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WILL YOU MARRY MY SON?

ETHNOGRAPHY, CULTURE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

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Introduction

In his article, 'Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life' (1994: 445), Timothy Jenkins argues that 'apprenticeship' better describes what happens during fieldwork than 'collecting data'. 'Knowledge of everyday life,' he asserted,

is not available to the disinterested gaze of an inquirer; rather, fieldwork is an apprenticeship of signs, a process of entry into a particular world, governed by a variety of factors, including the situation and previous experience of the anthropologist. During an apprenticeship, as well as skills and perceptions, memories and desires are altered, so that every actor, indigenous or ethnographer, is engaged in a personal and experiential capacity.

During my eighteen-month residence in a mixed-income neighbourhood of Amman, Jordan, I found myself engaged precisely in 'personal and experiential capacity', and as such I was expected to meet local standards of conduct. This article is concerned with the particularities of that process for women, and with the role of what I will call 'femaleness' in it, this being my chosen term for women's marked status. I use it cross-culturally, recognising that it manifests itself with culturally specific content. Femaleness carries with it the requirement to follow the logic governing female behaviour, and the threat of consequences for failing to do so. I do not wish to homogenise women's varied experiences of doing fieldwork by framing gender in this way; I merely refer to the experience of being a target for interpellation into what are deemed appropriate female behaviours. What is appropriate will naturally vary depending on context. Given this variability, Jenkins' concept of 'apprenticeship' is helpful in thinking through the way I was taught to meet those expectations, and for the ways in which women ethnographers encounter femaleness through their research. As Jenkins points out, a neutral stance is impossible, so one takes on a role in everyday life. For women, only female roles are available, so eventually femaleness will become a topic for concern.

We do not go into the field as blank slates – we bring our ways of inhabiting femaleness with us. The same goes for maleness, of course – though this piece is focused on the former. Femaleness can be a liability: as academics, established and aspiring, we must be female in a way that does not preclude professionalism. This demands creativity, as

anthropology has in the past had an ‘awkward’ relationship with feminism (Strathern 1987), in which femaleness is at odds with the imagined ideal of the ethnographer.¹ Participant observation emerged in a patriarchal context, inflected with ideas of heroism that made non-male, non-white experiences invisible (Behar and Gordon 1996). *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the reflexive manifesto of a new direction for the discipline, notably excluded female anthropologists, and a generation of responses to that exclusion has sought to secure a place for women in the ethnographic canon. Behar (1996: 1) pointed out that the male gaze falls on the female researcher just as it falls on the female interlocutor, and she ignores this fact ‘at her own peril’. Another contribution (Lutz 1996) in the same volume points out that the female ethnographer also ignores the male gaze out of necessity, because femininity has historically served as justification for women’s marginalisation within the academy. Specifically, ethnographic work by women is seen as more descriptive, more emotional, and less intellectual, less theoretical. Moreover, Lutz argues, enquiries focused on femaleness and on typically female concerns and spaces continue to be regarded as scholarship for a fringe audience – made up, of course, of women.

Given this history, women doing fieldwork for the first time could reasonably conclude that the best approach is to compensate for the liability of femaleness through a combination of denial and zealous overwork, swallowing the attendant anxiety. As de Beauvoir put it, ‘A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong’ (de Beauvoir 1989: xxi). The concern that being female will limit one’s access to ‘the field’ can be as effective in creating a sense of danger as the possibility of unwelcome male advances can be, and in practice, navigating femaleness requires much more than just attempting to suppress it – anyway an impossible task. I suggest that we will be better prepared for both types of danger by approaching participant observation as a ‘gender apprenticeship’ in the sense that Jenkins used the latter word. In this framing, local ideas about the appropriate performance of gender are as influential as the ideas researchers bring with them into the field. This apprenticeship will include initiation into the operation of danger and sexuality in context, and we can use this not only to keep ourselves safe as researchers, but also to understand how women in the communities where we work confront and navigate the risk associated with sexual desire.

While we primarily associate danger with men’s sexual desire for women, there are other kinds of desire, sexual and otherwise, that animate gender relations. In the marriage

¹ Strathern made the further point that the intellectual goals of anthropology and feminism diverge: anthropology’s commitment to representing facts ‘in the field’ accurately can also conflict with the feminist expectation that partisans will work to undermine patriarchy using the means at their disposal.

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proposals I will discuss here, I was approached primarily by women, and the motivating factor was material, not sexual. Danger emerges when we perform femaleness in ways that fail to account for local sensibilities, and this danger may be manifest in male attention, as well as in negative female attention – put differently, in tense interactions that threaten to undermine relationships. In Jordan, where space is structured in such a way that all-female space is the most protected, the process of learning to inhabit femaleness adequately in order to be granted access – the gender apprenticeship – is a central element of fieldwork. Learning to cope gracefully with unsolicited marriage proposals was an important facet of my own apprenticeship process in Jordan.

In this article, I will discuss these unsolicited marriage proposals as moments in which my own femaleness served to attract potentially dangerous attention. Some of these interactions made me uncomfortable, but my physical safety was not threatened. I stayed safe in large part because my research participants assumed responsibility for advising me and protecting me. In doing so, they outlined their expectations of loyalty and reciprocity, thus raising the stakes for my inclusion in their community. As a result, I found that these moments of tension were some of the most informative of my fieldwork – to paraphrase Jenkins, shaping both what I saw and what I was capable of seeing (Jenkins 1994: 442).

Learning by doing

With her memorable phrase, ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’, Simone de Beauvoir (1989 [1952], 267) gave us the insight that gender is something that one learns to do, and not an instinctual capacity that we have when we arrive on earth. The fact that women learn to act like women over time, though, makes emulating unfamiliar gender performances a difficult task. Being female in a locally legible way involves embodied practices that are unconsciously absorbed and built up over a period of years; usually these are well established by the time one reaches adulthood.

Jenkins’ concept of an anthropological apprenticeship was developed through his research in a Béarn cattle market. In the market, successful transactions required discretion on the part of buyers and sellers, so neither party was likely to describe the sale in detail. Unable to gain verbal instructions on how to operate in the market, he had to absorb this information through careful observation and imitation. Instructions for inhabiting Jordanian femaleness are as unlikely to be forthcoming as those for operating in the cattle market. Kaya (2010) observed that Jordanian university students had a complex rubric for identifying appropriate dress for women that demanded respect for certain articles of clothing, in

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particular religious dress and headscarves. In this context, disrespectful combinations, such as pairing a headscarf with tight-fitting trousers, were offensive in a way that wearing the same tight trousers without a scarf would not be. Kaya refers to a ‘criterion of consistency’: a woman is dressed appropriately if all of her dress and grooming choices place her in the same ideological category with regard to modesty. Mismatches make her vulnerable to criticism and charges of hypocrisy.

Western women approach modesty from a very different perspective, one more focused on how attractive you are rather than how closely you adhere to restrictions like covering the hair. In both cases the male gaze is a reference point, but the approaches begin from different assumptions about how the gaze will function and what should be done to direct it to one’s advantage. In the Arab world modesty is a key concern, and non-Arab women studying or doing research project their awareness of it, usually by wearing a scarf over their shoulders as a matter of course and selecting loose-fitting trousers or skirts. We outsiders understand that we have to be covered and that loose clothing should be worn, but when we do it we adhere to an aesthetics of modesty that has little to do with the Jordanian one. Trousers, for example, are rather far along the spectrum of sexiness, and covering the hips and backside are a first principle of modest dressing – the Western uniform often violates both codes. The minimal application of makeup and perfume typical of Western university students, on the other hand, suggests that one eschews these adornments, perhaps on moral grounds – a confusing indication, given the trousers and exposed hair!

The notion that you can attract a man – or deter him – with your clothing clearly informs both approaches to dress. As Kaya’s work shows, though, modesty in dress is not just a threshold test; it is a whole system of signs that Jordanians interpret with great attention to detail. Her article also indicates that dress sends these signals in multiple registers; she speaks primarily about modesty, but dress choices can also indicate class, taste, or ethnicity. The mode of dress I described above functions in this fashion as well, and when white North American and European women wear it, it puts them in the specific ideological, class and racial category of ‘foreigner’ (*ajnabiyeh*, m. *ajnabi*, pl. *ajnabiyat* m. *ajanib*).² As a white American, I was in this category, especially as I chose to identify as Christian while I was in

² I refer to *ajnabi* as a racial category because its general use refers to a white – typically North American, European, or Australian – foreigner. I found this most directly stated with questions about my background. Invoking the size of my nose and the colour of my eyes, strangers would say things to me like, ‘You speak Arabic, but you don’t look it – is your mother foreign?’, the implication being that a small nose and ‘coloured’ eyes (*‘ayoon imlawaneh*) were unlikely to come from Arab genetic material. Friends with features that fit different racial profiles, in particular East and South Asian, were questioned on their features with reference to specific regions or countries, without use of the ‘foreigner’ label.

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the field, rather than share my heavily yoga-inflected spiritual reflections with informants in detail.³ Together, these three factors made me a desirable marriage candidate: as an educated blonde girl with an American passport, I could serve as a high-status accessory and offer an avenue to emigration.

Orientalism and talking about harassment in Arab contexts

Schwedler (2006) roundly dismissed the idea that constraints on women's public participation in the Middle East apply to female researchers in the region, describing Western women ethnographers in that context as occupying a 'third gender' (Schwedler 2006: 425). Although she is not an anthropologist but a political scientist who has conducted ethnographic research in Jordan and Yemen, she identifies with much of the baggage we bring to this discussion. Schwedler's article is tellingly composed as a response to inquiries about how she manages to conduct her research, questions that arise from concerns about access as much as about safety. She maintains the position that neither safety nor access pose problems to female researchers in the Middle East any more than they would elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the Middle East scholarship displays a division of labour between male and female anthropologists that reflects the division of space into male and female domains (Sobh and Belk 2011, Nagy 1998, Dresch 2000). It has tended to take gender seriously (Deeb and Winegar 2012, Abu-Lughod 1989), likely because researchers find themselves so decisively shunted into the space appropriate to them. Female anthropologists' contributions have worked to dismantle fetishized notions of cloistered Arab women by writing in women's agency (Abu-Lughod 2002, 1986), industry (Hoodfar 1997) and vulnerability (Haeri 1989). Correspondingly, using frameworks which put 'honour and shame' at the centre of the Arab psyche is now regarded as something of a *faux pas* (Dresch 2000: 110).

Talking about sexuality in the Arab world nevertheless retains the complications of this legacy. It is difficult to discuss the limitations on women frankly in our current political context, where 'Muslim women's oppression' has justified the launching of two wars (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, Al-Ali and Pratt 2009) and is acknowledged as a pillar of neo-colonial attitudes (Abu-Lughod 2013, Massad 2001). Anthropologists from the region

³ In Jordan, Christians make up six percent of the population and are respected as 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*), followers of Abrahamic religions with whom Muslims can share food; women from these faiths are also acceptable marriage partners for Muslim men. The reverse is not the case – marriages between Muslim women and men of any other faith are not recognised in Islam. Jews enjoy the same status in theory, although political relations with Israel make such a match unlikely in Amman. These distinctions have as much to do with heritage as actual belief. The fact that I had not attended a church service for decades – which I readily shared – did not make me any less of a Christian.

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and elsewhere struggle with a desire to contribute to a conscious scholarly tradition that both avoids inadvertently rationalizing gender discrimination in the name of ‘culture’ and does not further silence already muted voices (Spivak 1988). These issues are front and centre in scholarship on Arab women, and we bring them into the field with us, regardless of our ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Practically, these debates make the stakes for our responses to things like flirtation, cat-calling, harassment, and other ways that women are belittled rather high. A desire to avoid reinforcing objectionable cultural stereotypes can make it hard to exercise good judgement. I have witnessed many ‘friendships’ between Jordanian men and non-Arab female researchers turn uncomfortable when women take it upon themselves to combat the canard of sexually predatory Arab men by overlooking obvious signs of romantic interest. To approach this challenge as a part of ‘research ethics’ attributes quite a bit of agency, and responsibility, to the female researcher. It ultimately reinforces the message that her femaleness and the vulnerability that accompanies it should come second to her role as a scientific researcher, whose body is really a vehicle for ethnographic experiences and no more.

It is no coincidence, then, that Schwedler combined concerns about access and safety in her response to colleagues sceptical of her ability to do her work in Jordan and Yemen. For women field researchers working in the Middle East, access is earned by demonstrating loyalty to informants, and at times this exchange makes us vulnerable. This vulnerability is not just a risk of the female fieldwork experience; it is an essential facet of the apprenticeship process (Dresch 2000). In the vignettes from my own time in Jordan that I discuss below, I show how I was forced to develop the skill of brushing off unwelcome proposals in a way that did not alienate people, balancing the risk associated with being seen as a sexual object with that of losing access in my field site. The latter danger was at least as acute as the former and certainly seemed more pressing to me, as an early career researcher whose future depended on my ability to gather data.

Marriage proposals

If we consider fieldwork on the apprenticeship model, we must accept that gender-sensitive preparation, while helpful, will prove inadequate, because general instruction on ‘fieldwork’ will apply differently in every field site. This was true for me. I approached my fieldwork with an emphatically female orientation. I framed my questions about ethics and subjectivity around the domestic work of cleaning, cooking, hosting, mothering and visiting. For my field site I chose a neighbourhood where I already had several female contacts through work at a

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kindergarten – another majority-female environment. In short, I was prepared to make femininity and the danger associated with it a central part of my research. I had also spent some two years in Jordan previously, studying Arabic and carrying out research for my master's degree. During those two years, I had endured several incidents of harassment, ranging from the humorous to the worrisome. I had also formed close relationships of the 'adopted daughter' sort (see Isidoros, this issue) with Jordanian families on prior visits. My local mothers and sisters had corrected the most delusional of my misconceptions about gender in Jordan before I started on the DPhil. Furthermore, I had studied Arabic for nine years prior to fieldwork and had spent more time in my place of research than is typical for first-time doctoral students. I include these biographical details to show that women's challenges in negotiating gender in the field are not merely the slip-ups of a green researcher.

I am American and grew up in an America that sexualized women dramatically (Gill 2008), but in a way that was very different from how women were sexualized in the mixed-income Amman neighbourhood where I lived and conducted fieldwork. I was prepared to be wary of men who chased after women for their thin bodies and 'fun' personalities, but not so prepared for the mothers who chased after women who could give their sons blue-eyed children and foreign passports. The proposals singled me out as a foreigner, different-looking and differently classed, and undermined my efforts to assimilate. They also cruelly reminded me of the opportunism that governed interactions between myself and my informants. Just as my desire to gather data for my thesis fuelled my game acceptance of all their invitations, the possibility that they could somehow benefit from my perceived wealth and privileged citizenship status made my confusing presence in the community easier to justify. The fact that I did not invite the proposals – at least in any conscious way – did not insulate me from the force of their message. There were no other fair-haired Americans in this community, though opportunistic friendships were myriad. Observing reactions to people's attempts to use me helped to reveal the ways in which self-interest (*maslaha*) influenced relations between women. The events themselves gave me a different status in my field site as people took stances to protect me, take advantage of me, or help me secure a good husband. They also forced me to notice the alliance-making among friends that animates life in my field site.

Sincerity, propriety and opportunism; or, what do you think about marrying an Arab?

Jenkins' concept of apprenticeship emphasises that we are not so much describing a given social situation accurately as learning how to get along in complex social situations. Likewise, our research participants are involved in the same work of 'acquiring habits of

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action for coping with reality' (Jenkins 1994: 434, quoting Rorty 1991: 1). The ways in which I was approached for marriage appeared to follow a clear logic based on interlocutors' understandings of their own culture and of a stereotypical western culture, and they evidently invoked both to see how they might approach me – they had no script for ensnaring an unknown blue-eyed girl and convincing her to take a Jordanian man home with her to America. So people improvised: approaching me clearly violated numerous 'rules', but they still did it, with varying degrees of tact. The difficult hurdle I faced was determining when offence was justified. Some offers were treated as ordinary when they seemed offensive to me, and others caused offence to my companions that I would not have anticipated. I will share several examples here.

Several months into my fieldwork, my neighbour, a particularly enthusiastic matchmaker, came to knock on my door with a question. Did I know the name of a mutual friend's niece, and if she was engaged? I knew the girl in question and said I was not sure of her status – she should call the aunt to confirm.

She rang immediately, and with the prospective bride's aunt on the other end of the line, she explained that two women driving through the neighbourhood's commercial district had stopped her while she was crossing the traffic circle and asked her if she was married. 'We are looking for a blond like you with green eyes', they had said.⁴

'I'm married', she said, 'and I have four children'.

'Do you have a sister, or cousin who looks like you?'

'I don't', she had told them, 'but I may know someone else'. Making good on her promise, she had placed the call as soon as she had the opportunity.

'I remember you have a fair niece', she told her friend. 'I saw her when I was at your house the other day. I took their number so you can call them'. My neighbour was disappointed to learn that the girl was recently engaged, and they brainstormed other eligible young women before agreeing to revisit the option at a later date.

No one commented on whether stopping people at a traffic circle was an acceptable way of organizing marriages. I found it puzzling that, despite all the attention paid to ethnic origin and social difference when discussing good marriages in the abstract, total strangers would be recruited based on the eye colour of their relatives. Still, my neighbour had jumped on this opportunity, seeking out someone she did not know well so that it would not go to

⁴ 'Blond', *sha'ra* or *shagra* in the local dialect, can refer to complexion as well as hair colour. In this case, as my neighbour was veiled when she encountered the strangers, it would have referred to her fair skin, although her hair was a salon-enhanced coppery blond. The term has a racial dimension, although it is by no means an objective standard.

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waste. The heavy traffic and aggressive honking on the roundabout in question also factored into my analysis – the groom’s partisans must be quite serious about speaking to a pedestrian if they were willing to slow traffic there and risk other drivers’ outrage. When I was stopped myself at the same traffic circle several weeks later, by another pair of women also looking for a bride, I was left to assume that it was a socially acceptable means of initiating this process.⁵ Curiosity in this vein was generally acceptable and could be stated frankly.

It was not just the traffic circle where one was on display in my neighbourhood, either – I received propositions at two different shops just steps from my home. In one case, bringing my neighbour’s three daughters, all under the age of ten, with me to the large vegetable vendor located in a tent near our building invited inquiries through a third party. After our shopping trips, the girls’ mother, the same neighbour who had been stopped at the traffic circle, was asked about my status at the vegetable seller’s. (She called the establishment ‘the tent’ [*al-khaymeh*], a reference to its facility.)

‘You know the old man who works at the tent?’, she asked me. I did, but as she soon revealed, I knew very little of the relevant information. ‘His two sons (whom she called by their first names) both work in the tent sometimes’, she told me. She went on to detail their assets, the other businesses they own and the Mercedes they drive. As an anthropologist, I found the topic interesting; in retrospect, I am certain my keen questioning signalled that I was receptive to her efforts at matchmaking, rather than eager to learn about the process of mate selection generally.

With my encouragement, she related the exchange she had had with the older of the two sons to me. He had asked her about the blond girl (*al-sha’ra*) who comes in sometimes with her daughters; she told him I was her American friend. He asked if I was married, and she said no; he asked if it was because no one found me suitable (*fish hada radi ‘ynha?*) She told him that everyone in our neighbourhood found me suitable (*kul al-dhahiyeh radi ‘ynha*).

‘I think he’s interested in you’, she told me (*hatit ‘yno ‘layki*).

This small interaction spoke volumes: my neighbour’s communication strategies alone are compelling data about female communication and advice-giving, an interest of mine that evolved out of the cumulative effect of interactions like this one. The way that she broached the topic with me – first beginning with details about familiar people and places, then including enticing additional information, primarily about the potential suitor’s income and assets – hints at the combination of the ‘traditional’ emphasis on personal connection and

⁵ This was not the most innovative means of facilitating marriages that I saw – that distinction belongs to a WhatsApp chat group called ‘We want a bride’ (*bidna ‘aroots*).

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‘modern’ consumerism that influences mate selection. She ended, as well, by relating a dialogue that featured her boasting about my desirability – an inclusion that demonstrated her loyalty in vouching for my respectability and so making her a reliable advocate. The young man also behaved in a revealing way: in considering me as a marriage prospect, he sought out females close to me and refrained from speaking to me directly. Had he approached me himself, his intentions would have been unclear – a romantic relationship might lead to marriage, but a man might also have in mind entertainment (*taslayeh*). By declaring himself openly to an older, respectable mother, he eliminated this possibility. Cleverly, he had also delivered his message through a woman I was obviously close enough to that I would entertain her children outside of her presence, giving the idea weight that it would not have had if conveyed by a stranger.

His tact, however, did not mean his intentions were disinterested. Through this offer and others, I quickly saw that my fair hair was not my only desirable feature; the other, my citizenship, was the impetus for other, more brazen approaches. On another day, my neighbour sent me to her preferred vendor for *zaatar*, a sesame seed and thyme blend eaten at breakfast. I went and fulfilled her request, purchased several items for myself, and chatted with the man about America, where he had relatives. ‘My son wants to go to America’, he said, ‘but it hasn’t worked out’ (*ma zabtat ma’o*).

In sha allah khayr, I told him. ‘God willing, it will turn out well.’

‘Why don’t you give me your phone number, and you can talk to him on the phone? Maybe you can keep in touch, and later ... maybe it works out’ (*bseer nseeb* or ‘fate will happen’, a euphemism for marriage), he said. Hesitant to conclude what had begun as a pleasant conversation in a harsh tone, I apologetically refused, but then he pushed me.

‘It’s just friendship’, he said; ‘you’ll talk and you’ll see.’

‘No’, I said; many young men (*shabab*) ask for my number, I can’t give it out.’

He raised his voice. ‘I’m a young man? I am fifty-eight’, he said, offended, even though he had made clear he was not asking on his own behalf. I exited quickly and did not go back for several months, despite the fact that his *zaatar* was better than any other spice vendor’s in my neighbourhood.

Though the blunt suggestion posed no threat to my safety, it brought to rather harsh light the man’s readiness to take advantage of me if I allowed it. In this case, a man essentially asked me to date his son so that his son might use that relationship as a conduit to America. Dating is acceptable in some Amman communities, but the neighbourhood where I was living is not one of those communities. For him to suggest dating suggests a decision to

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act according to the western customs that he imagines I follow, not ones that he would find acceptable for his own daughter. This decision reflects my responses to his initial questions: I live alone in Amman, and my family is in America. Had my family been nearby, then I imagine he would not have taken such liberties. However, his thinking resembled the logic about marriage exemplified by my neighbour's enthusiasm over a roadside proposition, namely that women are lucky to receive an offer of marriage at all.

I chose to defend myself with avoidance in this case, but when others were involved they sometimes took the casual suggestion that I would entertain green-card proposals as an affront to my dignity and their own. Once, I accompanied a contact to the home of a woman whose young daughter she was tutoring in English. There was no tutoring on our lengthy visit, just coffee, biscuits and other visitors, including her three sons, who sat with us briefly. I could feel the eldest staring at me during our conversation, and so I avoided meeting his eyes.

My contact, the tutor, continued to go intermittently to visit the daughter for several weeks, and then stopped when she became too busy. She received a phone call from the mother shortly afterwards, asking if I was married and interested in getting married. As a hint, they said that they had previously paid an American girl very well to marry the eldest son in exchange for her citizenship, but she had screwed him over (*dhahkat 'alayh*, literally laughed at him) and run away with the cash. He still wanted to go to America, though. Would I marry an Arab, did she think?

'Can you believe it?', my friend told me when she related the story. 'People have no shame (*al-nas ma tastahi*). I don't want to speak to her anymore.'

The Amman marriage market jarred me – I was not accustomed to being approached so unabashedly for my skin colour or citizenship. I was certainly an exceptional case, as I am neither Arab nor Muslim and was living in the neighbourhood without a family that could be approached by serious suitors. Nevertheless, my encounters with courtship awakened me to a concern that I shared with many Jordanian women about men's intentions in marriage-related interactions. This concern, in turn, pointed out the extent to which rules of propriety are open to contextual interpretation even in the supposedly conservative community of Amman where I worked.

Conclusion

These proposals gave me a basis for comparison with local couples' marriages, as dating is not the typical path to marriage for girls living in my neighbourhood of Amman.– Some

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people marry ‘for love’ (*‘an hub*), but even those marriages follow the accepted ritual of the mother of the groom initiating the engagement process with a visit to the bride’s family home for coffee. The mother of the bride and the mother of the groom make arrangements for these visits, usually with an intermediary – one of their friends, neighbours, relatives or sometimes the groom himself – introducing the two ladies to one another. Girls of marrying age often receive visits from several potential mothers-in-law. Not all lead to proposals, and not all proposals are accepted. Acquaintances owe each other courtesy over coffee and no more, so all the parties involved (the bride, the groom, and both sets of parents) have the right to reject a marriage candidate.

My own background in courtship followed very different rules, and I had a weak sense of which proposals were desirable. I was re-educated as different proposals came my way, but was also forced into situations with enough parallels to what girls in the neighbourhood where I was living might experience that I had quite a close view of how things worked by the end. In being oriented towards a different set of courtship rules, I found that Jordanian women confront at least as many puzzling situations in courtship as would be expected anywhere else.

Sexuality and danger interact in myriad ways for women conducting field research. Sometimes, they are manifested as threats by men to a woman’s physical safety, but our consideration of ‘danger’ in fieldwork preparation and in all subsequent reflections would be better served by a broader conception. Danger can emerge even when femaleness is performed with skill, and attention to the places in which it emerges between other people (cf. Johansson, this issue) will equip a researcher to respond appropriately when she inevitably finds herself in a similar situation. Managing this challenge involves more than the mere adherence to rules: the apprenticeship mindset will serve her in preparing for these moments.

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