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Bodies as Borders, Borders as Bodies

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Just as we are about to publish this issue, Sujana Rana and Roja Maya Limbu, two Nepalese migrant domestic workers and activists, were arrested from their employers' houses and detained in Lebanon, despite them having legal papers. Sujana was deported on Saturday, December 10, and Roja's fate is still unknown.

When we entertained the possibility of publishing an issue on the geographies of bodies and borders, we initially envisioned articles and testimonies on the plight of refugees, on the slippery borders of the Mediterranean, on bodies stuck in limbo, stranded on invisible borders. What we could not foresee, however, is the careful deconstruction of borders as sites of self-assigned power structures, whether by geopolitical actors or socially-enforced norms, that is prevalent in this issue.

In that sense, borders are bodies, interfaces in constant motion across time and space, and bodies become borders, sites of hegemonic conflicts, contradictory affects, and resistance. It has become impossible to talk about borders without questioning the brutal polarities of vertical formations of power, the collapsing and reshuffling of nation-states, and institutionalized discrimination, where dominant structures decide what and who and when is "legal." Similarly, speaking of bodies entails a reassessment of macro- and micro-instances of oppression, of movement and fluidity with respect to identity, belonging, geographies, and conflict, of positionality that is renegotiated at every intersection. As queer bodies – and I use queer as a political positioning, as bodies that are rendered foreign because of their positionality – how do we navigate the normative borders of intersecting power structures? How do we negotiate the borders of resistance and dissent?

This issue opens with a description and a short excerpt of Dictaphone Group's video performance *Nothing to Declare*. Dictaphone Group showed the video installation of their project at Kohl's launch event on December 8, 2016. *Nothing to Declare* is a poignant project that follows the journey of three women, Tania El Khoury, Abir Saksouk, and Petra Serhal, along Lebanon's old railway tracks, narrating their history and reflecting on borders as spaces of crossing, performance, and entrapment.

In the spirit of trespassing the borders of knowledge production and academic publishing, this issue features three oral testimonies and a conversation by migrant domestic workers living in Lebanon. They were recorded on November 19, 2016, then transcribed. The editing process was an overwhelming task for me: aware of my positionality, I was weary of linguistic appropriation and tried to stay away from imposing foreign terminologies. This is why I decided against including an editor's note to the conversation, in which I would have discussed the main ideas covered in the discussion from a theoretical standpoint, and opted for leaving the exchange as raw and unmediated as possible. Together, the four pieces are gems that reflect what Kohl aspires to become: a platform that historicizes the resistance of overshadowed communities of women.

In "Beirut's Welcome," Rose explains the reasons that pushed her to come to Lebanon in the first place. Much of her story is dedicated to her first 48 hours in Lebanon: she describes her horrid arrival to Beirut's airport and the time she spent at the agency without knowing her fate. The next thirteen years of her life are glossed over in a haste; as she expressed, her lack of freedom and the routine of everyday life in the same house with the same salary was a question of sacrifice.

Mala unknowingly arrived to Lebanon by boat in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War. “Migrating to the Lebanese Civil War” tells the story of a mother who had to care for others’ children in a country torn by war, and viewed her survival as a must for her own children, despite the bombs and the long nights in the basement. Despite her rocky beginnings, Mala was able to carve a place for herself in migrant domestic workers’ activist spaces in Lebanon, where she is still active today.

“The Road to Dissent” is Gemma’s account of her journey, from her hardworking life in the Philippines to navigating domestic work in Lebanon. Unrelenting, Gemma was able to send her own mother, a former migrant domestic worker, back home. Despite being a successful freelance domestic worker, she was only able to fill her own emptiness through activism. Bringing transnational communities of migrant women together to fight for the same cause, she tells me of the children of domestic workers born in Lebanon: “she won’t be a domestic worker.”

Joined by Meriam and Julia, Gemma, Mala, and Rose forcefully deconstruct borders in this issue’s “Openings,” “Resisting Borders: a Conversation on the Daily Struggles of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon.” In addition to their criticism of legal borders, the treatment at the immigration control, and the airport’s isolation room, the five women recount horrifying experiences of sexual harassment and the forced voyeurism they were subjected to. They then move to discussing class borders, whereby “domestic worker” becomes their class and perceived standard, before fleshing out the various layers of institutionalized racism and the racism within the home of their employers. Distancing themselves from a narrative of victimhood, they enumerate their strategies of resistance and keep going back to their activism. However, what the edited transcript does not fully capture, except perhaps in its closing section, is the power, sisterhood, solidarity, and incredible strength that prevailed in the room.

Next, Y.S.K.Prerana’s Opinion Piece, “The Grand Christmas Dinner: Turkey, Rojava, and a Pint of Feminism,” reflects on the boundaries of patriarchy and national liberation that the Kurdish women army in Rojava negotiate every day as an indivisible part of their struggle. Through newspapers articles, documentaries, and the concept of “Jineology” used by the women revolutionaries themselves, the author challenges militarization in its masculinist dimensions and reads Kurdish women’s struggle against global politics of erasure and colorblindness.

Still in the context of ethnic “minorities” in the Middle East, Chant inaugurates Kohl’s new “Essays” section with “Unlayering the Other: a Queer Armenian Experience.” The essay probes queerness, in its political and sexual sense, against the Armenian notion of *odar*, or foreign, and conveys the sense of foreignness in different, intersecting circles – namely, the Armenian and queer communities. Chant revisits the historicization of shame – *amot* – and memory transmitted through the womb by positioning themselves against the borders of identity.

Tania El Khoury’s essay, “Performing the ‘Arab,’” covers issues of performativity and representation, in the literal and metaphorical sense. Juggling between the various audiences of her performances, she comes to

an understanding of her own positionality, especially after Arab women were victimized and/or romanticized post-2011. Her performance *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* that initially intended to tackle the white male gaze towards “Arab” women uncovered the borders of representation and the homogenization of experiences that she was made to bear as an artist.

The first research article of this issue questions “The Cul-de-Sac of Postcolonial Theory” by exploring the tensions between negation and negotiation. In another criticism of homogenization and borders, Shereen Abuelnaga takes on the example of the UK’s Yarl’s Wood Center. She exposes the limitations of postcolonial theory, particularly its notions of hybridity and the horizon, by reflecting on the treatment of refugees by Western power centers. According to Abuelnaga, the erected borders and their dislocation cancel out polarities as they were defined by postcolonialism, and undermine the theory’s attempt to reconcile between them. Although conflicts are still fought over women’s bodies, the reshuffling of borders and the ways of crossing them call for revisited lines of thought to address current geopolitics.

In “The Many Scenes of Queer Damascus,” Mathew Gagné looks at bodies and borders through their queer subjectivities. Gagné’s *tour de force* is based on an ethnography conducted in Damascus not long before the Syrian war. Weaving together movement, spaces, and queer geographies, the author takes us on a tour of the various cruising spaces of the city, a tale he narrates through the eyes of his friends and acquaintances. Bodies in movement entail the crossing/uncrossing of borders, as well as the discoveries of new geographies with different paradigms of navigation. Ultimately, Gagné’s articles collapses bodies into borders and vice versa, implicitly rendering both notions fluid, ever-shifting landscapes in conversation with one another.

A firsthand account of borders is delivered in “Women Revolt: Between Media Resistance and the Reinforcement of Oppressive Gender Structures,” an article by Shahd Abusalama. Upon attempting to cross Gaza’s Rafah border to study abroad, not only was Abusalama stuck at the border for days, but she was sexually harassed by one of her fellow protestor, and incident that was visually documented. Abusalama’s piece is a powerful reading of the hegemonic centers of power using her body as a woman and Palestinian to fight their own battles. She tackles the various uses of the media, whether to promote hegemonic agendas, or to make narratives of resistance available to the public, sparking new discourses and transgressing borders that are seemingly impassable.

Touching upon mainstream media, Heather Jaber deconstructs the image of people with non-normative sexualities as they are represented in Lebanese *musalsalat*, or TV series. “Crossing the Border: Rethinking Failure and Exile in Lebanese *Musalsalat*” grapples with the strategies of illegibility and darkness, and reads failure as a narrative that challenges dominant discourses and societal norms because of their bearing of queer affects. Jaber’s analysis encompasses the normative borders of the nation as possible sites of internal exile, and challenges the notion of exile to the “West” as falling under the binary of success versus failure.

In line with the politics of representation, Deema Nasser’s “Gendered Voices of Youth and *Tahrir* in Ahdaf Soueif’s *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*” revisits Soueif’s bestselling book on the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Nasser highlights Soueif’s obliteration of voices of dissent, namely the working class and non-secular

feminists. She reads the book as a hybrid autobiography that is centered around Soueif's own positionality rather than on the various women voices and feminist struggles that were pitted against each other in Tahrir Square. In attempt to render the revolution legible to a Western audience, Soueif privileges her own voice at the expense of less appealing narratives and discourses that are very present in today's Egypt.

Still in the context of Egypt, Sara Abed engages with the understudied topic of Egyptian sex workers in "How do Sex Workers Perceive their Working Identity? Case Studies in Egypt." Through a series of interviews, Abed manages to bring forth sex workers' perception of their own occupation. She exposes the socially accepted notion that sex workers' bodies are "unrapeable," and juggles with the desirability of bodies that are deemed illegal or unlawful and burdened with stigma and socio-religious shame, but are still sought after, sometimes by authority figures. Despite the conflicting views of sex workers vis-à-vis their own profession, there is consensus among the study's participants that state discrimination is the main obstacle to the possibility of unionization, fighting for their labour rights, and accessing health services in a non-stigmatizing manner.

The issue closes with Abeera Khan, who reviews Tariq Mehmood's latest novel, *Song of Gulzarina*. Khan's review is a pleasure to read. She discloses her surprise at not encountering yet another post-9/11 tale of radicalization. Mehmood's careful layering and nuancing of his characters bestow upon them a feeling of exasperation at the thought of reenacting the same familiar plot. By being aware of their own tired performance of *abroadi*, the novel's protagonist offers a fresh perspective: Khan reads the outer layer of vengeance as confrontation and coming face to face with hegemonic systems, which would ultimately pave the way for self-redemption.

Working on this issue has been an honor. More importantly, it was a lesson in being aware of positionalities, of the shifting paradigms of privilege, of the deplorability of appropriation. I was humbled by this issue's authors and contributors, who articulated their struggles without being intimidated by any discourse, whether dominant or alternative. Their words and voices crossed the borders of what is more or less political, and they unapologetically spoke of what matters to them. And for the rest of us allies in solidarity with intersecting struggles, we are compelled to take a step back and listen.