested a lot of her time. She was now the director of the school. Second, both her other sons were already doing quite well in Cadubare each owning rice and sugar cane farms of substantial sizes. Lateef in particular was on the way to become by far the most financially successful member of the entire family further investing in his cousin's businesses in Boston. Third, both brothers desired to maintain the

family's land and were even purchasing new plots that Mario, the brother who stayed behind with his mother, was responsible for looking after. This was in part because of a fourth important reason behind Jameeleh's decision to stay in the village, the family as a whole had a considerable investment in its status as a kind of 'aristocracy' of the village, and by having Jameeleh stay in the village, it was asserting that it had overcome the logic of economic necessity that governed their initial departure. They now merely 'lived' in both places. Mario, was in a sense asked almost formally by his brothers to forgo migration and to stay with his mother. As the Venezuelan brothers' businesses kept improving, their commitment to Mario's family and its needs increased and were seen as what the family owed him for forgoing migration.

These then, as based on the above, were what constituted the family that I took as my fieldwork site: Jameeleh and Mario's family in the village in Lebanon; Jameeleh's sons Lateef, Waheed, and her daughters, Maya and Badi'ah, and Jameeleh's brothers, the early immigrants, Antoon and Georges and their respective families in Venezuela; Jeannette and Robert and their sons and their respective families in Boston; and Hoda and Sa'd and their family in Sydney. There were other family members living in Sao Paolo and in Montreal that I visited briefly just to get to know them, but they are not so much part of the transnational family as such, in that they do not participate in the extensive circuit of people, money and communication that constitute the family into a transnational/communal space as such. I take the family to be constituted through these transnational practices, and it is the extent to which an aesthetic dimension is part of this process of constitution that I want to examine here.

The production of diasporic style: migration, house decoration and the aesthetic de-instrumentalisation of life

On my first visit to Venezuela, staying at Maya's house, I noted a map of Australia, carved from wood with a golden clock in the middle, and with Tasmania dangling from it, attached to it by a golden chain. I noted it because exactly the same clock hung on the wall of the family's home in the village. A week later, I noted that it was also on the wall of Jeannette and Robert's home in

Boston. I made a note to myself to take a closer look, on my next trip, at how each household marked its transnational connections with similar items: non-Australian households all have beside the above mentioned clock an assortment of kangaroos and koalas, and one Venezuelan household had a didgeridoo; the Venezuelan households had a lot of American baseball memorabilia; some were in the lounge room and some in the boys' bedrooms. And, sure enough, there was an obvious bias towards Boston's Red Sox. Even in Sydney, one of the boys had in his bedroom a poster of Ted Williams, the famous Boston Red Sox hitter. In Lebanon however, true to the popularity of basketball in the country, Mario had a poster of the Boston Celtics logo next to his desk. Only one Boston household had a Venezuelan item however: a poster of the Salto Angel waterfall, although in the village household there are a number of wood engravings with Spanish greetings and home blessings made in Venezuela.

This interest in what we can call an aesthetics of transnational connectivity led me to become interested in house decoration in general. Most of the decoration marked a relation to place. This can be a relation to other diasporic locations as illustrated above, but in the households outside Lebanon it can also denote a relation to the country of settlement: a native Venezuelan rug in a Venezuelan house, an American flag in Boston or a Ken Done (a popular Australian artist) print in Sydney. Predictably, the dominant forms of decoration marked the households relationship to Lebanon: mirrors that have the shape of Lebanon's map, wooden or metal carvings of the Lebanese cedar or photos and statues of Lebanese saints, and of course, photos of Lebanese family members.

At one level, this household decoration as an aestheticisation of the home is no different in its function from any other non-diasporic household decoration. I nonetheless want to argue that there is a specifically diasporic dimension to this aesthetic form without which one fails to fully capture its significance for various family members, and which gives these decorations something I will call after Barthes, a diasporic *style*.

In a little book titled *What is Sport?* Barthes defines style while reflecting on the art/sport of bullfighting:

What is style? Style makes a difficult action into a graceful gesture, introduces a rhythm into fatality. Style is to be courageous without disorder, to give necessity the appearance of freedom (Barthes 2007, 9).

It is hard not to extrapolate from bullfighting to life in general here. In so far as life is a struggle that tends to imprison us in the order of its necessities, style is precisely that aesthetic dimension we manage to give our lives to transcend and sublimate this order of necessity. In much the same way, I want to suggest that diasporic style is that dimension of life where diasporic subjects struggle to inject things like 'grace' and 'freedom' into the domain of necessity that governs the migratory process. Migration marks this process with its own specificities. Let me exemplify this ethnographically.

One thing that drew my attention when I began working with the Lebanese diaspora is how bare of decoration the houses of immigrants are when they first move into a new country. With this image in one's mind it is hard to see a fully decorated household without seeing it in relation to this quasi-foundational state of bareness. In that early stage, an almost pure functional/instrumental reason seems to be behind the households' internal furnishing as if it is nothing but the homely externalisation of the realm of necessity. Slowly, I came to understand that there were a number of reasons behind this bareness and functionality. Firstly, there is the issue of poverty and of how recent the arrival is. Secondly, it is a matter of belief in the transience of one's presence away from the home country. Most immigrants and people working with immigrants know for how long this belief is maintained against all odds. But last and not least, and in what is more directly related to the issues discussed above, the refusal of decoration is partly an attempt to delay the sentiment of betrayal of the home country some immigrants feel when they settle in a new one. To decorate is to say that one is moving from the domain of necessity to the domain of enjoyment. By not decorating immigrants are saying that they are 'here' because they have to be: paradoxically, then, there is at this stage an interest in dwelling in the domain of 'pure necessity'. The moment one decorates, that is, the moment one begins to create such a purely aesthetic space, is the moment one begins to carve out for themselves a space that is not governed by the domain of diasporic necessity.

Early in my research, I noted that one of my informants who has been in Sydney for almost two years hung a Matisse print on their wall. It was the first time I saw such an object of 'pure art' in the house. I said something like 'Ah you're starting to make yourself at home here'. I remember very clearly that he looked slightly perturbed and replied *mish hal add* (not that much). It was as if there was a sense of embarrassment associated with the idea of making oneself at home in Australia. Hanging a painting for pure visual pleasure on one's wall means a desire to settle. And the moment one indicates a desire to settle one is also saying to one's country of origin: there's room for enjoyment here in settling in this new country; I am not going to live my life thinking that the good life can only be lived in Lebanon. There's more to life than homesickness.

To be sure, I am not saying here that an aesthetic dimension emerges for the first time in the process of migration the moment a painting is hung on the wall. There is an aesthetic experience associated with many things immigrants do from the moment they move into a new country. For example, there is an aesthetic experience associated with eating a plate of Lebanese food. A plate of *Tabouli* (Lebanese salad) is not just something that one eats. There is also an investment in its form. The plate can be referred to as 'depressing' or as 'full of life'. But the aesthetic emanating from the *Tabouli* at this early stage in the process of migration is an aesthetics of homesickness, aimed at taking one back to where one has come from. With the painting, indeed in the very act of hanging something on the wall, we move from an aesthetic of homesickness to an aesthetic of settlement. There are many objects that can fuse both of those aesthetic dimensions: hanging a painting of a Lebanese landscape is a classic example of such a fusion. But one has to note that once it is hung, a Lebanese landscape painting becomes part of the process of settlement. It becomes part of an aesthetic of nostalgia rather than homesickness. For as I have argued elsewhere (Hage 2009), unlike homesickness which activates memory in a backward looking way that shields the immigrant from participating in the new country of migration, nostalgia is a participatory affect that uses forms and memories of the past to engage in home-building in the present and for the future. Yet, even when immigrants have gone a long way into the process of settlement, the weight of the necessity that led to migration continues to haunt

them and as such is negotiated in every aestheticisation of the diasporic process. This is well exemplified in the case below.

Diasporic Aesthetics and The weight of necessity

'Wlek Ya Habibeh, Leik, fee shee baddak tefhamo, Ashab hoan ma fi'.

When Paul made this comment during one of the many chats we had concerning his migration to Boston, it did not stand out from the general thrust of his conversation. It was not until I translated it to English that I stood there looking at it bemused. This is the exact translation 'Listen my dear friend, there's something you need to understand, there are no friends here'.

Paul has definitely read no Derrida, no Montaigne and no Aristotle.¹ And if his sentence stands out for someone who has read one or all of those, what also stands out is the 'here' at the end of the sentence. 'O My friends, there are no friends' is the philosophically inspired lament made by Aristotle, and that was later analysed by Montaigne, to be more recently taken up and dissected by Derrida in his 'politics of friendship'.

Derrida subjects this contradictory performative to his usual deconstructive efforts. He articulates his deconstruction to a critique of Karl Schmidt's work on sovereignty and the friend/enemy binary in politics aiming to show the blurred line between friends and enemies.

But unlike Derrida or Aristotle, Paul was not making a universal statement about friendship. His was spatially specific : there are no friends 'here'. He made it clear during that conversation that he strongly believed that there were friends 'there'. Indeed, this was the thrust of his conversation: 'There', in Lebanon, not only were there many friends but, and I quote, 'friends were really friends'. 'Here', meaning in the US, and I quote again, 'no one has time for anything. And everyone is for themselves'.

I initially did not make much of this entire conversation as I have heard many similar comments made by Lebanese immigrants everywhere around the world. After translating it, I put the file in the folder which said 'Chapter Four: Diasporic

¹ Perhaps Paul has come across it in the Coco Chanel book of quotation where it is claimed to be Coco's own original contribution to social thought, but I doubt it.

Homesickness'. I interpreted this conversation as a variety of diasporic homesickness where everything is always imagined as super duper 'back home' just as everything was lacking 'here'. In this homesickness folder I had bits of conversation about 'fruits and vegetables' being better back home, about the 'sky and the sea' being nicer, about family life being closer and about coffee tasting better. And now I've got another bit on friends, I thought.

It was not until a year later that I had a moment of analytic illumination such as one has when doing fieldwork, and which made me remove the conversation from the nostalgia folder and re-evaluate what to do with it. It was not really me that had the analytic insight, it was Paul's maternal uncle, Georges, who, as mentioned above, migrated to Venezuela long before Paul migrated to Boston. Georges simply handed me the richer analytical space on a plate, when friendship came up in the course of a conversation.

Georges is a very successful rice farmer. His farm is located not far from Barquisimeto which is about four hours west of Caracas. Georges is also quite a powerful local figure in the town involved with Lateef, his nephew, not just in agriculture but in urban development projects. Once, while driving me from the farm where I was visiting and to his house, he got out of the car at several points including a kind of military checkpoint to talk to people. I did not see what exactly he did but he explained to me that he needed 'to keep these people happy' because 'God knows what Chavez is planning'. He, like a number of successful Lebanese immigrants at the time were worried that Chavez will mobilize the underclass mob against them. This never happened.

The day Georges and I had this particular conversation about friendship, he had in fact been a victim of an attack, but it was an attack by a less politically oriented underclass. I was actually visiting him in hospital. The week before, he was shot by people who tried to rob him. It happened outside the bank. He had just come out of the bank with a suitcase full of money (it contained the monthly payments of the manual labourers on the farm who were paid cash).

This was the third time somebody has tried to steal money at gun point from Georges in a fifteen years period. It has always happened in similar circumstances - that is, after he leaves the bank carrying his employees' wages.

He is now certain that the thieves have an inside collaborator in the bank because he has uselessly engaged in a variety of strategies to avoid being predictable. The first time he was robbed, the thieves just went away with the money. The second time, four years ago, he resisted them by knocking the person carrying the gun with the suitcase and taking it away. So, this third time, emboldened by his last encounter he resisted again and tried to take the gun away from the thief. But this time he got shot in the leg and the stomach and the thief got away with the money.

But Georges didn't want to talk about any of this. The experience of being shot, and of bleeding so much from the stomach that he had to be put in intensive care for many days, had put him in an existential mood. It was his third day out of intensive care and he wanted to talk to me about 'life'.

'How are you?' I said

He shook his head: 'Not good,' he said, 'not good. I am upset with myself and Helena (his wife) is upset with me. I risked my life and nearly died to protect my money...'

He shook his head again and repeated: 'for money... that's what I did for money'.

And then he surprised me by saying: 'I did not start life oriented towards business and money you know'. He surprised me because I always thought of him as totally consumed by his businesses and happy with all the wealth and power they generate.

'I was more like you... I was interested in ideas, poetry and philosophy. You know, I was the first person in the village to actually read all of Gibran (that's Gibran Khalil Gibran the pride of every Lebanese and particularly the Christian Lebanese of the northern mountains where Gibran comes from and where Georges also comes from).

Everybody talks about Gibran in Lebanon, Georges continued, but no one reads him. I read him. I read everything: The Prophet, The Broken Wings, all of them. People made fun of me. Even my father, I remember him saying sarcastically: 'I wonder what Gibran's parents thought when he migrated all the way to America

and sent them poems instead of money. Here he was thinking he was making fun of me, and I was actually thinking: I wish I can go away and write poetry.'

'So why didn't you' I said.

Head shaking again.

'I couldn't. I had to make a living and feed the family. A man from the village was leaving to come here (Venezuela) and he told my father that he can take me with him. I had to go. And I started making money. Slowly it became all about money. I left poetry and Gibran in the village. I left it just like I left the village itself that I loved, just as I left my parents and just as I left my friends.'

He paused for a second and then like his nephew before him he did a Derrida on me: 'if it wasn't for my wife and family there would be no one for me here. One thing for sure my friend, there are no friends here'

I immediately remembered Paul telling me this and it was a bit amusing. And I did what I have come to instinctively do when I hear familiar conversation. I add what I think is a familiar comment exploring the extent to which the same narrative structures people experiences. So I said: 'yes, everyone is for themselves here'.

But Georges surprised me by not continuing with the same conversational pattern :

““Everyone is for themselves here”. That's very true but who is the one who put himself before everything else first? Is it not us the ones who emigrated? Who left his family and friends and went pursuing money? Is it not us? We happily settle somewhere and accuse people of putting money before friendship, but is it not us who have done that to begin with?"

The more I thought about this the more I thought that Georges was pointing to a very important dimension of the migratory act. By enacting on his hospital bed the moment he split himself from his poetic/literary and affective self in the name of economic necessity he was enacting - in the process of telling his own story - a drama that is foundational to all migratory processes: migration, even the desire to migrate, involves at a fundamental level a surrender to perceived necessity. Indeed, every part of the migratory process involves a way of

negotiating this necessity. And it is within this process of negotiation that the 'aesthetic moment' in the diasporic process, what I have called above diasporic style, has to be understood.

At one level, the surrender to an economic necessity that uproots you can be shaming in so far as it involves an implicit acknowledgment that your country/community is not capable of looking after you. This is the basis of a whole diasporic genre. In Lebanon, a whole mythology, present in many official or conservative forms of artistic and literary endeavours dealing with migration, is devoted to rendering the economic necessity that drives the migratory process into stories of choice and heroism. In the process, economic necessity is erased from public discourse: The reason why the Lebanese love to migrate is because they are 'adventurous' and 'enterprising', showing continuities with their ancestors the Phoenicians; anything but the recognition that migration is the result of national economic failure and the unwillingness of many to endure the effects of such a failure.

Clearly, as the settlement process evolves in time, the experience of diasporic necessity diminishes as other forms of locally grown necessities impose themselves along with other forms of aestheticisation. Nonetheless, and as the example of Georges clearly shows, the effect of diasporic necessity and its negotiation, continues to be felt within migrant cultures well after the initial stage of migration.

Distinction: The aesthetics of inter-family differentiation

In the above, I have examined an aesthetic component or dimension of diasporic life, grounded in the immigrants' wrestle with the way the order of necessity imposes itself in the process of migration. I have argued that this dimension can be seen, more generally as constitutive of the diasporic condition. As such, it works as a unifying force in the making of the Lebanese transnational family's culture. But just as there is an aesthetic dimension that foregrounds the family's unity, there are others that highlight its internal differentiation. The family is most notably differentiated along national (the country they have migrated to), developmental (degrees of rurality, urbanity and cosmopolitanism), educational and class lines. These make for an aesthetic domain of perceived differences as

the family households and members develop styles that are a reflection of their national, socio-economic and cultural positioning. In addition, there is a domain of conscious strategic and competitive deployment of this difference, or what Bourdieu defines as the space of 'distinction'.

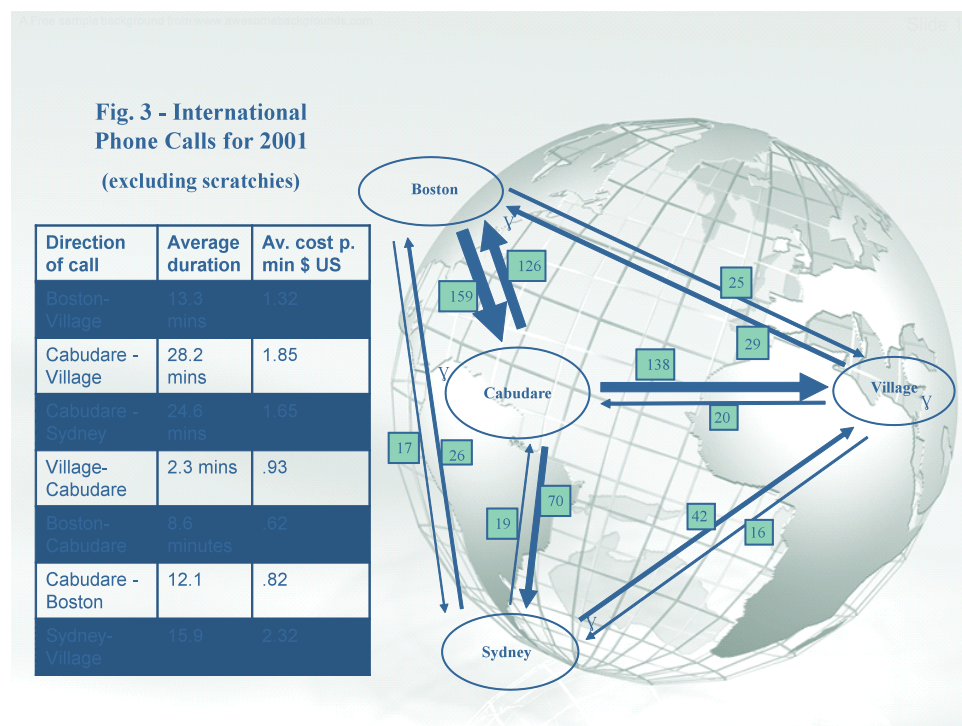
The first time I noted a competitive edge emerging between various members of the family was during an e-mail exchange between second-generation Australian, American and Venezuelan members which degenerated into a form of competitive tourism where each member was highlighting their own nation's touristic sites as the most beautiful and the most worthy of visiting. Class differences are often consciously and unconsciously exhibited giving rise to what one might call an aesthetics of diasporic success that is hardly specific to the family or to the Lebanese and exhibited in the type of houses people live in, the clothes being worn, and the cars being driven. Part of this aesthetics of success however is a tradition that is more or less specific to Northern Lebanese, particularly, but not only, Christian immigrants: success is measured by the label of the Johnny Walker whisky bottle one puts at the lunch or dinner table.

At some stage in the history of Lebanon's modernisation, whisky replaced arak as a drink that people have with food for those who saw in it a mark of westernisation. Like arak it is drunk with ice and mixed with water. Johnny Walker became by far the most successfully marketed whisky in the country with its ads becoming part of the Lebanese landscape. Very quickly, drinking 'Black Label' became a way of distinguishing one's middle classness. This tradition was continued in the diaspora at the same time as the knowledge of Johnny Walker's label varieties expanded to 'Gold Label', 'Blue Label' and others. Among the Venezuelans, having several bottles of 'Blue Label' on the table is *de rigueur* at festive meals and is very consciously used to differentiate them from less successful immigrants inside and outside the family.

Most often than not such strategies of distinction are acted out in the absence of those the practices are aiming to distinguish one from: such others are part of the general imaginary but not physically present. On rare occasions the strategies of distinction occur in an interactive space. Such an occasion arose in 2004.

Lateef, who is, as indicated above, the most financially successful member of the family had four girls. He desperately wanted a boy, but after the fourth girl in 1999 had given up. In 2003 he and his wife, Christina, decided to give it a last try and towards the end of that year Christina gave birth to a boy named Jacobo (the Spanish rendition of his grandfather's name). Lateef decided to christen Jacobo back in the village and invited everyone around the world (including myself) to come to the village for the christening. Given how much having a boy had meant to him it was clear that this was going to be a big occasion of the family re-gathering in the village.

It was during that christening that I recorded a number of interesting instances of interactive inter-familial strategies of diasporic distinction. It should however be said, as I have shown elsewhere (Hage 2012), that transnational families have a certain directionality or orientation. This orientation is formed by a number of variables and changes with time. The family we are concerned with here is oriented towards Lebanon. A quick look at the global map of phone calls made by the family in 2011 below shows how they are largely directed to the village in Lebanon. This does not have to be the case. It is function of the fact that they are relatively recent immigrants and that Jammeeleh who is like the family's nodal point has remained in Lebanon.



This directionality has also meant that there is a Goffmanesque dimension to the family's transnational being: a transnational mode of the presentation of the familial self in everyday life. In this familial mode of existence, the village operates as the front stage where the family presents itself where it deems it important to present oneself. On the other hand, the entirety of the international family travail, businesses, labour etc... is the backstage, secondary in so far as the economy of prestige is concerned (Goffman 1959).

It is important to emphasise the above to highlight the fact that the family as a whole has an interest in presenting itself in a specific way (as successful, as still Lebanese, as united, etc...) to the rest of the village. Consequently while, there are aesthetics strategies of distinction structuring the family internally, these strategies remain contained in one sense by the desire to project unity.

Nonetheless, the aesthetic of differentiation was there to see.

At the church ceremony, for instance, the Venezuelans were wearing very expensive and formal clothes with recognised labels. The Bostonians who were not as rich as the Venezuelans and on the whole could not as easily afford such expensive clothes, opted generally speaking for a less formal style: they tried to compensate for their relative lack of wealth by showing themselves to be more worldly. It was a common theme among the Bostonians that the Venezuelans 'never migrated': meaning that they moved from one rural area to another. The Bostonians think that while the Venezuelans have made a lot of money, they have nevertheless stayed villagers at heart and they exhibit their wealth in the way villagers do. They lacked the kind of cosmopolitan style that one acquires by living in a middle class part of Boston.

The Australians, who lived in a working-class part of Sydney, on the other hand, were by far the least financially successful. At the christening the younger generation among them did not even bother to dress up at all. Instead of playing up a worldliness and a cosmopolitanism they could not afford, they actually played up their Australian-ness. Something like 'we in Australia we don't care about things like this' and 'we have an easy-going egalitarian culture' were used when I raised with them the question of 'who is and who is not dressed-up'.

It is interesting to note here that claiming to be 'Australian' at the expense of one's Lebanese-ness is not a claim the Australian part of the family can or would make in Australia. Many of them, with a few exceptions, would feel that they are betraying their Lebanese-ness by doing so. At the same time, the politics of identification in Australia is such that there are always people questioning to what extent Lebanese Australians can be Australian. So, no Lebanese can make that claim without being weary of that potentially present 'real Aussie', always present in the imagination of the racialised, who will come and tell you "no, you are not really Australian". Interestingly, then Lebanon becomes the only place where the 'Australians' can feel liberated to act 'fully' Australian without worrying about either homeland guilt or racist doubters. The same goes, but in different degrees, for the Venezuelans and the Americans. Consequently, the village becomes an interesting site of shameless strategies of national distinction. Nonetheless, in those very strategies of distinction the family, like a multicultural collector, is projecting to the whole village the richness of the migratory cultures that compose it.

Mutuality of being: Dwelling in the Aesthetic

So far in this presentation, I have considered the aesthetic in so far as it is a dimension of form where other social processes, tensions and dramas associated with the diasporic condition are being reflected and played out. I want to conclude by examining the aesthetic domain not so much as being metaphoric of other social processes but as being itself a space where the family exists in a specific way.

One of the aesthetic dimensions of the family's diasporic culture we have alluded to is what we might call the aesthetic of commonality: those forms that are common to all family households despite their national and class differences. These can reside in some of the cultural forms taken by food. *Kebbeh Nayyeh* (raw meat crushed with wheat and herbs), for instance, is a Lebanese national dish, which, like any other dish, varies regionally in the way it is made and the way it is served. In much the same way, however, there are also family specific variations. There are certain features of the way the dish is made and presented at the table such as it is immediately recognisable as 'this is the way this is done

in the family'. A Venezuelan will go to Boston and when she or he is served Kebbeh Nayyeh, they will immediately recognise that they are among family. There are also certain ways of saying Lebanese words that are specific to the family. There is also a certain family phenotype, a loose structure or a vague mode of faciality, that the family recognise as existing among them and is equally visible to an outsider like myself. This visual similarity can also be associated with certain gestural similarities, certain way of moving one's head, of turning, of looking, of walking that indicate some remnants of an inherited common habitus that has long been fractured and that continues to exist in fragments here and there.

To the extent that these collections of familial forms constitute the basis of an aesthetic of commonality, the aesthetic remains here the same as what we have been treating so far: a dimension of life but also an expression of a reality outside of it, the reality of commonality. I want to suggest however that these common features are not just the source for a *representation* of what each family member experiences as having in common with other family members, They are also a space where family members experience their individual existence as dissolving within a wider mode of familial existence. This is what I want to call after Marshall Sahlin in his latest work on kinship (Sahlin, what is kinship?) the aesthetics of mutuality. here, I want to emphasise, feature such as those I have delineated above are not an expression of something that the family shares but the very space (not a representation of the space) where the family exists as a totality outside the specificity of its members.

Similar to the tradition analysed by Sahlin in his piece, the Lebanese denote social closeness by saying of a person *hayda minna w'feena*: he is 'from us and in us'. This term is not used about a person just because they are a biological kin. It has to denote a kind of existential kinship. While the idea that someone is 'from us' is common enough as indicating that someone is 'issued from us', the idea of someone being 'in us' takes us into the domain of mutuality analysed by Sahlin. Thus, when a man from Boston visits Sydney looks at his nephew and recognises a resemblance, they recognise a commonality but they recognise a mutuality: 'I am in you'. They can also recognise that the way they speak is 'in' the way they

speak, etc... Here then the aesthetic is not just an expression of a commonality but the site for the experience of mutuality.

While there are many other domains where one can examine the presence of an aesthetic dimension to the mode of being of the transnational Lebanese family, I hope that this presentation allows an appreciation of the diversity and the complexity of what it means to study aesthetics in so far as it is enmeshed in everyday practices.

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