CHAPTER 3: When Men Sit Down: Consumption, Commodities and the Dialectics of Presence

*Abbas took me for a drive in the hills north of Amman, around the Christian village of Fuheis. We stopped by a liquor store and bought a few big bottles of Amstel beer. With a knowing smile, the shopkeeper threw in a bottle opener for the ride. We kept the beers squeezed between our thighs between sips, and drove up and down the country roads, letting ourselves get lost beyond the limits of our usual geography. Following the moon hanging hugely in the sky, we turn onto a road lined with what look like empty and abandoned cars. We want to press on, but stop when we see a small kiosk on the side of the road, it’s A-frame roof traced with barbed wire. On the opposite side of the road, we see light coming through the bushy foliage, and hear what might be distant voices. A military site, we surmise, and Abbas high tails it out of there.*

*We drive on, now headed for a* matall*, a scenic outcropping, that Abbas remembers visiting in the past. A parked car gives the location away. Abass smoothly drives the car onto the outcropping and the ground gives off a gravely crunch beneath the wheels. From here, the lantern moon floats over the hills behind us and the luminescent clusters of houses glimmer in the valley below. I look over at the car that’s parked next to ours. At first it looks empty, but then I notice that the front seats have been completely reclined and, through the window, I see two pairs of arms waving languorously aloft. I nudge Abbas, who has been staring out over the valley, and make a joke about our neighbors having had too much to drink. But he only sighs, then speaks. “Jordan is a nice country. Beautiful,” he says, “But it’s not easy. I wish to forget these years in Jordan, when I leave here. These three years, I consider them a waste.” From an instinctual place of American optimism, I respond, “What about the friends you’ve made here?” I ask him. “Are those times a waste?” He tells me, “Most of my friends are gone. Look, for work, I’m not so rich that I can own a factory. It’s hard for a pharmacist. I’m working in the same job and not earning anything toward my future.” I sit in silence with him a while longer, until we finish our beers and chuck the bottles out the window, leaving them amid the broken glass and crushed packs of cigarettes that litter the ground.*

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In the last chapter, I discussed how urban, university-educated Iraqi asylum seekers saw migration as an opportunity to preserve an intergenerational trajectory of development by traveling abroad. To achieve this end required waiting years for titles to mobility in Jordan. And life in Jordan, because it is costly and because it denies most Iraqis opportunities, created a quantitative drain on finances that threatened to become a qualitative degradation of status. Through the cases of three young fathers, I showed how protracted displacement in Jordan mounted towards a kind of “life crisis” in the reproducibility of a national, cosmopolitan form of life. In this chapter, I shift from the time-scale of intergenerational trajectories to the everyday texture of the time and place that imperils them. Discussing the habits of Iraqi cosmopolitanism, my interlocuters cited everyday practices like visits and outings with mixed-sect groups of friends and family as they told the story of a life that had ceased to be possible following the American invasion and the Sectarian Civil War. These stories resonated with me as I passed more time in Jordan and witnessed what seemed to be quite similar social practices. My initial reaction was to interpret this everyday sociality as the survival of an endangered lifestyle. Yet whenever my boundless American optimism emerged in conversation, I was met with assertions to the contrary. In the excerpted notes above, Abbas voiced a desire to forget his time in Jordan that was shared by many other middle-class Iraqi asylees. “Nothing important has happened in the last five years of my life,” said one, taking a beat to look around the table where four other men who accompanied him nearly every day sat, “Though I guess I met these guys here.” People spoke of time both speeding up and emptying out as soon as they arrived in Jordan, and it often seemed as though reflecting on what all this time meant was a novel topic for conversation that only surfaced after it had been brought up by my deliberate ethnographic probing. What, to me, was the obvious fact that all this time together must have added up to something was met with, at best, lukewarm acceptance. How are we to grasp an intimacy grounded in wasted time? What is the relationship between present habits and future goals? And from where does this ethnographer’s impulse to valorize practices of everyday sociality originate, anyway?

The habits of sociality practiced by young men in states of indefinite waiting are a prominent theme in what I have termed the ethnography of global sticking points. And because this literature is often responding to the problem of ruptured or indefinitely suspended trajectories of growth and/or migration, it is important to distinguish my own approach to these questions. When the past can no longer keep its promise with the future, the present’s potential as a field of meaningful action appears evacuated. In the face of such pessimism, the ethnography of waiting promises a hopeful alterative, subsuming the negation of growth, movement or development into the positive production of meaning. Wasted time is redeemed in the form of a “politics of waiting” (Jeffrey, 2010), an “elaborate economy of leisure” (Masquelier, 2013), or a “spatial strategy that allowed one to become modern.” (Main, 20017: 668) The ethnography of waiting suggests new possibilities for imagining political and social life at sticking points by “integrating…new fluid identities and forms of individualization with an appreciation of the durable social inequalities and formal political opportunities and structures that mark the lives of present-day youth.” (Jeffrey, 2008: 753) In this paradigm, the individual is the center of transformational agency, and “fluid”, while the field in which he operates is fixed, and “durable.” And although the literature claims that this fixed field is different than it was in past generations, it is so only because we have already located it within a post-colonial, neoliberal, or otherwise “present-day” epoch the characteristics of which, we can assume, are well established in both scholarship and reality. In this way, the dominant paradigm to studying the sociality of young men in waiting reduces history to structure and while centering agency as the fountainhead of innovation and change

It is in this sense that the ethnography of leisure consumption among young men in the Global South comes to resemble those studies of “multiple modernities” which, while offering an “attractive argument” that allows us to elevate “subaltern agency”, do not necessarily illuminate “the transformed terrain on which these creative responses are being enacted.” (Scott, 2004: 114) Part of the point of the previous chapter was to depict a status group that is reckoning with the painful fact that the material grounds on which it enacted its own social reproduction have been eliminated through American intervention. The particular habits that characterized this collective form of life, embedded as they were within an urban terrain of mixed-sect sociality, have no conceivable future in Iraq, where that terrain has been, through a deliberate program of annihilation, entirely transformed. On what terrain might these habits be revived? Were this simply a matter of producing agency out of a local economy, a program of politics or a strategy of representation, there would be no obstacle to achieving it in Amman. As one informant put it, Amman is a “golden cage.” Every form of luxury and leisure is available, every practice of consumption can be conceivably pursued. There are, moreover, numerous Iraqi restaurants and cafes where the migrant can eat the same dishes, drink the same drinks and, indeed, see many of the same people that he encountered back home. Memory, as the scholars of diaspora understand the term, is in abundance. Yet this is a time and place that migrants want to forget. “There is no future in Jordan”, and getting elsewhere is essential to achieving intergenerational reproduction of status, of agency and of fully social manhood. But, surely, life goes on in the meantime. Again, the question: How, then, are we to grasp a sociality that is grounded in wasted time?

This move to valorize the everyday practice of young men with too much time on their hands as an agentive overcoming of staid structures strikes me as strange because it is so contrary to the way that leisure, boredom and everyday sociality were problematized in the past. In older accounts, everyday sociality was not celebrated as a generative site of innovation, but as an expression, or even a symptom, of forces that were rapidly transforming society. The everyday habits of metropolitan figures of leisure were problematized in relation to general theories of class (Veblen, 2017[1956], alienation (Marcuse, 2013 [1964]), or through microanalysis of specific practices characteristic of this emergent form of life. (Benjamin, 2003). This was true not only in the metropolitan West, but in Baghdad as well, where both celebrants and critics of modern male leisure centered such practices in larger concerns of urbanization, modernity and social transformation. (Olsen, 2018) The thrust of inquiry is not toward new forms of agency, but a new kind of society, conceived not through the foregone conclusion of epoch, but as a still-unfolding dynamic in need of both data and interpretation. Of course, critical inquiry can always slide into moralizing pedantry, and if the present-day approach to everyday sociality deceives itself by celebrating agency as overcoming, the more classic regard for leisure can, at worst, become a stodgy rejection of the new. But in my own case, it is the interlocuters spending time on these practices who regard them as mere “waste.” Making this connection does not mean circumventing the geographic, historical, cultural and other specificities that make leisure in contemporary Amman quite different from life in turn-of-the-century Paris, New York or Baghdad. For the perspective of migrants who both experience and imagine different relationships to time, sociality and activity across borders can, moreover, help us that such states of change are not everywhere equally felt. And the specific case of Iraqi migrants reminds us that such changes do not merely happen on their own, but are the outcome of political and military interventions directed towards the preservation of a present-day global configuration that is neither permanent nor complete.

An ethnography of leisure might prove to be one of those “strategic points of entry” (Trouillot, 2003) into our “fragmented globality” (Trouillot, 2001), wherein lives in different places and times are unequally recruited to the reproduction of capital in its changing historical compositions. This comparative project cannot occur so long as, no matter where and when we find them, we are told that young men in waiting are 1) all engaged in the production of their own politics, strategies, rituals, ultimately, agency and 2) that they are successfully reproducing this agency *in spite of* the radically different circumstances that undermine it. This chapter proposes an alternative approach to leisure, waiting and boredom in the Global South by reuniting the production of an intersubjective lifeworld with the consumption of commodities that accompanies these acts. Liquor and cigarettes, meat and coffee, sweets and cellphones: these were some of the possible accompaniments to sociality without which “hanging out” could not be said to have occurred. And if my interlocuters’ words averred the significance of these practices; their actions revealed the significant cost of maintaining them. The cost of everyday sociality is simultaneously financial and moral. Every dinar spent in Jordan reduces the amount of time one can spend in waiting, and thereby narrows the window of opportunity for resettlement abroad. And every dinar earned requires entering an unequal workplace where one is pushed into proximity with other kinds of people who might, by association, become a threat to status. Recognizing the fraught costs of achieving the everyday, I both acknowledge my interlocuters ambivalent attitudes toward sociality, and as how these practices might say something about the society in which they live. To do so, I take inspiration from another sub-genre that, unsurprisingly, inverts the approach taken in studies of male leisure: the ethnography of women’s consumption. Young women in rural Greece, for example, have carefully considered the financial and moral cost of entering cafes where they might acquire the cup of coffee that occasions meetings with friends (Cowen, 1991), while wives in an Omani village are absorbed in the quotidian tasks of purchasing, grinding, and preparing coffee for use during visits to their homes (Limber, 2010:61-68). In South Beirut, some observant Shi’a women disdain to enter establishments where alcohol is served and where pious men might simply refrain from drinking, for they are well aware that the very presence of alcohol creates an environment of licentiousness in which they would not wish to be seen. (Deeb & Harb, 2013: 158-160) It has not escaped notice that women’s activities of consumption are also sites of production, and ethnographic study of such intimate gatherings reveals them to be grounds for economic and political agency. (Menely, 1996; Joseph, 2000) But, conversely, men’s politics, strategies, and rituals likewise involve risky and consequential decisions about what is at stake in acquiring and making use of the stuff of sociality - the material comestibles around which cohere spaces and times of leisure and without which such social activity cannot meaningfully take place. And, because these comestibles are always made in and gotten from somewhere else, they become an inflection point between the generative spacetimes of leisure and the wider forces in which practices are embedded.

**The Labor of Presence**

If my companions dismissed sociality as a waste of time, they nevertheless insisted upon it as a necessary component of friendship. On many nights I’d taken to relax at home by myself, a phone call would come asking me to join an outing. If I demurred, I would be interrogated: “What [else] are you doing right now?” Taking the night off was never taken as a legitimate excuse, so I would force myself off the couch and into another living room, empty lot or a smoky café, to sit around with others rather than sit around alone. There was always the possibility that a group of companions would contact me while I was already out with another group. Saying “no” was painful, and while ethnography can certainly resemble hanging-out, telling someone I was “busy working” while smoking hookah and playing dominoes never felt right. Speaking about this difficulty with close friends, I was advised not to tell the truth. But as my circle of contacts grew to include more interlocuters, each with their own group of four or five regular pals, avoidance became impossible. There are a handful of cafes in Amman where Iraqi men gathered to play cards, drink tea, smoke *nargeeleh* and eat kebab, and part of the appeal of these sites is that you might run into anyone, from old classmates to washed-up T.V. stars to the American anthropologist whose been hanging around asking questions. These awkward encounters lead me to settle in with a regular group of guys. But each week was still a balancing act, since I still had to pay visits to other circles at other sites, while also keeping up interviews, workplace visits, and writing fieldnotes. And this keeping-up of contacts became, in itself, an ever-greater focus of my ethnographic attentions.

 Ethnographers have noted how such relational demands of continual presence form the bedrock of sociality in other Arab communities, though they rarely do so with reference to male friendships. For example, Suad Joseph, drawing from data on brother-sister relationships in Lebanon, describes a state of “constant connectivity… characterizing the social production of relational selves with diffuse boundaries who require continuous interaction with significant others for a sense of completion.” (55: 1994) Joseph proposes that the different relationships in peoples’ lives are distinguishable by the frequency and intensity of such intimacies, and offers one empirical contrast between the connectivity that exists between brother and sister and that which connects husband to wife. If kinship is a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2013), this mutuality is not equally distributed among kin, and there is such a thing as too much contact with the wrong relation. (Borneman, 2007) In the realm of male friendships, my Iraqi companions extended this distinction of degrees of presence to encompass both friends and kin. This became clearest when I would hang out with married men, who reflected on the pain of not being able to see their friends as constantly as they used to. Conversely, and not unlike in Joseph’s case, too much contact with the wrong relation warps the character of the relationship. “Your wife stops being a woman and becomes your best friend”, one man who had been married for about 8 months and was stuck at home, unemployed, explained to me, “because you see her every day and do everything with her.” Whether for brothers and sisters, as Joseph describes, or for new husbands, their wives, and friends, presence varies in frequency and intensity, and the appropriateness of presence to a particular relationship is determined by norms of intimacy governing it.

 Even among friends, my own disordered intimacies opened me to accusations of impropriety. My companions had few illusions about my purposes in Jordan. If anything, some of them confessed to hoping that my status as a student was a cover identity for some kind of spy or official – the better to intervene on their behalf in their migration case. But my habit of excusing myself in the name of “work”, as well as my tendency to commit to much of my time to too many different groups, lead to the suggestion that I was either a *maslahchii* (“an opportunist”) or an *imLuTLut* (“a hanger-on”). Other terms through which I learned from my companions to diagnose the improper connectivity of others included being a *lizget* (a “sticky” person who you can’t get rid of), a *looggii* (who sucks up to his superiors) or *faahii* (“bland”, of both food and people who do not contribute to the conversation). This rich vocabulary pointed to the many forms that false friendship could take, while the frequency with which they were flung across the café table assured me that perfect friendship is a matter of constant adjustment, and that good friends will remind you when you come up short.

To master the vicissitudes of constant connectivity, I turned to a man whom I will here refer to as Ayoub. When I arrived in Amman, Ayoub was waiting outside my building to give me the keys. When I wanted to meet some Iraqis my age, he invited me into his regular gaming circle. If you wanted to pay a bill without having to wait in line at the municipal office (for Jordan has no working postal system) Ayoub take care of it on credit. It was not just that Ayoub seemed to know everyone from shop-owners to cousins to minor celebrities, but that he kept up with all these circles constantly by doing them little favors. Speaking the local dialect from a young age, he has created a “Jordanian” alter-ego, which he employed when delivering the tax receipts of Iraqi-owned businesses to the local police station. He even helped me get a job as a dishwasher at an Iraqi restaurant, which is a story for the next chapter. Among our group, he was called just about every name for a bad friend I’d catalogued above, plus plenty more, but he always responded with a smile that spread right into place between the well-worn creases of his mouth, and everyone loved him all the more for that. And Ayoub was the only person who ever tried to offer a positive definition of friendship for me.

While he was doing me the favor of driving me well out of his way, we got to talking about his plans for the future. Ayoub is an accountant by training, but, like all but the wealthiest Iraqis, he is not permitted to work in Jordan. He had been working, all the same, for a rich cousin in an Iraqi-owned real estate investment operation. But one day, inspectors from the Jordanian Ministry of Labor dropped by the office. He managed to escape out the back, but he decided it would be too risky to keep working in there. His wide net of contacts and companions allowed him to quickly find two new part-time office jobs. But one of those gigs fell through when he was coming back from lunch and made some plainclothes Ministry inspectors hanging around the building lobby. His latest play was arranging for an Emirati Instagram influencer who was visiting Amman to make and share posts from different Iraqi establishments. When I asked Ayoub if he did all these favors for people because he thought they would help him later on, he responded not so much through denial, then by reframing the temporal orientation away from that of instrumental cause and effect: “God only knows [the future] (*allah ya’alam*). It’s natural, it’s humane, if you see someone thirsty in the desert, you will give him water. If I help you, it’s because we’re friends (*asdiqaa’*). And if you see me in need, you will help me. It’s not a matter of personal interest (*maslaha*).” In other words, the constancy of presence is present tensed. An honest person (*saadiq*) thinks not to convert today’s relationships into tomorrow’s gain, as the opportunist (*maslahchii*) might through a strategy or transaction. Rather, the true friend (*sadiiq*) maintains a rapport that can, whenever the future arrives to overturn it, become a space through which to maneuver toward the next move.

In Ayoub’s case, keeping up connectivity among friends might always realize a potential for economic value, yet this kind of friendship is neither directly converted into material gain nor is it morally opposed to it. Julia Elyachar (2010) has theorized an analogous form of activity as “phatic labor” through her ethnography with women in Cairo, and her notion elucidates some features of my own case. First, this activity is “phatic” because it is directed towards “the cultivation of channels of communication through which resources could potentially flow.” (460) Second, this activity is “labor” because, although it is not immediately directed towards production, it generates a social “infrastructure” that is indispensable to getting by as a working-class Cairene. (455) Third, “phatic labor” is, in Elyachar’s case, a true commodity form that has been valorized through the intervention of “empowerment finance”, a term Elyachar uses to encompass a variety of NGO interventions that valorize women’s (cultural) practices for their own sake, without ever really assisting women in attaining the (economic) ends to which these practices are normally directed. (460) By acknowledging the maintenance work that goes into sustaining connectivity as the potential realization of value (in her terms, an “infrastructure”), Elyachar offers a theory of sociality that is not opposed to economic interest, and instead allows us to see how sociality is grounded within the encompassing concerns of making-do and getting-by. And by tracking the interventions through which this general feature of social life comes to be identified with, and ultimately embodied in, specifically gendered practices, she recognizes that what has elsewhere been valorized as “care work” is not only essential to the reproduction of contemporary configurations of capital, but is itself a product of these very capitalist histories.[[1]](#footnote-1) And so, unlike those approaches to sociality that, in the act of writing, valorize practice as the overcoming of struture, Elyachar offers a paradigm that recognizes the valorization of practice as itself an outcome of the interpenetration of the everyday with productive relations.

But if Elyachar’s coinage of “phatic labor” points my own inquiry in the right direction, there are significant differences that must be addressed in this case. Although Elyachar mentions that the doing of phatic labor is in some sense trying and tiring, she does not explicitly work through the cost of maintaining these ties in terms of either time or money. Even as we are told that these activities are centered around the purchasing and consuming of commodities in coffeehouses, (545) the consumption-for-production of maintenance work does not in itself emerge as an object of concern for her or her informants. I suspect this is because both Elyachar and her interlocuters were already operating from within the NGO-verse, with its project of social intervention to commodify and valorize such “women’s work” for its own sake. The encompassment of fieldwork within the NGO-verse leads Elyachar to comes close to negating her own insight that the gendered division of labor it itself a product of capitalist histories when she treats women’s production-for-(men’s)consumption as somehow already and always a feature of Egyptian life, rather than the subsumption of family relations under the demands of capital for free, autonomous laborers.[[2]](#footnote-2) (456) But for men who must likewise perform maintenance work as a matter of making-do, and who have been spatially and socially distanced from the communities who sustain them, this kind of valorization is not widely available. In Ayoub’s case, both time and money had to be accounted for. First, there were many occasions on which our little group called on Ayoub to come hang out, but he was too busy working two or three different jobs, keeping up his bill-paying scheme, and other pursuits. However so instrumental sociality was to his job prospects, time spent earning a wage through these channels was not time spent doing the work to maintain them. This contradiction of two circuits was usually resolved at the expense of Ayoub’s sleep schedule, a prolongation of his “working day” (Marx, 2015[1887]: 370-371) which could be read at a glance through the dark circles under his eyes that grew deeper and deeper in the time after he lost his job at the construction company. But the contradiction worked in the opposite direction as well, for the wages gotten in work had to be put back into the café. While Ayoub did not accept the suggestion that he socialized in order to find work, he did recognize that he worked in order to socialize. “Half of my monthly income goes towards going out with friends”, he explained, “I keep working because if you don't have some money, and the guys call you, you have to say, ‘Sorry I'm sitting at home tonight.’” In Elyachar’s “infrastructural” metaphor, women’s sociality acts as a given input on the men’s capacity to realize the value of their labor on the market. In Ayoub’s case, a man must perform his own maintenance work.

The contradictory accounting of time and money is mediated through a particular social practice: the purchase and consumption of material commodities alongside one’s fellows in a café setting. But to grasp this dynamic and tie it to the larger forces in which it is embedded, we need to address the ways in which the notion of “phatic labor” is both empirically and theoretically incomplete. Elyachar’s concept marks an attempt to analogize between semiotic processes and material structures, and her argument is advanced by drawing on the genealogy of the “phatic” concept from Malinowski’s studies of communication, to Jacobson’s enumeration of linguistic functions, to her own dialogue with Kockelman. (461) The idea of a purely symbolic production can always be imagined as analogous to a just as imaginary pure material one. But it is the determined nature of signs, being social, to possess a worldly, material existence. (Volosinov, 1973: 13) And this is true for all societies, not only capitalist ones. As Elyachar explains, Bronislaw Malinowski coined the concept of “phatic communication” by drawing on his canonical studies of the inter-island *kula* trade in Melanesia. The concept denotes a particular style of interaction “such as gossiping or chatting” that is “a means of establishing ties for their own sake”. (453) But the problem with adopting Malinowski’s framing of coordinated activity directed towards the maintenance of social connectivity is that, even in Melanesia, so-called “phatic” activities involve material forms of mediation generated through activities intended towards the total reproduction of a society and its values. As Nancy Munn describes in *The Fame of Gawa*, (1992) kula partnership is not achieved in words alone. Rather, small gifts of food (*skwayobwa*) undergird the exchange of prestigious shells (55) by sustaining memories, obligations and ties between partners in the trade. (61) The *skwayobwa*, moreover, must be grown through the labor of women who remain on the island, along with the magical stones that bring good harvests and that, in turn must be protected from the witchcraft that arises from political resentments. Thus, the “phatic communication” of kula partners is merely the form of appearance in a single interactional moment of a unity of “value transformation” whereby a given society participates in the reproduction of its given form of life. Going further than Malinowski could or did, Munn’s data reveals that the channels through which values flow, along with labor that reproduces them, cannot be understood purely by analogy to semiosis, but are instead shaped by their own logics of activity, value and material form.

In the rest of this paper, I will expand on this point, building from the actual conduct of men in cafes, to the commodities that mediate these activities, to the circuits of value in which these commodities are embedded. To do so, I follow Munn in another important sense. It is telling that where Elyachar ultimately grounds “phatic communication” in Max Weber’s notion of “social action” (461), Munn explicitly developed her approach in an effort to improve on the Weberian paradigm. To do so, she aligned her work with a tradition of phenomenological, existentialist and materialist thought that offered new concepts with which to grasp the material grounds of social action, as well as the potential-for-sociality inhering in both human and non-human matter.[[3]](#footnote-3) Recent efforts to incorporate Munn’s theory into the anthropology of capitalist society explicitly disavows this phenomenological inheritance. (Bear, 2014; Graeber, 2001: 267) This strikes me as a mistake, given that many of these same approaches have proved so productive for historians of capitalist society interested in the changing texture of the urban “everyday” – a conversation to which Munn’s own contributions should not be discounted. (2003, 2013) A materialist-phenomenological approach is useful because it recaptures the link between action, experience and matter, providing a bridge between peoples’ evaluation of their own changing circumstances and the broader forces that are shaping their world. Rather than describing one-sided acts of social creation through which “new worlds” of meaning are called into existence (cf. Graeber, 2001), it attends to practices that demonstrate a deep, perhaps even unspoken, knowledge of the world as it is and a practiced appreciation for what is given in the situation. Ethnographic attunement to these practices is edifying in two ways. On the one hand, we can identify the distinct styles of action and their material forms of mediation through which a given community constitutes spaces and times of “intersubjective” experience. (Munn, 14) On the other, we can uncover how, in a capitalist society, what appear to be the material mediations of sociality are themselves social products, with their values determined by a historical configuration of productive relations. After all, the world of Iraqi asylees in Jordan is far more open than the one depicted by Munn’s and Malinowski’s ethnographies. Larger forces operate beyond the phenomenological “spacetime” of interaction, yet always threaten to rupture it. It is this tension that feeds into the ambiguity around acts of situated social creativity for participants who explicitly deem those acts to be a waste of time.

**When Men Sit Down:**

One difficulty of adapting Munn’s materialist phenomenology is that these concepts appear extremely abstract in her introduction, and must be elucidated in the ethnography. Treating her terms as purely abstract concepts not only makes them hard to gloss, but in fact obscures the very thing they try to elucidate: the worldly embodiment of culture-in-practice. Thus, Munn uses the term “intersubjectivity” (14) to characterize the way that shared practices “*construct* different formations of [mutually experienced] *spacetime*” as forms of action that “constitute (create) the *spacetime* … in which they ‘go on.’” (10-11) What does this mean? To answer that question, I will start by posing another, easier question: what does the sociality to which I am referring actually consist of? Picture a brightly lit café on a damp, chilly winter’s night. The café is “suffocating” (*hayngah*) with smoke, noise, and people. Each group surrounds a small table crowded with game boards and finger foods, most are holding cigarettes or the mouthpieces of water pipes. The games themselves are noisy with the sound of clicking dice and dominoes and cards slammed on the table with a certain flair. These victorious flourishes are met with moans of agony and cries of rage. Somewhere in the thick of all of this, I am trying to decide my next move. “Play, play, play!” yell my two opponents, seated on either side of me. My partner can only stare pleadingly from across the table. Another two men wait to take on the winner of this round. One stares at his phone; another tries to get the attention of the waiter distributing coals for the water pipes. It will not do to think through every move, and so I make my play. Some cursing erupts from my opponents, and I respond in kind. My partner giggles, he is now in position to “eat” two marbles from the other side. As the turn passes in a circle to the right, I pile on the trash talking between pulls on a cigarette and sips of tea. An observer has become interested. “See guys? When he started speaking Iraqi he sounded Japanese,” he says, “And now he’s sounding Kurdish.” But even near-fluency is exhausting. By themselves, both the game and the language can be managed. Together, they demand too much. When it is my turn again, I am so buoyed with feeling that I play right away. The marble clicks into its new place, and groans erupt from around the table. My partner feigns at weeping on an opponent’s shoulder, and the players in waiting start to eye the endgame like wounded prey. The turn passes to my right.

In the ordinary language of my interlocuters, this dense layering of sensation and activity can be represented through a single word: “sitting” (*al-ga’ida*). For example, you might call someone on the phone and ask, “What are you doing?” (*izhdatsawii*?) If that person replied, “Sitting with the guys” (*gaa’id wiyya ash-shabaab*), you would picture your pals assembled in a café, probably playing cards and smoking water pipes. Likewise, if you wanted to express your satisfaction with a particularly pleasant outing, you might declare that it was “an excellent sitting” (*chaanat kulish khosh ga’ida).* And, if you wanted to discourage your group from spending their time at a particular spot, you might warn them that “the sitting there is lame.” (*al-ga’ida t’abana*) In this usage, “sitting” operates as a metonymy: a linguistic trope that uses a characteristic part of the whole to communicate the whole as a concept. Of course, people are never just “sitting”, they eat, drink, play games, talk, and many other things. But all of these activities are going on within a time and place (a spacetime) given over to the unity conveyed in the posture of “sitting.” In this sense, the ordinary term “sitting” grasps the abstract notion of “intersubjective activity” through a specific, culturally-recognized formation of a space and time that is constituted through the activities that go on within it.

And yet “sitting” is not an abstract concept like “formation of spacetime.” And to reduce “sitting” to a particular illustration of a general concept would obscure the fact that, in their embodiment, concepts possess a material existence alongside other such embodiments of meaning. Stepping back to evaluate the activity in its unity, “sitting” appears alongside other activity-tropes that each unify their own given set of actors, actions and relationships. Thus, to use the term “sitting” to describe male sociality is to invite contrast with other embodied postures that carry their own associations. The most obvious set of contrasts is between “standing in place” (*waqaf*) and “standing up” (*gowm*). In her ethnography of gender dynamics in Cairo, Farah Ghannam theorizes a category of manly action through the emic concept of *mawaaqif* (“stands”), to refer to “the stance one takes in a specific situation [in which] a man becomes noticeable and recognized by others as such.” (2013: 83) The use of this derivative of *waqaf* to express the notion of action as “taking a stand” also found use among my interlocuters, for whom it had the additional connotation of resolve in a situation of conflict or disagreement – “taking a side” in a dispute or begrudging a point in an argument (*awaaqif b’il-amr*). If “standing in place” denotes consistency and loyalty, “standing up” (*gowm*) carries connotations of asserting one’s place with a similarly masculine resolve. *Gowm* is used to connote the embodied act of moving from sitting to standing, but it is also the term from which the concept of “a folk” or “a people” is derived (*al-qowm*), as well as the notion of “residency”, as used for Jordanian residency cards. (*al-iqama*) The concept of *qawmiyya*, while usually translated into English as “Arab nationalism”, carries both the sense of “a folk” *and* this sense of a physical assertion of place through decisive action against external intervention: to speak of Iraqi *qawmiyya* is to speak quite specifically of organized violent resistance to foreign occupation, not to the full historical and ideological sense of “nationalism” as the term is used in English. There is also an element of relativity to postural tropes: one “awakens” by “sitting from sleep” (*ga’ida min an-nown*), for to be “sleeping” (*na’im*) in demotic Iraqi connotes a supine posture, and so “sitting” relates to “sleeping” as “standing up” relates to “sitting”. It is the nature of semantic fields to go on forever, so let us confine ourselves to a discrete point: When the formations of spacetime are conveyed in terms of concrete, embodied postures, these styles of actions become politized, gendered, and otherwise groupable in terms of other categories of difference and opposition. The concept has not been brought back into the realm of experience. It never once left.

There is, moreover, another usage of the “sitting”/ “standing” contrast that conveys the sense of multiple concrete modalities of human action even more clearly. Classical Arabic does not distinguish between a simple and present continuous verb tense, although the active participial noun form of a verb can be used to connote continuous or habitual action over time (*al-ism al-faa’il*). The demotic form of Arabic spoken by my interlocuters, however, has several ways of modifying present tense verbs to denote continuous action, including appending the active participle of “sitting” (*gaa’id*) as an auxiliary to the normally conjugated simple present verb. To clarify through example:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **English** | **Arabic-to-English** | **Arabic**  |
| “I walk” | “I walk” | *imshii* |
| “I am walking” | “I am a sitter I walk” | *aanii gaa’id imshii* |

It should be noted here that there are other ways to create this continuous present tense, both in other Iraqi dialects and even in the same variety of Baghdadi demotic (appending the participle *da* before the normally conjugated present tense verb.) This exercise is not meant to demonstrate how other people *really* think about time differently as evidence in the modes of their verbs (Worf, 2012[1936]) but rather uses ordinary language as a starting point for an investigation into the recognized categories or styles of human action. (Austin, 2007[1961]) Keeping this in mind, let us now fill out this postural grammar by contrasting “sitting” with “standing up.” (*gawm*) Where “sitting” is used to connote continuous action over time, “standing up” is conjugated in the past tense and then added as an auxiliary to a second verb to connote the initiation of action in the past, similar the classical Arabic particle *qad*.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **English** | **Arabic-to-English** | **Arabic** |
| I’m reading a book | I am a sitter I read a book | *aanii gaa’id aqraa’ kitaab* |
| I (had) started reading a book | I stood up I read a book | *gimit aqraa’ kitab* |

This contrast between “standing up” and “sitting” suggests not only two different grammatical modes, but two different styles of activity: that which is continuous, ongoing and passive and that which is initiated with decisive intent, frequently in opposition forces beyond oneself. This fact may not have been going on inside Ayoub’s head when he stated that a true friend acts in relation to the present, rather than attempting to calculate the future. But it does offer a language through which to connect how he was speaking with what he was doing.

It is significant that the activity of masculine sociality referred to as *al-ga’ida* in fact alternates between both such styles of action, which together construct the phenomenological skein in which they occur. For example, when a newcomer arrives at the gaming table, everyone is obliged to pause their activity and physically stand up out of their seats to great him, then integrate him into the scene by all sitting down together at the same time. The scene plays out through the many different little activities taking place in a continuous tense: eating, chatting, checking the phone, all generating a kind of background or static of activity. Then, suddenly, the skein is broken: there is an argument with a waiter, an outrageous claim is challenged, a breaking news story shows up on someone’s social mediate timeline and must be discussed. Attention is demanded, decisions must be made, sides must be taken. This alternation between continuous and decisive activity is the games that form the centerpiece of café “sitting”. Learning to play these games involves not only mastering the rules, but internalizing those rules to the point that one can maintain a certain quality or flow of action in the passing of turns. Failure to maintain this sense of action flowing in time by taking too long to act invites harsh abuse from companions. But the effect of being lulled by quick repetition into a continuous, encompassing present only serves to heighten the drama of a sudden, decisive maneuver. Knowing how to slam a backgammon piece, card, or domino onto the table so loudly that it smashes through the constant murmur of clicking dice and wagging tongues is a further element of gaming practice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Decisive action interrupts the focused, continual flow, inviting reaction in the form of curses and high fives, punches and pinches, rage and laughter. And then the steady undercurrent of continual activity begins again, submerging the decisive act into memory until the next moment in the series of alternations. Not only do actions qualitatively differ according to their loudness, speed, intentionality, and material media, but these two distinct styles of action form a pair, one as a continual ground of mutual presence, the other as a decisive interruption that is past as soon as it occurs.

Even as the practice of sitting generates a densely intersubjective co-presence, the embodied trope of sitting is inherently unstable. In this account, what appears to be a single practice (“sitting”) can be dissolved into a multiplicity of distinct activities. At the same time, the unity of the practice is achieved by bringing this multiplicity under the sign of a single characteristic element. This element takes the form of an embodied metonymy of practice that, when viewed from a distance, occupies a meaningful position within a set of postural contrasts of other such activity-sets or styles. But there is a contradiction between these two. At one level, “sitting” unifies a practice under the sign of its characteristic element, thereby connoting a great variety of activities without having to mention them individually. At another level, “sitting” distinguishes this unity of practice from other such unities, creating a series of contrasts that are each endowed with their own proper meaning. And yet, precisely because the unity, and therefore the contrast as well, are achieved by the foregrounding of a particular element from among others, those subsumed elements that are shared between multiple different practices stand to unmake the distinction between different sorts of practices.

This tension plays out through the gendering of particular forms of activity. There is no possibility for taking stands, making points, realizing strategies, and enacting politics without the phenomenological skein of “sitting” that must be resewn throughout the process of the practice. To the careful observer, this activity shares a lot in common with the sort of maintenance work, or “phatic labor”, that has often been imagined to be the exclusive property of women. And yet, in the kinds of cafés in which I made these observations, women are nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the men involved would agree that whatever they are doing, it is not women’s work. “I used to hang with a different group at this café,” said one companion, “but they were always sharing secrets about people and talking badly about them. ‘This is women’s talk (*Hechii niswaan*)!’ I told them.” Men contrasted the pleasure of “sitting” on a night out with friends with the averred prospect of “sitting at home”, introducing distance between what they know they are doing and what they might otherwise seem to be up to. My companions were too polite to remind me that the home was no fit place for me to do my “sitting”, but young fathers who left the gaming table early in the night were open to the accusation that their wives had tamed them. It is not that the café is a pure space of masculinity that must be policed at its boundaries. Rather, styles of action that are otherwise feminized are in fact indispensable to the practice of café “sitting”, and therefore must be actively averred. When Paul Willis revisited his influential writing on the “cultural production” of working-class masculinity, he noted that he had observed sensibilities and practices that did not fit with the image of the working-class man being invoked by his subjects, but that these aspects of life were subject to a selective “destressing”, as if they had to be made not to matter in order to render a consistent model of masculinity. (1982: 132) The male figure of labor who consumes-to-produce is, of course, produced with the inputs of female figures who produce-to-consume. But insofar as each moment of the unity of production and consumption itself contains both male and female-coded elements, the gendered division of labor must involve a selective “destressing”: an active unnoticing of those elements of the practice-set that happen to be shared between men’s and women’s activities.

“Sitting” is vulnerable to disruption from without as well as within, because it is not achieved autonomously. The act of “destressing” extends to two other sustaining yet underappreciated elements that make the café into a kind of home-away-from home. The first element consists of the commodities consumed concurrently with the activity of sitting, such as fatty meat, nicotine, caffeine and, sometimes, alcohol. The second element is the working people who prepare and serve these comestible commodities. Matter that, amid a solipsistic intensity of focus, appears “ready to hand” is only so because it is worked over elsewhere and by someone else. And when that matter arrives too slowly, or doesn’t taste right, or isn’t what was ordered, no one at the table had any trouble remembering who is responsible. Both the labor and the commodities in which that labor is embodied are consumed quite unthinkingly over the course a session of “sitting.” And yet, without the presence of these commodities, “sitting” could not occur.

**Substances of Value: *dism*, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine**

All sessions of sitting involve consumption, but the particular commodities consumed in a session give it a distinct color. This special color reflects what has been called the “visceral meaning” of the commodity: the way it can “overwhelm” by simultaneously pressing upon our senses, memories, affects, and “the blood in our biological life-streams.” (Taussig, 1987:13) Far from a private affair, these visceral qualities affirm the intersubjective dimension of commensality through the objects’ “capacity to regularly demonstrate such subjective outcomes.” (Munn, 61) In the case of Munn’s study, not only food but stones, wood, gardens, body paint and a number of other material necessities of Gawan existence possess such capacities which, in their being manifested in relation to a practice, she terms “qualities.”[[5]](#footnote-5) These various qualities settle into a collection of “polarized elements” (17) – light or heavy, bright or dark, fast or slow, and so on – to create the dimensions of contrasts that Munn terms “values.” Much as the characteristic elements of embodied practice come to stand for the practice as a whole in the discussion of “sitting”, the embodiment of value in objects is expressed via metonymy drawn from the body being evaluated. For Munn, these values are either “positive” or “negative” depending upon whether or not they cause the intersubjective skein that overcomes momentary absence by linking people in memory. (61) Through the movement from subjective experience to objective qualities to intersubjective connectivity, commensality can be shown to encompass what only appears to be a contradiction between the solitary biological activity of eating and the relational practice of taking a meal with others. (Simmel, 1995[1910]) What emerges from the discussion below, however, is less a single dimension of contrast between “positive” and “negative” value, but different configurations of the values embodied in the commodity. These varying configurations produce concretely different modes of intersubjectivity or, put differently, color the practice of “sitting” in distinct ways and for different people.

## Alcohol

Drinking with a companion was the rarest and often the most intimate mode of sociality. Alcohol is subject to a very high “vice tax” in Jordan, which makes even buying a few beers to drink in your car a small luxury. If one wanted to go out with a larger group, alcohol can only be gotten at specifically licensed “tourist restaurants” that tack on an addition 18% “service charge” for food and drink in addition to the 12% Value Added Tax. In my experience, going out for drinks was reserved for special occasions, such as the return visit of an old friend who had resettled outside of Jordan. It also tended to happen among men who were better off and usually married, but who also had older parents in the home who would not have welcomed hosting a drinking party. Within the broader category of drinking, there are finer distinctions to be made based upon the intensity of alcohol content. Drinking beer was usually conducive to laid-back conversation, while hard liquor could lead to intense bouts of dancing, public cuddling, extremely dangerous driving, and, eventually, carrying your blacked-out friend as quietly as possible back into his bed. The consumption of *arak* (anise liquor), always accompanied by Lebanese *mezze* (small plates), lent an air of ritualized sophistication to the gathering. The tempo of drinking *arak* is fixed by the waiter who wields his small set of metal tongs like a conductor’s wand as he moves cubes of ice one at a time into fresh glasses. Into these, he pours the dilution of *arak* and water from a shared pitcher that, along with all the other instruments of preparation and the *arak* bottle itself, is kept on a separated wheeled table draped in a white table cloth, from which the freshly chilled glasses are launched to circulate among the drinkers. In spite of these variations, getting drunk (*yiskir*) was the aim of alcohol consumption, not the enjoyment of alcohol’s taste. Expensive scotch whiskey was not appreciated for the complexity of its flavor, but for the particular way in which it “sets your mood right” (*yadhbut almezaaj*) unlike cheaper forms of alcohol.

Drinking alcohol was normatively directed toward the intensification of sociability. There was disparaging talk of men who drink alone, or men who showed up to social events already drunk, because they so badly need a respite from the stresses and problems of life. Drinking at home occurred only among young men were living without their families or when the oldest male in the household chose to indulge, in effect modeling for his children and guests an ostentations secularism of the kind I describe in the previous chapter. Yet for even the most stridently secular Iraqis, alcohol consumption is “pricey” in a moral sense. “Don’t tell him about the time we went out drinking,” Abbas told me when we met up with mutual friends after the outing I describe at the beginning of this chapter. There are friends you drink with and friends you don’t talk about drinking with, and learning how to distinguish between the two was one of my first practical introductions to the way that shared or unshared knowledge mediates social relationships.

## Fat (dism)

Iraqis point to consumption of large quantities of meat as something that set them apart from other nationalities living in Amman. “We are addicts of meat”, one Iraqi woman explained as she served me a glistening mass of *dolma*, “we must have it every day.” *Dolma* is consumed throughout the ex-Ottoman world, and simply means “stuffed” in Turkish. But Iraqi dolma is a unique experience, distinguished by the fact that the stuffed cabbage leaves and onions are placed into a mixture of rice and meat, which suffuses the entire dish with animal fat and meaty flavor. It is possible that this fixation on animal proteins and fats reflects the experience of the American “siege” (*hisaar*) of the 1990’s, when more humble foods like eggplant and tahini were the only available way to achieve that feeling of fullness and satisfaction that meat provides. Iraqi meat is, moreover, said to be superior to the kind available in Jordan. Some cited the presence of the waters of the Euphrates as the explanation. Others said that Iraqi livestock became accustomed to feeding on natural grasses and foods because animal feed could not be imported during the American siege. But it was a fixation on the fat content of animals, *dism*, that drew large groups of men out to one of West Amman’s many Iraqi restaurants. Dishes such as *koozi b’il-liyya* (mutton with pure sheep’s lard) or *semech mazgoof* (wood fire cooked carp) were distinguished by the quantity of the white, soft substance they contained. Less pricey options, such as American-style hamburgers and fried chicken strips, were quite popular as well. Ubiquitous *shawarma*, fatty cuts of lamb or chicken slowly cooked on a spit so that the fat renders and is dispersed throughout the tough cuts meat, was also available, though usually not something considered worth convening a large gathering over.

Consumed in such quantities, *dism* has a soporific effect on the body. You begin to sink into your chair after a meal. At the same time, you find yourself sweating from a pervasive inner heat, like a sauna working its way from the inside out. If *dism* is a “downer”, it is complimented by “uppers” in the form of a “greasey [fingered] cigarette” (*zigara b’il-ziffer*) and a cup of very strong Iraqi tea. As a companion who did not drink alcohol put it to me in the afterglow of a stupefying heavy dinner, “In your country, they have premarital sex and alcohol. Here, we have kebab.” Going out to eat such heavy meals was, like going out for drinks, an expensive proposition. But unlike drinking alcohol, eating large quantities of fatty meat was nothing to hide from your social circle. Participants in lunch outings gleefully took pictures of the dishes to post on Snapchat. There was no requirement that everyone one in the group be familiar and comfortable with one another beforehand. If drinking taught me to distinguish between different degrees of depth and secrecy among companions, eating fatty meat was an opportunity to extend my network of contacts among perfect strangers.

## Caffeine

No fatty meal was complete unless finished with a glass of Iraqi tea (*istikaan chai*). The *istikaan* is an iconic glass vessel, wide at the top, then narrowing slightly before opening again into a bulb-shaped bottom, suggestive of what Americans would call “an hour-glass figure.” These cups are filled to the very brim with black powder tea made in a *samowar*, one teapot that brews a highly concentrated liquid stacked on top of another teapot that boils water used to dilute the concentrate. Drinking from an *istikaan* requires dexterity, patience, and tolerance for pain – the glass is too hot to grab it at the middle, so the fingertips are used to lift it by the slightly thicker lip, where the scalding liquid is most likely to spill onto the fingers. So much sugar is added to the cup that it acquires a syrupy consistency, but the sweetness never manages to eliminate the amber bitterness. *Istikaan chai* was seen as the only beverage worth pairing with an Iraqi meal, other varieties of tea being dismissed as mere “hot water” – especially the Lipton brand teabags widely available in Amman. Coffee was individually consumed from roadside kiosks serving finely ground Turkish coffee and, in the Nescafe-brand instant coffee powder, but it was rarely taken by Iraqis social settings. The distinction between coffee-drinking and tea-drinking was projected onto an Iraqi/Jordanian binary, reflecting the way that Jordan has made its coffee culture a symbol of national identity (Shryock, 2004). Where the Baghdadi term used for the location in which men gather to socialize and consumed caffeinated beverages is, properly, *chai khaneh* (“tea house”), in Jordan, these locales were referred to as *maqaahii* (“coffee places”) or even *kafaay* or *kofeeshob*. Of the two such locales I frequented with companions, one, called simply *Chai Khaneh*, contained distinctively Iraqi décor, from statues of *lamassu* (the mythic winged man-bull of Assyria) to wall-mounted baskets woven from palm leaves, a craft associated with southern Iraqi folkways. The other, *Staad Café* (“stadium café”), was Iraqi-owned, featured Iraqi foods on the menu, and had an entirely Iraqi clientele, but did have any other features that distinguished it from any number of soccer-themed spots for men to gather and watch games in Amman. The presence or absence of national symbols influenced our decision about which café to go to much less than the fact that *Staad* had plenty of outdoor seating for warm nights whereas *Chai Khaneeh* had a larger and better insulated interior for the winters.

Unlike alcohol or meat, which were the locus of sociability in their own right, the stimulating effect of caffeine served to enhance and extend other pleasures, including the pleasures of sociality itself. I myself often struggled to keep the same hours as my companions, whose evenings would sometimes begin as late as 11 o’clock. “We’ve got to teach you to stay up late,” (*laazim n’allimak tis-har b’il-layl*) I was told by those disappointed at my refusal to stay for one more game of *jackeroo* or to come out drinking past midnight. Caffeine enhanced the body’s capacity for sociality by enabling it to more deeply penetrate the “frontier” of night (Melbin, 1978), not in pursuit of profit or productivity, but to expand the hours in which one could sit in the company of others.

## Nicotine

Jordan is a country with among the highest rates of smoking among men in the world at 70.2%, although the rate among women is much lower, at 10.7% (tobaccoatlas.org). This reported rate for women smokers strikes me as completely unbelievable, but I suspect women underreport smoking as the stigma associated with the practice holds more strongly for them than for men. Iraqi men in Jordan are no exception to this overall high prevalence of smoking. While cigarettes could be consumed alone on in company, in which case they were usually distributed from a shared pack, it was the *nargeelah* or “hookah” water pipe that formed the setting of most social outings. *Nargeelah* could usually be ordered at restaurants and some drinking establishments, but I did most of my smoking at the “tea houses” (*chaii khaaneh*) mentioned above. Typically, a single person would order a *nargeelah* for himself, with a single *ras* (“head” filled with a mix of tobacco and syrup) costing the equivalent of a whole pack to as many as three packs of cigarettes, depending on the establishment. “Heads” were available in a variety of flavors and, unsurprisingly, men favored robust and spicy flavors over more sweet and fruity ones. I learned that my favorite combination, watermelon and mint (*rugii o na’na’)*, signaled a certain sweetness and lightness, and I became more comfortable ordering a potent mix of cinnamon and mastic (*elich o daaseen*). While *nargeelah* could be shared in order to economize, the long hose was always passed with the nozzle end folded inside a fist and facing down. This prevented the length of hose and nozzle from drooping licentiously over the extended hand, which, in being thrust towards one’s companion, drew comparison to an obscene invitation. These minor moral anxieties were matched by the awareness of tobacco’s bodily dangers. Men who abstained from smoking typically cited the effects of tobacco on health, particularly because of high blood pressure. Still, as I well knew from my attempts to quit while in the field, it is especially difficult to decline a cigarette that is offered to you, or a *nargeelah* enjoyed among friends. My own attempts at moral accounting lead to foreswearing nicotine on my own time, but continuing to consume it in the company of others. With Pavlovian regularity, I found myself drawn to social events in anticipation of the indulgence they would grant me. If caffeine extended the portion of the day that could be dedicated to sociability, nicotine drew me back into the company of others on a day-to-day cycle, until it became impossible to distinguish the longing for company from the longing to smoke.

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The values and meanings associated with different comestibles expanded social spacetimes across different dimensions: broadened, deepened, lengthened, and regularized. In this way, comestibles serve as the link not only between the subjective and the intersubjective, but between one-off sessions of hanging-out and more enduring friendships. Likewise, attentiveness to the material substrate of sociality gives provides a more nuanced appreciation for the varieties of sociality that fall under the general concept of the term. Not all “hanging-out” is alike, and each act of commensuration is also an act of exclusion, with both certain actors and certain interpretations of the relationship between actors being kept out of the picture more or less explicitly. As my own failed efforts at ethnography proved, one cannot be friends with everyone all of the time. Disconnecting, as much as connectivity, is important for social conduct.

Of course, the people who were always and consistently excluded in these interactions were women. Above, I have noted several moments at which the slightest appearance of feminized activity is disavowed. The friend who stated that going out for kebab is the Arab version of American casual sex was, I think it is fair to say, making a joke that worked to the extent that his apt analogy brazenly defied this accepted rule. I also suggested that these denigrations of certain forms of activity were in some sense necessary to preserve the masculine code of sociality, not because people needed to police a male space at its boundaries, but because they needed to un-notice (to “destress”, using Willis’ term) certain activities that could be read as overlapping with feminized spaces and activities. There is, of course, a tired and true structural analogy in the anthropology of the Middle East that runs: {men:exterior::women:interior}. But just ethnographers of Middle Eastern women’s worlds can discover public life in private spaces, an attentive ethnography of masculine sociality reveals the intimate connectivity at the heart of “going out.” Now, this gendered separation is further maintained through the commodification of café experience that confronts the consumer who selects from the “menu” of options made available to them. And in the consumer culture of contemporary Amman, the distinction between women and men must be complicated with another distinction between families and individuals. Many public places in the consumption corridors where I conducted my fieldwork explicitly divide the dining area into two sections – a “family hall” and an “unmarried men hall.” Even those eateries that did not declare this policy effected the segregation in other ways. For example, the fruit smoothie shop that offered virgin “cocktails” that were popular with my non-alcohol consuming friends had groups of unmarried men sit downstairs, in full view of the street, while groups that included women were seated upstairs. The possibility that groups of unaccompanied women would go out by themselves was simply not available within this distinction, let alone a group of unmarried men and women would go together, let alone a couple on a date. There were other eateries that allowed for these groupings, but they tended to be much more expensive and located in neighborhood where the Euro-American presence was much stronger. The only cheap, not Western-friendly mixed-gender space I found was one basement pool hall where both men and women worked as servers, including a female bartender. But this is an exceptional case.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is not only that these practices take place outside the home, but that men’s sociality of the kind I am discussing take place outside the household economy. Women’s uncompensated labor, whether folding cabbage leaves to make *dolma* from scratch or arranging friend chicken sandwiches from the local KFC onto serving trays, transforms purchased commodities into free gifts. Even at the moment of purchase, balancing economy and satisfaction in menu-making is “skilled work that requires several years of schooling.” (Giard, 1998: 208) For men who could ill-afford to spend money at cafes, the feminine arts of meal-making could achieve the “sitting” experience inside the home for a much lower cost. Thus made do the pair who, in the previous chapter, described their multisectarian friendship as exemplifying the open-mindedness of pre-invasion cosmopolitan Baghdad. Each man hosted small gatherings that replicated the Lebanese-style *arak* and *mezze* hang-out, with all the different comestibles prepared by their wives. After this work was done, the wives and other women relatives would join to drink and eat with us, in a way that felt very familiar to my experience of all-male sociality.

But for men who did not have wives of their own, substituting the “free” labor of a spouse was not an option. For under normal circumstances, young, unmarried men are expected to live within a household economy and work in a family business, placing the income in the hands of the father, who arranges for the provision of their needs. Men who go out of the family home to “sit” will purchase their comestibles ready to eat, both buying and eating for themselves without a hand in the making of consumption. When displaced in Jordan, however, only Iraqis who own their own businesses are permitted to work under most circumstances. But those who did have business concerns of their own struggled to turn a profit. It did seem like for most of these conspicuous consumers, there was always money for hanging out. There were also more and less expensive venues for these practices. The *maTal*, a hilly outcropping usually located besides a road, functioned as an improvisatory space of sociality for younger and less affluent migrants, who might bring along chips, beer (if they drank), cigarettes, and convenience store coffee. Other people’s workplaces, particularly the all-night pharmacies described in the last chapter, could also be used this way, if one was friends with the pharmacist on duty that night. But even men who come from affluent families that see to their every need while waiting for resettlement in Jordan will work low-paying and risky jobs in order to acquire the few hundred dollars a month they could spend at their own discretion. This is leads to situations like my friend Ayoub’s. As we learned, Ayoub was spending half his monthly income on going out in order to keep up the contacts that might get him a new job, in the event he had to abandon his old job because the labor inspectors caught on. So far, we have been discussing how material objects shape the character of social relations through their distinct qualities. But a complex social apparatus determines who can access these objects and in what quantities. It is this second sense of value embodied in the commodity that passes unnoticed in the phenomenological account, but must be recognized if we are to situate sociality in relation to the forces that determine its conditions of possibility.

**“Blood Pressure”: The Price of American Suzerainty**

 During the course of my fieldwork, many Iraqis who had taken refuge in Syria were displaced for a second time, settling in Amman. Moving in Iraqi circles, I began meeting a handful of people who viewed life in Jordan through the lens of this Syrian experience. And for people who had spent a decade or more in Damascus, life in Amman was a disaster. “The sun is gentler in Damascus,” said one companion, “and the air is cleaner. The food is better and cheaper as well.” Indeed, prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Ammanis would gather early in the morning at the Abdali depot to take shared taxis across the border and load up on groceries, cigarettes and other sundry items. Amman, by contrast, is a terribly expensive place to live, particularly for people concerned with keeping up an active social life. Speaking with another Iraqi who’d recently arrived, I was told that, “In Damascus, you could have a completely wild night for $100. In Amman, you couldn’t even buy a ‘hello’ [*marhaba*] with that money.” Of course, the man was exaggerating – based on my own calculation a night spent at a gaming café could cost between $1.50, if you ordered only a single tea, to around $20, if you also had *nargeeleh*, a sandwich, and multiple cups of tea. But I kept hearing this joke that, in Amman, even a “hello” came with a steep price. “Your money is eaten up in Amman,” said one person. “This place drinks your blood,” claimed another. “All Iraqis have high blood pressure,” said a third, “Its not the food we eat. It’s a psychological thing.” But this is not quite right, for reference to blood pressure [*dughut*] was used by long-term residents of Amman to describe the cost of living in Jordan rising steadily over time. The sudden shift from Damascus to Amman made startlingly evident what was otherwise a slowly mounting trend: life in Amman was not only expensive, it was getting more expensive all the time.

Change your relationship to the commodity, and you change your relationship to time. So far, we have discussed the value of commodities in relation only to their being consumed in the course of a practice. In this arrangement, the commodity’s visceral qualities come to the foreground, serving as a material nucleus around which intersubjective states of take hold, like atmosphere clinging to a body of sufficient gravity. But step back from this foggy sense of presence that emerges around commodity consumption, and the comforting haze of an intersubjective present dissolves before the harsh light of the future. The tropes of embodied feeling used by my interlocuters in speaking of their anxieties remind us that the pressures and pains of this future are no less sensuous than the pleasures of consumption. Like the mounting cost of visa fees or residency permits which fed into the anxieties of Iraqi asylees awaiting resettlement, the rising price of social life expresses a quantitative logic in qualitative claims about the nature of everyday experience. The dual nature of the commodity that becomes evident through this perspectival shift sets it apart from the *skwayobwa* food-gifts described by Munn. The comestibles enjoyed by me and my companions during session of “sitting” is that the latter are not only just things with qualities, but also commodities with two different sorts of value. As purely qualitative forms, we might read them according to Munn’s single axis of “positive” and “negative” value. But the commodity is not only what Marx termed a “substance of value”, it is a “magnitude of value” as well. (1977: 125) Moishe Postone has explained that, “As an object, the commodity *has* a material form; as a social mediation, it *is* a social form…Commodities are both particular, sensual objects … and values, moments of an abstractly homogeneous substance that is mathematically divisible and measurable.” (1993:155, 175) For Postone, it is the latter, abstract substance, what Marx termed the portion of socially-necessary labor time, that allows the commodity to operate as the characteristic social form of a way of life uniquely determined the abstract, universal measure of time as quantifiable, divisible and independent of human action. But the sensuous aspect of the commodity has a temporal dimension as well, and indeed if the commodities described in this chapter have a “use value”, it is to produce, in their being consumed, particular modes of intersubjectivity that underly a social practice. *The commodity embodies values of both concrete and abstract time*, and in fact in this case the two embodied values impinge upon one another in a contradictory manner. But where the sensuous, concrete time generated in commodity consumption must always be remade in every moment of “sitting”, the abstract time crystalized in the consumed commodity confronts the buyer as something of a mysterious force, insofar as the productive relations that produced the commodity are in fact at a spatial and temporal remove from the scene of action, as far as those involved in “sitting” are concerned.

A proper account of value as socially necessary labor time will need to be put off until the next chapter, when I discuss fieldwork in a restaurant kitchen. So far, we have treated monetary price as roughly equivalent to the “measure of value” in the form of its appearance to the paying customer. But, we might also ask, what would we need to know for proper discussion of the contradiction that emerges between money as the measure of value and money as the standard of price? (Marx: 192) In asking this question, I want to show how careful attention to the recursive work and material substratum of intersubjective presence made visible through a phenomenological approach can be opened up onto the historical forces of production that work at its edges. While a more commonplace approach to the ethnography of present-day sociality might read practice as an assertion of innovative agency against fixed structure, the approach I am pointing to would not only historicize the conditions of possibility for particular forms of human activity, but actually name the mechanisms through which these changes to the limits of sociality are made.

The experience of people and things crossing borders points in a tentative way to what such an approach would look like. Struck by the vast difference in the cost of living between Jordan and Syria, twice-displaced Iraqis remind us that national borders are also boundaries that divide national economies, where the very same things are valued according to quite different standards of price. Economistic country reports will tell you that Jordan is entirely dependent on imported energy, food, and water, but people in Jordan depend upon more personal transnational connections to get access to the finer things in life, as well. In its constant quest for revenue, the state levies high tariffs on cars, electronics, and luxury goods, making these much more expensive than they would be otherwise. Between fieldwork jaunts, I became entangled in plots to bring cellphones, battery packs, nicotine vapes, condoms, brand-name shoes and clothing, and other little luxuries into the country. Cellphones and battery packs were made particularly conspicuous, frequently laid out on the table during “sitting” sessions so that we might compare their virtues and capacities. The necessary accoutrements of bourgeois existence were all the dearer to a displaced leisure class whose transnational mobility had been entirely restricted by the international visa regime.

From this perspective, it is the governing of international trade that shapes the conditions of possibility for social life. Beginning with the 1989 recession and debt crisis, International Monetary Fund reforms have stripped away subsidies for basic goods and utilities, cut away employment in government bureaucracies and set off highly visible public demonstrations in response to each act of reform. From 1989 onwards, Jordan’s inflation rate was brought to acceptable levels by tightening of central bank credit to the government through raising interest rates on central bank lending and raising reserve requirements. (Maziad, 2011: 90) In 1995, a new approach to stabilizing the Jordanian dinar came into effect: the value was pegged at a “fixed exchange rate with the U.S. dinar.” (Sweidan, 2013: 158) Pegging the Jordanian dinar to the dollar ensured a stable currency local currency, which was a necessary condition for encouraging foreign direct investment, and that foreign investment would be crucial for financing the privatization of “national infrastructure and utilities, including transport, electricity, water, energy, and telecoms.” (*ibid*.) In particular, the currency peg helped “align the economy with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries’ exchange rates through mitigating the exchange rate risk [of] Jordanian expatriates [who] are working there and to promote the flow of foreign investments from the GCC to Jordan.” (Hijazeen & Al-Assaf, 2018: 14) Since the currency stabilization effort of the 1990’s, Jordan’s strong reserves, low inflation and fixed exchange rates are touted as bright spots in an otherwise discoursing economic forecasts.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The new monetary policy of the 1990’s was good for attracting foreign finance, but it has had negative results for the domestic economy. To understand why, we need to understand what macroeconomists call “the exchange rate pass-through into the economy” (Suweida, 2013: 159). According to this conventional macroeconomic wisdom, a strong local currency will make it harder to address a negative balance of trade, while “currency devaluation increases net exports.” (*ibid.*) It should be noted that during the ‘90’s, when the deflationary trend was halted through IMF adjustments, Jordan paradoxically experienced an increase in exports. But this can be explained by the fact that Jordan benefitted from “newly established Qualified Industrial Zones [QIZs] to the U.S. market.” (Hijazeen & Al-Assaf, 2018: 16) The QIZs appear to be a classic symptom of what Aiwah Ong has termed “neoliberalism as expectation” (2006: 3-4), with the state leasing territory to business owners in closed-off industrial parks, where bused-in workers make products – primarily garments and textiles – that are exempt from tariffs inside an international trading area, in this case made up of Jordan, Israel, the territories of the Palestinian Authority and the United States. But the actual history of the QIZs shows that “neoliberalism” is itself no exception in the history of capitalist imperialism. Just as the Oslo Accords were about negotiating a regional trading sphere as much as concerned with achieving peace, the QIZs emerged from the 1994 Wadi Araba peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, with the ideological assumption that international trade, foreign investment and political stability would each sustain one another. (Bel-Aire & Dergarabedian, 2006: 6) The results of this experiment were, unsurprisingly, acceptable for international capitalists and outright bad for Jordanian workers and consumers. The program claimed it would integrate rural, poor and primarily female Jordanians into the workforce. But a study published a decade after the QIZ’s inception found that among the factories in the zones, “very few are Jordanian-owned” and that only about half of the workforce was made up of Jordanian, the rest being “brought in from China and Southeast Asia”, with workers of all nationalities suffering from “low-[paid], with no minimum wage enforcement or oversight for treatment.” (Baylouny, 2005: 42) Such special industrial zones enjoyed new import when opening a factory in the zone became a way for Iraqi and, later, Syrian capitalists to acquire residency permits and operate a business[[8]](#footnote-8) and are now being discussed as sites to experiment with employment for Syrian refugees.

I make this digression into the history of the QIZs because it illustrates the fact American interests in Jordan are protected through a kind of soft suzerainty of currency pegs, reserve requirements and trading incentives. Today, Jordan does not just import nearly everything that people in Jordan consume, but, with the exception of China, imports most of its goods from the United States and its allies. The purchase price of goods in Jordan is extremely susceptible to fluctuations in global energy prices, while, because the one is pegged to the other, the Jordanian dinar’s value is extremely vulnerable to factors impacting the value of the dollar. Thus, in 2009, following a boom Jordanian due to the American invasion of Iraq, “US dollar volatility” created “new economic pressures” on Jordan (Sweidan, 2013: 158-9), which ultimately had to be addressed through further aid and intervention, until the next crisis takes shape. It is interesting to note that Jordan, with its overvalued currency and consequently poor balance of trade, looks to economists like a resource rich country when it is, in fact, a resource poor one. A number of economists have attempted to theorize Jordan’s case of “Dutch Disease” (when newly discovered natural resources negatively impact demand for exports by way of currency overvaluation) in relation to the large proportion of foreign remittances entering the country (Swidan, 2013), as a result of nonproductive aid revenue, (Rajan & Subramanian, 2011) or the outcome of oil wealth in neighboring countries spilling over into Jordan. (Rawashdeh & Maxwell, 2013) From a more critical political economy perspective, Peters and Moore (2009) argue that Jordan’s dependency on “external rents” helps explain the remarkable stability of the monarchical regime, which has over time relied on all different sources of assistance to stay in power without broad-based popular support. As in the previous chapter, we have encountered a situation in which the interventions that ensure Jordanian “stability” as a political entity in fact produce “instability” at the level of everyday experience.

It is at this point that my ethnographic approach, dependent as it is on a secondary literature to provide information about the political economy of Jordan, reaches its limits. For, to my knowledge, no economist has attempted to account for Jordanian rentierism in relation to capital flight from neighboring war-torn countries, such as Iraq, Syria or Libya. Anecdotally, I can report that Iraqi capital continues to support luxury construction developments, retail and restaurant businesses, car rental offices, and hotels. I can also say that three different informants described this as a kind of money laundering, whereby the profits of corruption in Iraq were transformed into stable assets in Jordan. But to what extent do these developments increase rent and land valuation in Amman? How much of Jordan’s banking reserves are made up of deposits made by asylees in exchange for residency permits? And are there back-room deals taking place between agents of the Jordanian state and Iraqi capitalists? A very different kind of research project must be proposed to address these questions, involving collaboration with scholars who possess the necessary compliment of skills. Just as anthropologists of global climate change have found it productive to work with ecologists, biologists and other sorts of scientists, collaboration with different sorts of experts would have to be central to the study of global imperialism that I have in mind.

The program being stated, we can at least assert that the purely ethnographic approach does capture something essential about what it is like to live in a situation shaped by forces that those caught up in it cannot access. As the Iraqi proverb goes, “politics is a sea” (*as-siyaasa baHr*) and for those who do not become “men of politics”, the currents that move deep in the sea are not visible, only their surface effects. Similarly, Iraqi consumers in Jordan who are not privy to those currents encounter the magnitude of value in the commodity through its price, which is, after all, the form of appearance of value. And whatever the extent to which the money that middle-class Iraqis spend on overpriced commodities contributes to the aggregate phenomenon of Jordanian Dutch Disease, there is a clear sense among my interlocuters that they are being bled dry in Jordan. Is it really surprising that sociality, a practice that is oriented around the consumption of these commodities, receives an ambiguous regard? For as much as such activities of conspicuous consumption are essential to preserve a distinction between the middle-class cosmopolitan and the masses of hopeless refugees, they are achieved through financial sacrifices that become ever more unsustainable and will, if resettlement does not occur, eventually put the migrant into that latter category. Time spent in such activities can be written off because, in them, the present is not building towards any sort of future, but in fact opposed to it. And this contradiction arises because the material objects that form the center of socializing practices are neither purely sensuous nor economic values, but in fact both at once and, moreover, at odds with themselves.

**Conclusion:**

 In this chapter, I asked why the everyday social practices that were remembered as so central to the vanished life of Baghdadi cosmopolitanism were regarded with detachment and ambiguity by urban Iraqis in Amman. Where the contemporary literature on male leisure posits the practice as an overcoming of the shortcomings of present-day capitalist society, the literature on female sociality reminds us that such acts come at a cost. In particular, Elyachar’s notion “phatic labor” proved useful in understanding a style of action in which economic interest and interpersonal connectivity are not necessarily opposed. This notion is incomplete, however, insofar as it offers no way of grasping the values embodied in the material mediations of sociality, which are both products of others’ labors and necessary accoutrement to social reproduction. Taking inspiration from Munn’s phenomenological materialism, I reinterpreted an everyday social practice as the production of an intersubjective present and pointed to some of the material comestibles that, in their being consumed, make such an orchestration possible. I then noted that, unlike in Munn’s case, these objects are not merely things, but commodities, and therefore embody not only a quality of value-as-substance but a quantity of value-as-magnitude. This latter category can only be understood, at this point, through the collective sense that the stuff of sociality in Jordan is outrageously expensive. It is here that we pass from ethnography to economics, and I attempted to account for these high prices by reviewing the literature on the effects of effects of the suzerainty of America and its allies over Jordan’s monetary and trade policy.

 To make a broader anthropological conclusion, this chapter shows that however so much social practice generates shared worlds of meaning, the forces governing the conditions of possibility for these shared worlds are not subject to the logic of practice, nor are readily apparent to ethnographic methods. The commodity, as both a substance and magnitude of value, stands at the inflection point between these two fields. In fact, one’s standpoint with respect to time determines how we view the value (in a normative, positive or negative sense) of the commodity, a double-perspective which can, in a qualitative way, be accessed through ethnographic attunement. In centering the commodity form as the mediating term of sociality, I have tried to present an alternative to studies that read social practice as innovative agency overcoming staid structures by creating an opening from fieldwork experience to the wider world in which that experience is embedded that runs through the value embodied in that commodity form. Here, readers may object that I have simply smuggled in one Western universal for another. If we must be cautious that we are merely witnessing the manifestation of already given concepts like “neoliberalism”, “post-colonialism” and “precarity” at various places around the world, should we not also treat “commodification” with that same fieldworker’s skepticism? I would argue that, unlike the epoch-naming concepts that pass for theory in much contemporary anthropology, the commodity relation need not be understood as having been already and everywhere perfectly achieved. To transform this insight into a comparative project, we must of course avoid the easy answers of a traditional Marxist anthropology, which was rightly criticized for arraying the ratios of “formal” to “real subsumption” obtaining at particular points along the static stages of global history. (Harootunian, 2015: 66) The history of the Iraqi nation-state is itself a painful lesson in how fantasies of linear development collapse under the ever-recurring reconfigurations of global capitalism, whereby the wealth accumulated under one system must be “liberated” so that value might accumulate in others. Migrant practices do not overcome this tumult so much as navigate through it, and therefore offer guideposts for scholars on our own journeys into reality.

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1. See also Yanagisako (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Even as she tracks the valorization of women’s sociality through “empowerment finance”, Elyachar holds fast to the idea that such activities are already the property of women supporting their husbands and sons in becoming productive laborers and community leaders (456). Yet rather than reading this activity as a classic example of the social reproduction of labor for capital, she asks us to imagine it as a “semiotic commons” that is being, but has not yet fully been, enclosed on by the capitalist financiers. (460) But how can it be that women’s sociality is both instrumental to reproduction of capitalist relations of production, while also not yet being enclosed by capitalism? If Rosalind Morris (2016) has reinterpreted the Marxist theory of primary accumulation through the forceful subsumption of gendered relations into capitalist ones, perhaps Elyachar’s “empowerment finance” marks a secondary moment of accumulation in the valorization of gendered labor-power, whereby the once-invisible labor of social reproduction is revalorized as the alienable property of women through new forms of financial intervention. This would help situate the NGO-verse alongside other, parallel circuits of accumulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the introduction to *Gawa*, Munn acknowledges her debt to Sartre (1966), Polanyi (1968), Bourdieu (1977), Heidegger (1982) and Bertholot (1983), among others. Moreover, she advances her phenomenological-cum-materialist approach to action and meaning as a critical dialogue with a Weberian tradition that reads the meaning of human action in relation to the cultural “lifeworld” understood as a purely “social reality”, drawing our attention to Schutz (1962), Giddens (1979) and, of course, the influential work of Clifford Geertz as exemplifying this approach. (Munn, 1992: 6) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One could conceive a whole taxonomy of café games as instruments for generating different rhythms of social activity and, by extension, different modalities of social relatedness. Very good backgammon players explained to me that there are only one or two “right” moves given the state of the pieces on the board at a given time. These patterns must be internalized so that the player can immediately read the state of the board and move accordingly, keeping up the rhythm of turn-taking between two players. Backgammon only permits two players, and at the cafes I visited these tended to be older pairs who played together every night, their continual friendship over the game board perhaps further enhancing the rhythmic quickness of play. At the other end of the spectrum, me and my companions favored *jackeroo*, which is similar to the American game *Sorry!*, but played in two teams of two players using a combination of marbles, playing cards, and a wooden board. *Jackeroo’s* randomness and hybrid mixture of components significantly slowed turn-taking compared to other games, although there was a similar intolerance for pondering over a move for too long. Likewise, certain playing cards allowed for non-linear movement across the board, permitting moves like swapping the position of two marbles, moving backwards, and even plays that did not involve moving the game pieces, like forcing the next turn-taker to discard a card or skip their turn. Rather than backgammon’s tensely focused race to the finish line broken up by the occasional capture-move or the re-racking of the board between rounds, the *jackeroo* meta-game drove the emotional rhythm generated by ruining your opponents’ best laid plans as frequently as possible. The priority in the actual play of *jackeroo* on “eating” your opponent over reaching your own destination lead one of my playing-partners to compare it to the way people seem to go out of their way to cut one another off in traffic in Amman, referring to both styles of interaction as a “malignant game”. (*lu’aba khabiitha*). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Where Munn cites Charles Sanders Peirce’s notions of “iconicity” and the “qualisign” to clarify this point (16-17), there is no need to adopt the trinitarian apparatus of Peircean semiotics to understand the point about the relationship between an object’s latent potential and the actualization of a particular potential through activity that she is trying to make. (Munn, personal communication) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This poolhall was across from the building where I lived during my first year of fieldwork in a street known for its cheap discos. I quickly discovered that I had been rented a room in a building that was infamous for housing the “Russian women” who worked in the cocktail bars around this part of Amman. Upon returning home in the evening, I would sometimes see them, in sequined gowns and rhinestone-studded high heels, lined up outside or entering a black SUV. I did not think it wise to penetrate this world ethnographically, fearing the notice of the burly man in a muscle t-shirt would sit in the stairwell and smoke, minding the women and sometimes walking their Pomeranian dog. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the reports in the Economist Intelligence Unit. xx [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In fact, my own dissertation project was originally designed around fieldwork at just such an Iraqi-owned factory, which ended up closing during my first week in Jordan due to the closing of the Jordan-Iraqi border in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)