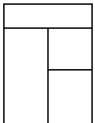


مُمتَلَكات

MUMTALAKAT



ABOUT MUMTALAKAT

Meaning “belongings” in Arabic, the word *mumtalakat* is derived from the Arabic root to own, to govern. Thus, *Mumtalakat* has to do not only with the materiality of objects, but also with a phenomenology of dominance, of power. As a title, it considers the ways in which objects shape interaction, inviting reflection on their ability to hold multiple meanings and perform personal and cultural functions. It also engages various understandings of objects as conceptual entities that carry affective memories of the migration experience.

With an emphasis on process, each iteration of this multi-part oral history project functions as a site of encounter where new discourses can be articulated. The project as a whole considers the complexities of collaborative processes, questioning conventions of the researcher/educator as main author, prioritizing participants’ perspectives, and investigating how to negotiate these relations and viewpoints through an exhibition and public events.

This installment in the Gallery’s vestibule features personal objects belonging to five Arabic-speaking immigrants: an icon, teddy bear, identity cards, rescue tools, diaries, sewing notebooks, house key, rosary, book, Keffiyeh, school note, postcard, and travel souvenirs. As remnants of remote oversea experiences, these objects open a space in the here and now for looking and reflecting on notions of home, identity and belonging.

By placing personal objects and narratives under the category of the aesthetic, *Mumtalakat* considers visibility and its constraints. Prompting encounters between the public and the private, it questions how different forms and strategies of representation test the limits of the personal and how these approaches can extend the interpretive potential of oral narratives and embed objects in their larger cultural contexts.

Participants: Malaka Ackaoui, Alexandre Ackaoui Asselin, Wissam Assouad, M.B., Maher Kouraytem, Farah Mustafa

Interview with M.B.

Interviewer: Emma Haraké

Date of Interview: March 08, 2019

Length of Interview: 51 min. 55 sec.

Place of interview: Interviewee's office

Language of interview: Arabic (Syrian Dialect)

Objects: Three diaries, rosary, teddy bear

Transcription in Arabic: Emma Haraké

Translation into French: Chirine Chamsine

Translation into English: Emma Haraké

Comments

There is some background noise from the street. Text in square brackets [] is used to identify non-verbal communication or add context. *Italic* text indicates when the language used in the interview was English or French.

Biographical details

M.B. is a 24-year-old Syrian/Armenian born in Aleppo, Syria. In 2014, M.B. had to leave Aleppo with her family to Lebanon because of the Syrian war. In December 2015, due to political unrest and treatment of Syrians in Lebanon, the family decided to move to Montreal. M.B. is currently a student at Concordia University and a community organizer.

Where are you from?

From Aleppo, Syria.

How old are you?

24.

What are you doing now?

I'm currently a *student* at Concordia, and I teach.

What are you studying at Concordia?

Early Childhood Education and I'm doing *minor* [in] *linguistics*

When did you arrive in Montreal?

29-12-2015, exactly. [laughter]

We talked about what you are doing, you're a student and you're teaching. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your life here in Montreal?

Yes, I do a lot of volunteering. I mean not only with the Syrian community, with [both] the Syrian and Armenian community since I'm Armenian/Syrian and in the Montreal community as well.

Why did you decide to come to Montreal? Who did you come with? Or was it on your own?

Oh, I didn't decide, life happened. We went to Lebanon because of the [Syrian] war, then my parents decided to come here because of the political discourse and the Syrians' situation in Lebanon, so we came. We applied, they accepted us, and we came.

[1:20]

Ok. We can start speaking about the objects. You told me that you photographed three objects?

Yes, three objects. The first object is *my notebooks* [points to a photograph of three notebooks with different covers]. Even though they are not very beautiful, they are not *fancy* but these... I started writing when I was maybe six or seven years old, and I used

to write about our house, it would be very simple things: about the neighbourhood, people living in the neighbourhood, or the neighbours who would visit. You know how life is over there: the neighbours, and the house, and the stories that never end. Each day had a story, so I always wrote them down. And even if I wanted to sit facing... *I had a window in my room*, and if I wanted to sit and look at the sky and write... So, you can find my whole life in these [notebooks]. Every single day since I was six years old until I became an adult and even my days in Lebanon are [documented] in this yellow notebook [points to the photograph].

And is this the oldest, the one with the butterfly [on its cover]?

The oldest. It has a butterfly, [I got it] when I was young. I don't know why I chose one with a butterfly. And these...

And the blue one is the newest?

No. The butterfly, then the blue, then the yellow. [I got] the yellow when we moved from Aleppo—we didn't actually move—when we migrated from Aleppo to Lebanon. And I wrote over there, in Lebanon, about the people I met because I used to go and observe life over there in the Lebanese society. So, I used to write, like reports, and some of the [writings] used to be published, by the way. As I was writing, some got published in newspapers. Some were published in Aleppo, even in Cyprus and Lebanon.

Ok.

So, I used to love writing, sharing my story. I don't know why it was extremely important for me to take them with me. To this day, if I'm feeling distressed or extremely happy, for example, I like to see my life as M.B. I mean [I like to] look here, in the early years see what and how I used to think; even the words, I laugh a lot. Even *the handwriting, it was very bad, ...* but I am able to relate to what I was feeling back then. I can see how I evolved, how I ... so yeah. These [notebooks] are all of my memories and every detail of my life. This is why they were the first thing I brought with me. I said to myself: "No, my notebooks are the most important. I don't want clothes, I don't want anything, my notebooks are the most important thing."

Yes, your memories, your childhood...

Everything!

So, you didn't hesitate?

No, never! Not once!

[4:35]

And now, do you have a fourth notebook to write in?

No, I go back and add to them [laughter]. Honestly, I tried, I bought a notebook, a new one here, and I started writing in it, but I didn't photograph it here. Because at times, I go back and take some from there, a few, ... I don't know. Although you can that tell they are not very beautiful, not very *fancy*, but yeah.

If you look at them separately, what does each remind you off the most?

[Points to the notebook with butterfly on its cover] The butterfly, maybe when I was a teenager or older. Sometimes, I feel that all of them are me, but as you know, we evolve. So maybe over there [I remember] how much... how do you say it... how naive I was, naiveté. And the blue [cover], maybe I was dreaming of very *big* things, I mean *I'm dreaming big*. And the yellow [cover], I was more realistic; I started feeling that no... yeah.

Did you use to buy them yourself or did someone give them to you?

No, it was always me. I have many beautiful notebooks given to me as gifts—and they were kind of *fancy*—because I was growing up and they noticed that I liked writing to great extent. So, around Christmas, several people would bring me notebooks, "So you can write in them" and so, well. I don't use them, I put them to the side, and I go and buy the ones I like.

Ok.

And as you can notice they are... *it's not fancy* but I don't know, they have secrets! I don't know why I love them. I even wrote *about my first day of period*.

Ow! Ok.

I wrote, I wrote here [in the] butterfly [notebook] and it's all written in red because as you know it's a taboo over there, so no one told me and I couldn't tell anyone. Now, when I read, I laugh at how stupid I was [laughter]. "*Dear my diary*" and I used to write in English, Armenian, and Arabic. "Don't tell anyone, but this happened to me." You know how? So yeah, *everything!*

And where do you keep them at home? Do they have a designated place?

They have their place. I have, like a bookcase, a very small and very old [bookcase]. [I keep them] in between books but they have a shelf of their own. This is their place, and no one ever touches them.

Do you leaf through them 'til now? From time to time?

Always, always, always. I even used to add dates, so if I went... for example, when you asked me about when I arrived, I had it written down. Dates are essential to me.

[8:06]

Does anyone else read them?

No, no, only me. Sometimes, for example, I choose to share what I wrote with my sister or mother. But I [only share] things, for example things if *it's not directly related*. Let's say, if it's a third or fourth person who they don't know very well, or if I wrote something about the house or the neighborhood and stuff like that. So, I'd say, "Mommy, look at what I wrote," and she would listen to me; she always listens, even dad. And afterwards, they laugh or become somehow sad, I can tell from their faces, then I close the notebooks and I put them back. No, no one [reads them], these are private.

Yeah. So, do you still have time in the present? Are you able to write as before or...?

In the notebooks? Unfortunately, no. Currently I am mostly using *unfortunately my phone*. I have like *notes* that I write on there, then later, if I have time, I copy them. Because personally I prefer the most... I love the pen and paper. But, ... because I tried... because life is really fast paced here, ... I tried to find balance; it didn't work. So, I said, "Instead of forgetting what I want to write, I better write on *whatever I have*." On the phone? On the phone.

Sure, yes. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about them?

The notebooks? No. I don't know, I feel that someday I'd want to compile them into a book. With all the details inside and all the things... When I was silent or had to stay silent, so I'd write here. I mean, as a woman, as an immigrant, as... Anything I felt I couldn't say because I am a woman, I couldn't say because I don't have the right to voice my thoughts because I'm not in my country, I'd write. In the future, when I graduate, I'll write [my stories]. I can write whatever I want, and I want to publish a book as well, but I don't know if it'll work out. But now, little by little, I started with *storytelling*. I take parts from them; I add something new and something from inside them, I create a *mix*.

This was actually my next question. If you want to make a book, would you revise or leave them leave them as they are, innocent, especially the ones from when you were young?

No, I'd leave them and make... So, if I leave them, I would do the *critique* by myself, you know. I was this and this and now I'm like this, how foolish I was when I used to be afraid of pointless things and so ... innocent – not foolish- innocent!

I also feel that this is more [accurate]...

Innocence. Maybe the butterfly [notebook] is innocence, yes.

Ok. You told me that you used to publish in newspapers in Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus. Are you publishing here?

I tried to publish here, I published once in the United States, but later it became... people wanted to exploit my stories. When I publish, I don't take... I mean, I don't charge. So, when I noticed that they wanted to exploit my stories and gain profit for themselves, I stopped. I want them, I want them to listen to the [whole] story, not just mine, because there are other people's stories inside mine. But I don't want them to exploit our situation or use what is happening for their own profit, to sell one more newspaper. This is why I stopped sending them [material] to publish. I also thought that I should stop for a while *and focus more on myself* and get to know how people here are, how they think, before I publish. But when I stopped, I didn't stop completely. I started to change. I didn't publish my poems, but I tried to recite them. I created a *performance* because I felt there are people who don't know the stories of the countries we come from; they have a lot of *stereotype ideas about us*. So, I told myself, I tried to do something before graduating from university because I felt responsible, much like what you saw. Besides, I did two or three, two or three, I organised the *storytelling sessions* to make our voices heard.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

[head shake, no]

[13:49]

Ok, what is the second object?

Ta-da, Ta-DA ! [laughter]. The second object is a rose-coloured rosary, a rose rosary. Why a rosary? Even though it is used by Catholics and I'm not a Catholic, but I don't have... I mean for me this doesn't represent... what is called? Sectarianism or... it is more representational of faith. I needed it the most, [needed] to take it from one country into another along with my memories. Faith, faith that I... faith in myself because when you migrate a lot, and I'm very sorry for what I'm about to say, especially in Lebanon, you feel yourself like, "Ouffff, my goodness, you know nothing!" They are the ones who know, they are the ones who are strong, and they are the ones who lived

what you've been through. But afterwards, *sometimes like it's enough*, just enough! I don't want to hear them anymore. So when we decided to move here, and sometimes you put things like this [gestures to mimic blinders on her eyes], like a donkey so you only see ahead, you don't look right or left... but I always felt that [my] faith is very strong to this day. Faith, faith... faith in everything. Faith in nature, faith in yourself, faith, faith.

Are you the one holding it in the photograph? Are these your hands?

Yes.

Did you buy it? Was it a gift or did it belong to someone in the family?

Wow... it's the only one I brought from Aleppo, to Lebanon, to here. Maybe, I bought it... when did I buy it? I might have bought it when we once visited Lebanon and went to ... [trying to remember]

Harissa? [Pilgrimage site and shrine to the Virgin Mary in Lebanon]

Harissa!

Were you still [living] in Aleppo at the time?

In Aleppo.

Ok.

We were there for a visit and so I bought it, I liked it. Then we went back to Aleppo and we lived there and there was nothing happening. But it [the rosary] was the only one that stayed with me to remind me that, "No, I mean, *eventually everything will be OK.*" Yes, I'm in pain and so on, but that's it. I mean, it might be very funny, but I don't know, I feel when a human being is struggling a lot, they need something to hold onto, whatever that is. For me, it was my memories and my faith. My faith in the past, my faith in the future and the present and everything. Faith. And this is it, I mean, even its color, ... I like it because it's not very... you know, *Peace*. Yeah, I like it very much in my life. Especially if you've been through war and such, peace is the thing I look for the most. And peace means peace, peace for the *mind* and for the soul and for everything.

[17:22]

So, what do you remember when you look at it or hold it in your hands at home?

I don't hold it in my hands. I put it on my photographs, on my photo.

You mean hung?

Yes, I have a photograph with my friend and these friends are... they aren't here with me. I put it [on the photograph] facing me so I can look at it every morning. Faith, that... I don't know, we will be together again, and everything will be fine, I don't know how, but yes.

Do you want to take a break?

No, no. It's good.

Sure?

Yes, yes.

And do you know where your friends are now?

Yes. Each one of them is in a [different] place. I was lucky that my one friend moved here, and how did he make it? Faith as well. We don't know, he came on his own and got accepted even though they stopped taking new people. He was the only one accepted from his group. Yeah, so he's here, so yeah.

You told me earlier how you carried the rosary with you to Lebanon and to here. Given what you've been through, sometimes a person's faith is shaken or...

Yes, true. Because during times of war... when we were at war, as an Armenian I always used to say that, we have a song that goes, "Where are you god, where are you? Can't you also see what's happening?" I used to hate this song because they would broadcast it every April the 24th [Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day] but then later it seemed like we were going through the same cycle... very.... We lost people who were very close to our family. I used to say, "No, this can't happen. And if God, for example, exists, if there is something greater, then this must be stopped." Then afterwards, when I first went to Lebanon, I noticed that people discriminate each other *based on their faith*. It was *something* very new to me because it was the first time I felt, "Uffff, seriously?! This is how it should be? That if someone has a [different] faith, we should treat them differently." So, it was the first place where [my faith] was shaken and I started to doubt that this, faith thing, might not actually be a good thing or that what I was thinking is wrong. The first stop was Lebanon. And I thought that maybe they did [those things] to us because of who we are, because we are Christians or because we had faith. So, doubts started eating at me. I started to doubt myself a lot, doubt everything. I also became skeptical about what is happening in Syria, what is still happening... I mean, Why? But also, in difficult situations... for example, we used

to go out every day, if we were going to university and weren't sure whether we'd make it back or not, but we would make the sign of the cross and "Let's go! Bye, bye." People are still living like that up until now. So, if I make the cross sign and leave then that's it, *you're doing great!*

[21:15]

When you moved to Lebanon, did you know that you will be moving to a different country or...?

No, we went to Lebanon because my mom needed a surgery and dad was... I mean we lost someone close to the family, he wasn't a blood relative, but he was very close. He was very close to us and was his [my father's] closest friend. He was like my uncle, I used to call him "uncle" and my mom needed an operation around the same time we lost him. We had no water, no electricity, no nothing, no way to do an operation, so my dad said, "Let's go to Lebanon and see how things are there." We went and managed to do the surgery for my mom, and we got her leg surgery. She couldn't move, so we decided to stay there for six months, and after six months she had to have another operation. Seven more months where she couldn't move. But my dad returned, he worked in Syria and didn't stay with us in Lebanon. He was the main support because we had faith that everything would end. Up to now, we have faith that what is happening in Syria *it's not fair*, especially Aleppo, it has to be over soon. But for four years we lived in war like this, day after day, we would say, "Today, it will be over. Tomorrow, it will be over." Until now, "Let's go, we want to go back". So, when we [first] moved to Lebanon, we didn't know that we were going to Canada [next]. But after my dad returned to work over there [in Syria] and we started attending university there, we saw that it is tough over there. Roads were closing and everything kept going from difficult, to difficult, to worse. So, this is why when he [my father] joined us, he said, "No, enough. We don't have any way out except to leave, so let's leave." For me, it was like... You know how things are over there, we didn't have a brother or brothers, so it was all on me and my sister; we both worked, studied and took care of our mom. But at first, we didn't have a job, a job, because Lebanese jobs were for the Lebanese and we were Syrian. And if they wanted to kick someone out of a job, which happened to me, of course I had to be the one to leave. And we didn't have a PR [permanent residence] and we didn't have... so, the best way was to leave.

How long did you stay in Lebanon?

We stayed from 07/2014 to...

[The date] before you moved here?

Yes, one year... a year and a half.

You were at which university?

In *Haigazian* [University] for Armenians.

Were you studying the same major?

No, not at all. I wanted to be a pediatrician, so I was studying *biology*. But I also loved languages a lot, so I was taking *Armenian studies* as well. It was the only place that offers *Armenian studies*, and I worked at the university. And they didn't *transfer* any [credits] because I was in a Syrian university before and they wanted to make a profit. So, we said, "It's Ok, having a degree is what matters." So, I studied biology over there and when I moved here [Montreal], they said that they didn't want to transfer [any credits] as well. I thought, "No, I cannot start *biology* from zero again." By that time, war had happened, and I was... blood started to mean something else to me. I still have a brave heart and I can deal with blood, see blood and not faint, I have a brave heart but that's it, I was like no, I didn't want to... but my dream was to work with children and I used to like languages a lot, so now I'm also [studying] *linguistics*.

Ok.

I can't deny anything.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the rosary?

About the rosary, no.

Did your relationship to it change since you moved here?

To the rosary? Yes, you asked me a very good question [earlier] that didn't cross my mind. I don't carry the rosary. I keep in its place; I don't know why.

Even in Lebanon? You used to keep it on a photograph?

No. In Lebanon, I used to hide it in my *sac à dos*. Never.

In Aleppo?

In Aleppo, yes. Likewise, I used to hang it somewhere in my room, on photographs, any place and it reminded me that I have faith.

[26:41]

If you want, we can move...

This is *my teddy bear*; I don't know why I chose him as well. I was telling you that we left like... We didn't decide, I mean, I can even remember mom taking the... what was its name? The coffee pot? You know the one I'm talking about?

The rakwa [meaning coffeepot in Levantine Arabic].

The rakwa! We put on top... we took a taxi, everything on top of the taxi.

On top the car?

Top of the car and mom was holding the coffeepot and descending, [wondering] where to put it. Personally, I used to really love... I, I had many teddy bears as a child, and what else? I didn't have a Barbie, I hated them, but I had one like a *bébé*... what's it called? A *doll*. You know, these two, him [teddy bear] and her [doll], they were always on my mattress, always. Like I slept with them, all together. But when I left, I couldn't take everything, so I took him and left her there on the condition that I would come back some day and take her, bring her along. She's still there, waiting for me, but I took him. I don't know why; safety, safety. Yeah, right. I mean we slept on... what's it called? Sofas, on mattresses. We moved a lot, especially in Lebanon, here and there, but believe me when I tell you that when I used to put him on a mattress or on the floor or anywhere, that's it! It became my bed. Wow, I never thought about it before, but now as I am speaking, maybe this is the reason why I carried him with me.

Do you remember how old were you then?

That, yes. I was either nine or twelve years old, and I remember that this was a New Year's gift and I didn't know the person who brought it very well, he was from Homs [city in Syria]. But I don't know! Since the very beginning, I liked it a lot. Like, I sleep with it and it brings me comfort [laughter]. So, I brought it with me, I carried it from one house to another, from a mattress to a couch to the floor, everywhere. Maybe because it represented safety to me. Also, because you can't sleep just anywhere, and sometime the houses where... for example, we didn't choose the house in Lebanon, someone we knew asked us to take care of it. The house was in Jal el-Dib [village in Lebanon] and I used to walk every day, and I didn't feel safe. It represented safety for me. Can you believe it? This teddy bear, I still have it. It went everywhere with me, and it is waiting for its friend.

Does it have a name?

Teddy bear.

And its friend likewise?

No, she has a name. She has an Armenian name meaning *sunshine*. Yes, bear, *teddy bear*, I don't know why I love it.

[30:34]

Did you hesitate when you were choosing what objects to bring with you?

Yes, a lot! Because you can't take everything. But I didn't hesitate in a sense of, I didn't hesitate to leave my clothes there, I didn't hesitate to leave people's presents there. No, I didn't hesitate. I knew what I wanted. I knew, for example, that these are the most important. Of course, I wanted to take my clothes as well, we always wore short sleeves in Lebanon and we didn't have winter clothes when we arrived here. So, we started buying things little by little, but yeah, I didn't care at all, at all about clothes and *shoes* and such, at all! But it was very... Oh yes, and I felt sad about my books, I [only] brought some of them. I love reading poetry and novels very much, but I have a big library there so *I will go back and pick them up with sunshine*.

What connects these three objects in your opinion?

Connects them? Me, my life! Maybe my personality, my personality or *my values*. The past is important for me, the *roots* are important, this is why I brought all my stories with me, even though I can remember them, but no! There is.... I feel that there is something different when you go back and read them. Plus, my faith, because I don't like to give up. I need something in order to keep going, I need faith because sometimes, we are all humans, there are many stages in life when we feel that that's enough, we get exhausted. I mean, I could have left university, left everything and married in order to end all this misery, because honestly, I have a lot of health issues these days. The first year I arrived at Montreal up to now, I've had... I would visit the doctor every day, every day during the first year, physical, not mental issues at all. Then afterwards, I was supposed to have blood tests every six months or so. I could have quit; there are many, many reasons to quit school, abandon *stress*, and forget about the past. When you go through all that, your past and your present, they affect your health as well and I had serious reasons to leave them behind, but I didn't. On the contrary, I came here and started to tell my story, trying to get people around me to share their stories as well. Besides, I didn't give up. I wanted to have a degree; I still want to have a degree. This is why faith was very crucial to me and safety, safety in everything. Safety, because you can see that there are no *bombs* here in Montreal, there are no bombs, but would you believe me if I told you that I used to feel safer in Aleppo during the war than here, now? I mean here at 8:30 [pm] *maximum*... Afterwards, I don't like to stay away from home, I don't like, I don't feel safe. But perhaps little by little, with time this feeling would return. So yeah, every morning, me and this teddy bear, we wake up together and sleep together despite becoming... how old am I? Twenty-four years; a lot of people might mock me, but no.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about...?

No, this is it. Do you have more questions?

What I really liked about these [notebooks] is that I can see the *transition visually*, the time. Here [rosary] you talked about your relationship to faith and how faith...

As I told you, it might be a cross but for me personally I am very... I believe in nature, I believe in life, I believe in everything and I combine all faiths, you know? And the teddy bear...

[35:49]

This [represents] safety, you were just telling me how you felt Aleppo is safer...

As a girl over there, I used to stay late till half past two [am] in the streets and come back whenever I felt like it, but here, even now, I don't feel... I feel that there is danger that is hidden from me here. The danger, the exile, I don't want to see it, but future generations don't want to see it... I may be able to recognize it a bit, but the following generation might never see it because I don't know if we can show them the countries we came from. You know what I mean? *It's too complicated*. Look, my sister had a *hamster* and the weird thing is that when we were in Lebanon, she never thought about it, but when we moved here, she bought around a million *hamsters*, I don't know why. I mean, we couldn't bring her hamster from Aleppo, you know how small a *hamster* can be and it can get lost, so here, she can't be comfortable if she doesn't see the *hamster* every day. Maybe this is how she—now I'm thinking—maybe this is how she tries to make herself feel comfortable.

Do you have a favorite, if you have to choose between these three objects?

It's a beautiful and difficult question, I cannot choose. On the contrary, I can think of a way to carry all three of them [laughter]. I'm not kidding, I can put [the rosary] on me and carry my notebooks on my hand and put the teddy bear on my back. I might have done the same when we left Aleppo. I didn't put the rosary on me [though], I put it in my *sac à dos* as well.

You mentioned that there were other things you wanted to bring, other than the doll...

The books, the library, because—I don't know why, I used to love reading very much, and there were many... for example, when I was studying for my high school diploma,

you know how you say, "Yeah, tomorrow, or after graduation I will, I should read this book." I don't know why we used to plan for the future before the present. So, there are a lot of things I wanted to do. Plus, I wanted to bring my photographs, my photographs, my [photo] albums with me. I couldn't, but the good thing is that a friend of mine sent them to me, my albums from when I was a child I mean.

Scanned or did she ship them?

I got them in the mail. I received them. Besides, my mom, for example, printed my hands and documentary things like that, which I would have loved to have taken, but I didn't because I said that words would be a reminder. I wrote so many things, even the small details. Imagine, even if a problem happened with the family, I would write about it in my diaries, I don't know why. And ever since then, you reminded me now, I had magazines. I mean, I used to write as if I had my own magazine and I used to tape them [make a layout]. I used to write, then print my handwriting, then I'd take a story from another magazine and put everything together and pretend that I wrote one story; I am the editor, and the other story was written by someone else and I own the magazine. I couldn't bring them, you reminded me. I put them in a drawer, the second drawer from the bottom, and now I don't have them anymore.

And did the magazines have different texts than the notebooks?

Different, different. I still have a title for my book. So that magazine... I mean, when I write a book, it will have the same title as the magazine, yeah. I used to put images in with them, *it's not again that fancy* but I used to glue them and save them in *dossiers*, I left them. You reminded me of them [laughter]. I should, I mean there are many things. But look, I didn't choose those [magazines] for example, I chose these [notebooks]. These, because of, I don't know, the *handwriting*, and those [because] I used to print them on the computer, I *type it* then I *print*; maybe this is why I didn't bring them.

And you mentioned that you used to write in Arabic, Armenian and English as well...

And English, and my English was fantastic! [sarcastic, laughter]. I mean, I laugh a lot when I look at it now. There and then, *it was wow*.

[41:45]

Has your relationship to the language changed since you moved to Canada? I mean we mostly use English at work and school...

This thing kills me. I am also observing the children, I am thinking about the future, but my sister and I, my sister is two years younger than me, but I am seeing how she changed her accent, how she even changed her *mother tongue* which is Armenian; we

started to speak differently... she started, not me. Until now, I feel like “No, I didn’t change my Armenian language, my *mother tongue*” but you can tell that I started *mixing* a lot between Arabic and English and this bothers me a lot. But up to now, *I know what is my favorite language, languages actually* and I know that at times I have to think in Armenian, and other times in Arabic, because there are things I feel more in Armenian and others I feel more in Arabic and I cannot separate them, I cannot separate them. When I was in Lebanon, I felt I had to isolate the two. I have to be, ... to say that I am either Syrian or Armenian, I can never be both, and this comes from the people who were already divided based on their religions. I mean, imagine that I used to hate myself when I took a taxi; they’d start talking about Syrians or Armenians. At times I did choose. First, I used to say that I am either Armenian or Syrian. Later, I stopped, I couldn’t! I didn’t want anyone to ask me about anything, I’d just say that I am from Bourj-Hammoud [one of the suburbs of Greater Beirut. The town has the highest concentration of the Armenian population in Lebanon] and that’s it. Plus, I didn’t... I even changed some of my [Syrian] expressions in Lebanon. The thing I hate the most, I hate that my friend is still influenced, because he had to work in Lebanon and I didn’t. I don’t know if you noticed, at times I pronounce it “jeh” [sound of letter J: ج in Arabic] even though in our dialect in Aleppo we say, “tjeh, tjeh’tjeh’a.”

Yes.

And I hate that my friend is still struggling to use an authentic Aleppine accent, because he had to work two, three jobs in Lebanon and all three of them were in customer service, so he was 100 percent obliged to change his language [dialect]. We couldn’t go “straight,” we had to go “directly.” We couldn’t say... what else? A lot of things, “jeh, tjeh...” So, for me, this is very... I personally [believe that] *language equals to identity*. If we are speaking Arabic with our friends and he starts to talk and doesn’t pronounce “tjeh,” I become very, very, very angry! Even though it’s such a tiny detail. Or if he doesn’t say “straight” and uses “directly” instead, I become very angry—we’ve never used the word! But two years were enough. Two years changed a lot, because we were obliged to adapt, to hide our accents so that it doesn’t reveal where we’re from, so that they wouldn’t hurt us.

[45:47]

You’re compartmentalizing yourself, your identity; I mean you have to choose one part and hide the other...

True, true. This is why, here, I began to slowly feel that, “No, I can [be]. I have the right to believe in the things I choose to believe in.” I can be the Armenian, I can be the Syrian, I can be the Aleppine, I can be the Canadian. I can choose who I want to be, but getting there was *not* easy. I mean, because I began... we may have left a warzone, but the war started in us, you know: “Who are you? Why did you come here? What happened and why? Why you and why me? And what happened?” All these questions

that don't have an answer most of the time. Unfortunately, not everyone is like this, not everyone thinks about what is just... and afterwards, what happened? After we came here, you're not only [facing] a war within yourself, no, there is also a war... there are people who stayed there and started talking about us, "She left, she escaped." Don't say I escaped, I didn't! Even more, there is a division, within a division, within a division. I mean, when I arrived here and started to think, I said that the situation of the Lebanese people will unfortunately be repeated for the Syrian people; the same thing, I am talking about the human and mental situation.

Yes, the division...

I mean imagine, "You quit, you went over there. We are the ones who stayed, and you don't have the right." How can it be that I don't have the right?! So yeah, the division I witnessed and experienced in Lebanon... I believe if I go back to Aleppo in a few years, I will live through the same thing, unfortunately.

Ok. Let's talk about Canada. *Moving forward* a year or two, what do you envision yourself doing...?

I stopped planning after the war, you know, but I want to do a master's and a PhD, and I want to have a family. What else? I want to share my stories, I want to show the world, not the world, but people who have lost their faith or lost faith in themselves, that we can. You know, even though they said, "No, you don't know because you left that country. You know nothing, you have been *outside the world* for three, four years and so on." But yeah, I want to tell them that we can, you can, and whoever wants to also can, it just takes patience and hard work, and what else? And faith, most importantly, yes. But yesterday something happened to me. When I first moved to Lebanon, I hadn't seen the sun for a long time. So, when we were there, my friend and I, we went to a *piscine*. It had been four years since we went to a *piscine*. We went and my friend spent three quarters of an hour taking a shower. You know, you should take a shower before going in the *piscine*. I told her "Enough, come on, finish! Enough, let's go outside." The shower was very nice, imagine, you turn it on, and the warm water falls on you. Next, we took a bus after we left, and the noise from the engine drove us under the seats. Yesterday, I was walking around the corner here, you know, where *Tim Hortons* is? Facing it, there are many... there is a group of... not birds, what are they called?

Pigeons.

Pigeons, the pigeons! I was walking without paying much thought to where I was walking. I wanted to catch a meeting, and I wasn't thinking and suddenly I felt that "curr curr curr" [imitates pigeons voice]. I went down and made a gesture like this with my hands [gesture with hands as though protecting her head]. I kneeled and two seconds later I felt like there was nothing [to be afraid of]. Ok, so I stood up. But this

happened yesterday. I don't think I want to forget everything. I can say, "Let's forget and live the moment." Yes, forget, I cannot forget. This is my personality; I cannot forget, and I cannot pretend that nothing happened. Lots of things happened, and these things made me lose—they didn't make me lose, no!—I don't like saying that I lost. No! I won many things. My personality, my identity, numerous things that I became more attached to.

[51:55]

Translation to English: Emma Haraké

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