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WATERSHED LIVES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RIVER INFRASTRUCTURE AND RUINATION IN LEBANON

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Abstract

This dissertation is a historical ethnography of the Litani river dam in Lebanon (1954-2022). Drawing on more than 20 months of archival and ethnographic fieldwork (January 2021-September 2022) in the rural region of the West Bekaa, where the dam is located, I examine how debt-fueled development and social insecurities have set in motion what I call a 'politics of bereavement' — a set of non-redemptive and pessimistic discourses and practices that enlist and mobilize informal networks, kinship connections, and factional ties to mitigate material, psychic, and affective losses. While the implementation of the Litani infrastructural project became associated with the passing of a certain rural way of life, I argue that past experiences and modes of sociality are not really past; they irrupt into, and structure, contemporary life.

Paying particular attention to the double movement of capitalism (Polanyi 2011) — the ambivalent social relations and power fields that reproduce development's socioecological inequalities whilst also containing its detrimental effects — I trace the moral economies of electrification, irrigation, and technological change in five villages of the West Bekaa. To tend to these questions, I develop a methodological framework of counterpoints. Juxtaposing ethnographic and archival exploration, I engage the history of the watershed in the *long-durée*, together with the life histories of its inhabitants; the optimism of modern state-building against Lebanon's ongoing state of ecological and socioeconomic devastation; and the broader forces of politics and the market with the finely textured immediacies of everyday life. The contrapuntal movement, between two divergent scales, highlights how discursive political claims embodied in large projects —designed, negotiated, and implemented at global, regional, and national levels— are refracted materially and affectively in local environments.

While the Litani infrastructure congealed a national politics of development that promoted the interests of urban elites at the expense of rural communities, I show that it also opened a space for residents of villages near the dam to practice a politics that expresses neither resistance nor subservience. I suggest that the broader tenets around which development is construed cannot

be reduced to universalist and secular conceptions of progress and growth, thus complicating more commonplace understandings of subversive politics in the Global South. Local communities, whose lives have been transformed by infrastructural development, reframe struggles and dispossessions as a form of sacrifice made in the name of communitarian ideals. Their political imagination upholds forms of life that uneasily thrive within, not against, late capitalism's ecologically destructive forces.

Résumé

Quand tout tombe à l'eau: ethnographie d'infrastructure en ruines au Liban

Cette thèse est une ethnographie historique du barrage de la rivière Litani au Liban (1954-2022). Combinant plus de 20 mois de recherche en archives et d'enquête ethnographique de terrain dans la région rurale de la Béqaa Ouest où se trouve le barrage (janvier 2021-septembre 2022), j'étudie comment le développement, qui est alimenté par la dette, ainsi que les insécurités sociales activent « une politique de la perte » que je définis comme un ensemble de pratiques non-rédemptrices et de discours pessimistes qui mobilisent des réseaux informels, des liens de la parenté et des connections sectaires afin d'atténuer des privations matérielles, psychiques et affectives. Alors que la mise en place de l'infrastructure du Litani ait été associée à la disparition d'un certain mode de vie rural, je soutiens que certaines de ces expériences et modes de socialité ne font pas vraiment partie du passé. Au contraire, ils font irruption au sein de la vie courante et la structurent.

En portant une attention particulière au double mouvement du capitalisme (Polanyi 2011) —les relations sociales d'ambivalence et les champs de pouvoir qui reproduisent les inégalités sociales et écologiques du développement tout en endiguant ses effets néfastes— je retrace les économies morales d'électrification, d'irrigation et de changements technologiques dans cinq villages de la Béqaa Ouest. Afin de répondre à ces questions, je développe une approche méthodologique en contrepoint. Juxtaposant la recherche ethnographique et archivistique, ma méthodologie engage l'histoire de longue durée du bassin versant avec les histoires de vie de ses habitants; l'optimisme de la construction des institutions de l'état moderne contre la crise socioéconomique et environnementale continue au Liban; ainsi que les forces politiques et le pouvoir du marché en même temps que les expériences immédiates de la vie quotidienne. Ce mouvement de contrepoint, entre deux échelles divergentes, souligne comment les discours et demandes politiques, exprimés au niveau des grands projets d'infrastructure et conçus, négociés et mis en application sur des plans global, régional et national, se concrétisent matériellement et affectivement au niveau local.

Bien que l'infrastructure du Litani ait actualisé une politique nationale du développement promouvant les intérêts des élites urbaines au détriment des communautés rurales, elle a néanmoins pu proposer aux résidents des villages situés autour du barrage l'opportunité de poursuivre une politique qui n'exprime ni résistance ni soumission. Je maintiens que les principes de bases autour desquels le développement est habituellement envisagé ne peuvent être réduits à des concepts universels et séculaires tels que la croissance ou le progrès. Ce faisant, mon argumentaire problématise les conceptions normatives des politiques subversives pratiquées dans les pays du Sud. Ces communautés, ayant vu leurs vies bouleversées par le développement d'infrastructure, reformulent luttes et dépossessions en leur attribuant un autre sens, celui d'un sacrifice fait au nom d'idéaux communautaires. Cette imagination politique soutient des formes de vie qui prospèrent incommodément au sein (et non pas contre) les forces écologiquement destructives du capitalisme tardif.

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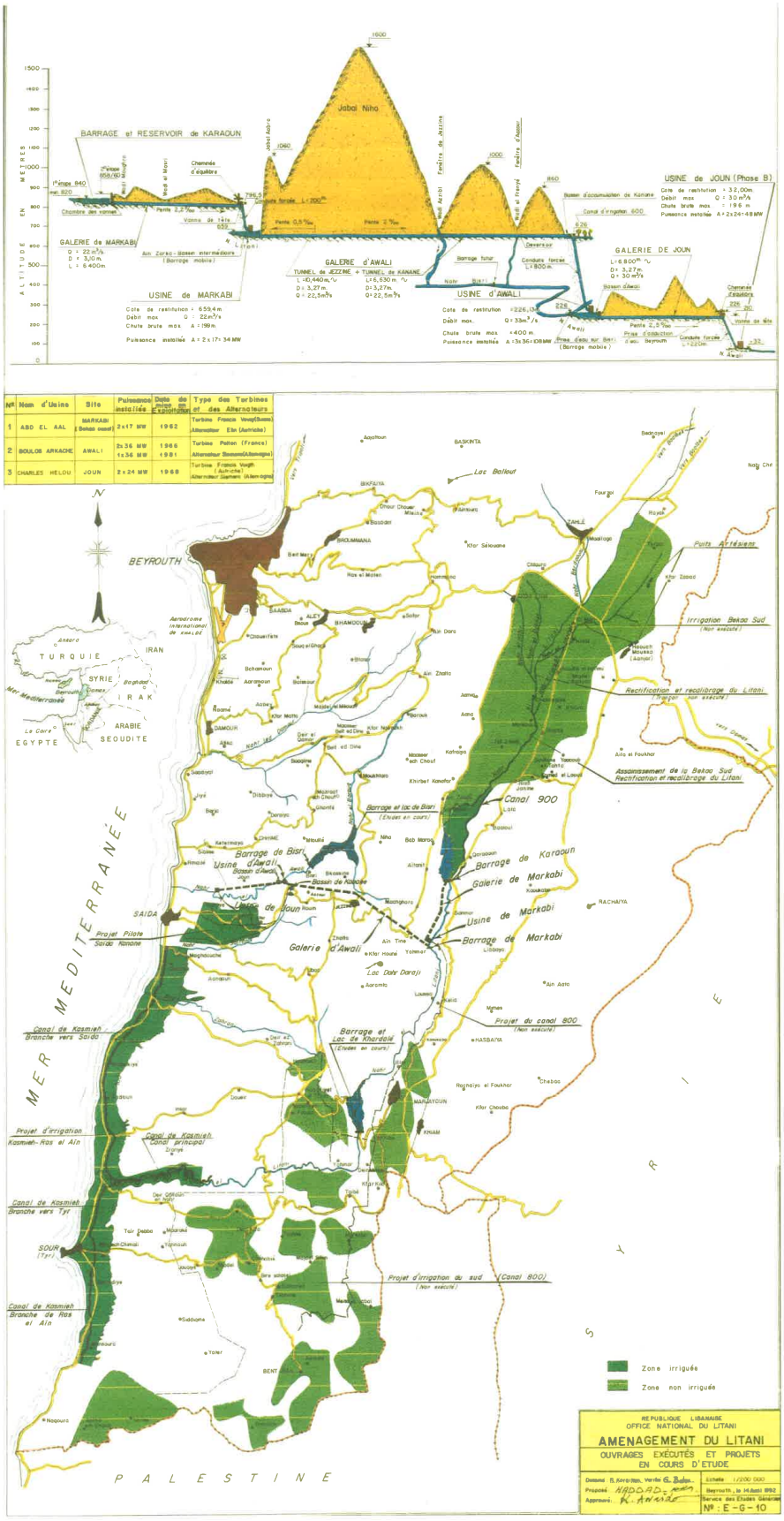

Map of Infrastructural Projects on the Litani River

Courtesy of the Litani River Authority.

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Finally, much of this dissertation was written at a time of incredible collective sorrow and grief. It is to the steadfast people of Lebanon and Palestine that I would like to dedicate it — neither as consolation nor repair, but as an affirmation of intractable bereavement and unbeatable love.

List of Abbreviations

CDR:	Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction
DAI:	Development Alternatives International
EDF:	Électricité de France
EDL:	Électricité du Liban
ESIB:	École Supérieure d'Ingénieurie de Beyrouth
FPM:	Free Patriotic Movement
GFL:	Groupe Français du Litani
IBRD:	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
KFAED:	Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic development
LRA:	Litani River Authority
ONL:	Office National du Litani
PSP:	Progressive Socialist Party
SLA:	South Lebanon Army
UNHCR:	United Nations Higher Refugee Council
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
WB:	World Bank
WFP:	World Food Program

Note on Transliteration

Transliterations follow the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) simplified system, with some exceptions. I have used diacritics only to denote the *hamza* (ʾ) and the letter *ayn* (ʿ) and, where applicable, I have replaced the Arabic *shadda* and *madda* with double consonants and vowels, respectively. Some spellings, which vary from the system specified by IJMES, appear in the interest of ease, use, and clarity (name of rivers, cities, and localities for example) or to remain in keeping with the Lebanese dialect, vocalization, and pronunciation (for instance *kahraba* instead of *kahrabaʾ*).

Introduction

Bou Falah wanted to show me what it felt like to drive along the imposing crest of the Litani dam in the West Bekaa. We were riding in the white *Renault Rapid* that he drove and that belonged to the Litani River Authority (LRA) — the semi-autonomous public body established in 1954 to oversee the infrastructural development of the Litani. Reaching the site of the dam in the valley, we stopped at the Internal Security Forces' checkpoint. While tourists, visitors, and passersby were only allowed on foot, Bou Falah, who worked as a patrol agent for the LRA monitoring the river basin, was allowed to cross in his car. Greeting the *darakeh*, the gendarme who was manning the checkpoint, Bou Falah inquired about his health, his family, and Abou Ahmad, his friend who was usually on duty. Evidently pleased to see Bou Falah whom he appeared to know well, the *darakeh* warmly welcomed us while also relaying that Abou Ahmad, who hailed from the nearby village of Sohmor, had been reassigned to a post in Akkar, Lebanon's northernmost province. As we all bemoaned Abou Ahmad's fate, the *darakeh* lifted the barrier and gestured for us to pass. Halfway across the ridge, Bou Falah stopped the car and motioned to get out. I had trouble keeping my eyes open. It was almost noon and the asphalt road together with the reservoir's gleaming surface reflected the light and the heat back into the scorching atmosphere. Bou Falah, wearing mirrored sunglasses, seemed unaffected. Walking towards the lake, "the *bahra"* (small sea), he pointed to its murky waters.[1] "Here, see? That's where the engineers who built this dam once stood, in the gallery down there, beneath 220 million m^3 of water. Can you imagine, before they built the dam in 1958, that the sun was still shining there? But the Litani eclipsed the sun!" Then, turning his gaze upriver towards Bar Elias and northern Bekaa, he drew imaginary circles, embracing the lake with his two arms, as he described how the LRA had also made plans in the late 1960s to develop touristic resorts in the neighboring hills and create a scenic route around the *bahra.* "The Litani wanted to make a beautiful landscape here but then the war came. Now, it [the Litani] is in good hands", he added, shrugging his broad shoulders.

* * *

[1] Bahra is also used to refer to a garden or indoor home fountain.

In Ain Zebdeh, Saghbine, Aitanit, Machghara, and Qaraoun, the villages of West Bekaa where I conducted field research in 2022, and even in the headquarters of the LRA in Beirut, people often talked about the Litani as a river, an infrastructure, and a local manifestation of the state all at once. I came to adopt this ambiguous way of referring to the river.

The day that we drove along the dam's crest was the first time I heard the word *bahra* (small sea) used to refer to the dam. Smaller than the sea (*bahr*), larger than a lake (*buhayra*), Bou Falah's depiction of the dam evoked state power, technocracies, and the complex socioenvironmental relations that converge to produce the stunning waterscape on which our eyes feasted daily in the rural West Bekaa. These particular ways of speaking about the dam, what Alia Moussallam (2012) calls "the language of the dam", discloses an "offstage hidden transcript", specific to the people who work with and know the river (Scott 1990).[2] Bou Falah's commentary about the *bahra* and its engineers, who managed to eclipse the sun, as well as his allusion to the "good hands" —referring to the political party (one of Lebanon's most powerful) that now oversees the Litani with great care— reveals more than the poetics of a landscape's entwinement with bureaucracy or its transformation from a site of labour to touristic panorama. Beyond the spectacular feats of engineering and design that undergird these breathtaking sceneries, the hidden transcripts exemplify the dam's intersection with power (Rodriguez 2012). A "character of the Anthropocene" linking nature, development, and state power, the Litani functions as a dispositive that structures a particular mode of government, deepening social and ecological disparities, whilst also opening the possibility for a situated political practice to emerge (Hetherington 2020; Li 2008).

As we toured the Litani facilities, Bou Falah was keen to underscore the multilayered significance of the dam, both as an impressive technical feat and as one of the country's last functioning infrastructures in a moment of otherwise widespread economic and financial collapse. He reminded me that the dam and power plants had remained operational while everything else was falling apart. While the LRA could barely afford the costs of preventative maintenance, due to currency devaluation, its teams strove to maintain Lebanon's fraught

[2] As the material, affective, and symbolic manifestations of human and non-human relations, landscapes form part of competing regimes of economic, political, and aesthetic value (Loloum 2016, 2020; Nye 1994; Philips 2022).

legacies of state development against all odds. As I came to understand, Bou Falah, like others, viewed his work for the LRA as part of an intergenerational, personal, and political responsibility towards the river, his family, his village of Machghara, the powerful political party he was affiliated with, and Dr. S. —the charismatic young chairman of the board of the LRA whom he regarded with great respect.

Funded through a loan from the World Bank during the 1950s (Lebanon's inaugural loan from the Bank), the Litani Hydropower and Irrigation Project elicited both pride and disappointment among many of my interlocutors in the watershed, whether they worked with the LRA or not. While it once promised the farmers of this region modern and more comfortable ways of life, its slow and hazardous decay now mimicked the country's broader fallout, bringing disarray to humans and non-humans alike. But like Bou Falah, many continued to be gripped by the Litani's unrealized promises.

After developing a serious illness while working as maintenance technician in one of the Litani power plants, Bou Falah lost the value of his salary and savings during the crisis to the point that he was no longer able to afford gas to fuel his *Rapid*. Despite this, and worsening sociopolitical conditions overall, he continued to express unswerving dedication to the Litani. Like Bou Falah, most of my interlocutors in the watershed reiterated their longstanding political and ethical commitments towards a leader, a party, a notable family, or their village despite the many losses they had suffered. In the face of illness, poverty, death, war, and compounded insecurities, such loyalties were often framed as inexorable, indispensable, and preordained. These escalating crises and the river's ecological decline were further inscribed in a conjuncture of disasters. People were grappling not only with the effects of Lebanon's financial crisis, deepening since October 2019, but also the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, whose blast was felt and heard as far as Cyprus.[3] In this context, Bou Falah's enduring connection to the Litani afforded him and his family ways to protect themselves against "the general degradation of existence" that arises from the volatility and imposition of self-regulating markets on humans and non-humans alike (Polanyi 2001, 139).

[3] See for e.g., Dalal Mawad, "The aftermath: how the Beirut explosion has left scars on an already broken Lebanon", *The Guardian*, Thursday 3 Aug 2023 05.00 BST, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/03/port-of-beirut-explosion-aftermath-scars-on-already-broken-lebanon.

This ethnography of the Litani and its people examines the reconstitution of the political —as lived experience exceeds representation and as humans in extremis are left with no alternative but to endure the conditions they face (Jackson 2015; Larkin 2013, 329; Marx 2019). It attends to the ambivalent social relations and power fields that reproduce development's inequalities, whilst also containing its detrimental effects —what Karl Polanyi (2001), warning against the dangers of unfettered economic liberalism, called the "double movement of capitalism." Beginning with the recognition that people's attachments to the Litani are saturated with material, symbolic, affective, and psychic loss, I aim to unsettle more normative understandings of how political power operates in Lebanon and make forms of everyday life practices and discourses more recognizable qua politics. Building on Tania Li's definition of politics as the word or act posing a critical challenge to power, I foreground how my interlocutors negotiate, acquiesce, or protest the forces shaping their worlds (Hart 2009; Li 2007). While academic and popular discourses in Lebanon have foreclosed certain predispositions from being conceptualized as such, I show how my interlocutors practice what I call a politics of bereavement. I define this politics as a set of non-redemptive and pessimistic discourses and acts that enlist and mobilize informal networks, kin and factional ties, and embodied experience to mitigate losses.

The register of this politics of bereavement is pessimistic, not melancholic; its tactics and forms are contingent and not necessarily experienced as painful. My understanding of pessimism is partly inspired by Antonio Gramsci's 'pessimism of the intellect'—the insight gained when one recognizes that the conditions for a radical politics of transcendence do not exist. It also reflects my own inability to come to terms with Lebanon's cascading crises. [4] Throughout my time in the West Bekaa and in Beirut, I often asked myself how it was that neither the 2019 uprising in Lebanon, the severe socio-economic crisis that followed, nor the Beirut port explosion had been able to produce a shift meaningful enough to displace prevailing ideologies, or at the very least, unsettle dominant forms of political power in Lebanon. It was my repeated failure to answer this question that proved unexpectedly generative —especially as I found myself thinking with the

[4] What Pierre Bourdieu (2003) calls Participant Objectivation —a reflexive practice that allows the researcher to not merely reflect upon their own personal experience and position but also rather transform their own self into an object with which to interrogate the wide array of forces, structures, and relations that shape one's own sense of making sense of the world. See also (Li 2008; Mosse 2006).

contested history and the politics of the Litani infrastructure. In contrast to the acute and dramatic events of Lebanon's recent past, the river's long dying and the gradual social and environmental transformations precipitated by the infrastructure opened the possibility for me to reflect critically on development's fraught intersections with dominant forms of power in the watershed (Nixon 2011).

The implementation of the Litani hydropower project and the construction of the dam in Qaraoun, West Bekaa highlights how development, and the consolidation of capitalist relations, transform political and institutional arrangements, while simultaneously enabling the social reproduction of power structures. Converting peasants and farmers into power plant workers, public employees, migrants, or service providers, the Litani embodies a politics of development that helped mutate social and economic relations —from farm-based livelihoods to lifeworlds revolving around trade, services, and energy-intensive consumerist lifestyles— whilst also providing power with the means to reproduce itself. The perpetuation of these inequalities, to borrow Li's formulation, reflects the "insidious ways in which capitalist relations take hold even in unlikely places" (2014, 4). In tracing the contours of a subversive, yet unruly, political imagination, my attention has shifted from the counterforces so powerful they enabled unequal relations to perdure to recognizing the openings, possibilities, contradictions, and ambiguities vital to the "struggle for being" (Allan 2014; Jackson 2015, 163). These forms of imagination taking shape in the course of everyday thought and action, uphold forms of life that thrive within, and not against, the all-encompassing, rapacious, and ecologically destructive forces of late capitalism.

* * *

Progress

When I first proposed this research, I assumed that the Litani's ecological devastation as well as the passing of a certain rural way of life, usually associated with programmatic development interventions in the countryside, would be at the heart of my interlocutors' concerns. Against the proletarianization and the abrupt attrition of agrarian society that the

infrastructure of irrigation and electrification prompted, I imagined my interlocutors nostalgically conjuring the sensorial lifeworlds that existed before the river's pollution. I anticipated that our conversations would revolve around personal and intimate experiences of living near the water. They might tell me how they swam in the Litani; how cold the water felt; how the wind blew through the silver-leafed poplar trees that lined the river course, refracting the bright; and how the scorching sun, high in the clear blue sky, and the hot dry air of the Bekaa parched the remaining droplets off the skin of swimmers, as they lay on it sandy banks. I envisioned listening to stories of farmers descending the maquis shrublands on their beasts towards the valley to work fertile lands, fishermen catching trout and carp with their bare hands from freshwater streams now drowned under the Qaraoun lake, and women, young and old, walking in procession towards the Litani for the ceremonial washing of the bridal linen of a sister, daughter, cousin, or friend before her wedding.[5] Seen from near or afar, I envisaged the landscape itself — a valley flanked by two imposing mountain ranges, which, to my mind, evoked familiar tableaux of the Lebanese countryside, where peasants once wore hats or the *hatta*, terraced the hills, and cared for fruit orchards, olive and fig groves, and vineyards.[6]

When I arrived in West Bekaa for fieldwork in January 2022, I anticipated what life would look and feel like come spring. I had rented a room in my friend Ghada's family home in the village of Saghbine. Drenched in the honeyed fragrance of the yellow flowers of the *wezzal* (broom), which covered the hills surrounding the river, I imagined foraging wild asparagus, *zaʿatar*, mushrooms, and fresh capers and preparing delectable omelets. During the summer months, we would all indulge our love of almonds, figs, peaches, cherries, plums, and, later, apples handpicked from their trees. By the end of my stay, I had savoured all these things. As summer came about, I had even helped harvest onions and potatoes, and watched Ghada make fruit leathers from apricots and plums, spreading the fruity orange and purple pastes into sheet that she hung to dry on the sunny terrace of her house. However, it wasn't long into my fieldwork before I realized that these elicitations of leisure and pleasure in an unsoiled nature were largely absent from my interlocutors' account of their lives.

[5] The maquis is the ecosystem of the mountainous slopes located around the Mediterranean.
[6] Hatta (or kuffiyeh) is a traditional headdress worn by men in different parts of the Arab world.

In fact, part of the Litani landscape that I loved so much came from the dam itself, including the green and bluish hues of Mount Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon —the two ranges that embrace the dam. The making of that beautiful landscape was premised on the dominant idea that Lebanon —dubbed *La Suisse du Levant* at the time of the dam's construction in the 1950s and the 1960s— had much in common with Switzerland, politically, topographically, economically, and culturally, and might be developed on the model of the Alps (Maasri 2020). In the watershed, I began noticing how people interacted with the riverscape in a manner structured by these planned technical arrangements. "Why travel to Europe?", asked Nina and her husband George one morning as we sipped Arabic coffee on their balcony overhanging the Litani, near the village of Saghbine. "We have the most European beautiful landscape, right here", Nina insisted. Yet, the evocation of a European landscape suggested more than just snow-covered mountains. Both Nina and George bemoaned Lebanon's desolation, which they described as backward and emblematic of civilizational failure: *balad fashel, bala kahraba, bala may, bala ʿelm, bala hadara* — a failed country, without electricity, without water, with no education, and no civilization.

My interlocutors' current preoccupations and concerns, which revolved around maintaining their livelihoods and overcoming feelings of "stuckedness" through crisis, were far removed from the image I had of wistful longing for bygone and pristine rural lifeworlds (Hage 2015). Among other things, the country's ongoing socioeconomic and financial crisis structured how they remembered the past. Like Nina, George, and Bou Falah, many of my interlocutors and friends in the watershed, believed that capitalist transformations together with technological advancement still held emancipating potential, and viewed the Litani infrastructural development as a missed opportunity. When the Litani dam and power plants were completed during the 1960s and 1970s, on the eve of Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990), many left their villages or the country altogether and stopped working the land. While some had recently returned to their village homes, engaging in crop cultivation, fishing, and farming on the side, the majority still regarded agriculture, when the primary source of income, as ungrateful labour. Riddled with risks and hazards, they considered farming to be an unrewarding, physically taxing, low-paid activity that secured little to no financial security. While people expressed frustration

over Lebanon's failed development, they still believed in a teleological unfolding of the promised rewards of capitalism. In the watershed, as in the rest of Lebanon, modern, more comfortable, and more secure ways of living continued to figure as a dream, only deferred.

As I discuss in the dissertation's opening chapter, the Litani project was initially set in motion and then implemented in a context of profound sociohistorical change and upheaval. In the two decades following its independence from France in 1943, the new Lebanese state weathered popular mobilizations, nationwide electricity and labour strikes, political turmoil, street confrontations, insurrections, as well as waves of rural exodus and the influx of Palestinian refugees in the wake of the Nakba, which led to the expansion of impoverished and informal settlements around the capital city of Beirut. All this exerted significant pressure on the fledgling Lebanese state and profoundly shaped its policies for programmatic development. The Litani project that materialized at this time was one that focused almost entirely on hydropower generation. It was not merely the byproduct of technocratic interventions and the contributions of international experts of development, but rather the outcome of a series of struggles waged over the exercise of both power and politics — which could have turned out differently. Its history articulates how debt-fueled development, economic and social obligations, and particular forms of relatedness to the river have become entwined. It is in that sense that the past is not really past in the watershed: the dam continues to "sediment" national histories of state and the ongoing relations of market forces, developmentalism, and subversive politics (Kurtiç 2019).

Departing from my initial assumptions about an authentic rural world and an idealized attachment to a past ranged against "the rule of experts" (Mitchell 2002), I no longer held to this view that certain fixed conditions, representations, or reified ways of life existed before the Litani waters were harnessed to technological and sociopolitical change. This sharpened my awareness of how modernization and capitalist economic expansion, which transform human and non-human rural life, cannot be understood as an imposition of disembodied and external forces. Working against these teleological visions of "progress" and the technocratic promises of capitalist development, my approach thus carefully considers the situated politics —learned or lived, discursive, embodied, or sensory — and the modes of valuation that the Litani

infrastructure has cultivated, whilst simultaneously reckoning with its entanglement with the reproduction of unequal relations and practices (Li 2007, 2008, 2014; Mains 2012).

Crisis

I write this dissertation against teleological conceptions of development as the rule of experts but also against normative understandings of crisis. In the face of both alter- and anti-crisis, I aspire to a mode of writing and thought that allows a certain fugitivity from the affects and holds of crisis (Hage 2015; Roitman 2013).

During my stay in Lebanon, spending time in the West Bekaa was, to me, a much-welcomed break from being in Beirut, where the effects of the financial crisis and the subsequent infrastructural fallout were more felt. While the provision of electricity had always been unstable and uneven, it morphed into a permanent power outage when the state could no longer secure the foreign currency required to purchase fuel. The national electricity company, *Eléctricité du Liban*, which struggled to provide a couple of hours of power per day was entirely out of service, for months on end, following the blast of the port. As water distribution relied on state provided electricity, the majority of households across Lebanon endured severe water shortages. Because of fuel shortages, waste collection was also severely reduced, aggravating the country's longstanding problem with waste management. The garbage and other refuse that accumulated on the streets, acute water shortages, permanent blackouts, and noises and toxic fumes of private generators that clouded the atmosphere made living in Beirut very difficult. In the less densely populated village of Saghbine, in the West Bekaa, the situation was starkly different. Decades of state neglect in the countryside meant that the village's municipality operated its own water supply, while the nearby Litani powerplant distributed hydraulically generated electricity around the clock. As I show in Chapter 2, this reversal of riches was nevertheless not ample enough to shelter people in the West Bekaa from all the spiraling effects of the crisis.

I still do not know how to fully account for the conjuncture of disasters that gripped Lebanon during my fieldwork — disasters that have continued to intensify in the wake of Israel's

genocidal war on Palestinians in Gaza and its renewed aggression against Lebanon, particularly in the border region south of the Litani. After the coronavirus travel restrictions were eased in 2021, I returned home to a Lebanon devastated by an unsuccessful uprising, a deepening economic crisis, and the port explosion. As the Lebanese Lira rapidly devaluated, I witnessed firsthand the effects of skyrocketing inflation leaving countless families, including my own, robbed of a lifetime's earnings and savings. Recent statistics point to the breadth, scope, and severity of the population's destitution. Between 2018 and 2022, unemployment rose from 12 percent to more than 30 percent with the average monthly salary dropping from $800 to $92 USD during that same period (Central Administration for Statistics and ILO 2022). By December 2022, the cost of necessities had skyrocketed with increases of 8022% for food and beverages, 1563% for healthcare, 4603% for transportation, and 1618% for water, electricity, gas and other fuels (Central Administration for Statistics 2022). Such numbers both reveal and obscure the suffering distilled by them.

On the eve of the massive protests that erupted in most cities and towns in October 2019, Lebanon was already one of the most unequal countries in the world with the richest 1% of the population earning around 25 percent of the national income, leaving the most disenfranchised half with less than 10 percent (Assouad 2021). This uneven distribution of wealth is the result of political economic policies put in place at the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, which ushered an era known as "the reconstruction", ironically, and where bloody in-fighting made way for the imposition of drastic free market policies (such as deregulation, privatization, and public austerity) that aimed at structurally reforming state and society. An enlarged service sector, financialization, and unencumbered consumption became the main drivers of economic growth at this time. Between 1993 and 2018, Lebanon also received around 280 billion US dollars of capital inflows and remittances, an amount so great that it surpassed the sum of aid distributed under the Marshall Plan in Western Europe during the post-World War II reconstruction (World Bank 2010; Zbeeb 2020).[7] During this period of economic expansion, instead of financing investments or development projects, the inflow of money was swallowed up by a trade balance deficit (Lebanon imported more goods than it produced), real estate

[7] Money inflows were a mix of remittances from the Lebanese diaspora, private investors, and aid, loans, and funding conferences.

speculation, and mounting public and private debt, in which the country's local banks became heavily invested. More than half of Lebanon's revenues were eventually used up to service the country's debt. Throughout, Lebanon continued to seek foreign bailouts in the form of aid, grants, or loans. When the money stopped flowing in, this economic system, already stretched to its limits, collapsed, leading to the sudden disenfranchisement of the middle classes and to the further impoverishment of the urban and rural underclasses alike (Saleh 2023).

It is during that time too, post-war, that many of my interlocutors in the watershed imagined the state would resume its infrastructural development of the Litani, finally implementing the irrigation plans designed in the 1960s, and that were meant to follow the completion of the hydropower component of the project. Instead, the region of the Bekaa witnessed a real estate boom and a contraction of arable land. The landscape was transformed by the increased financialization of housing and property. Profits that could be made from land sale, rent, or construction work were significantly higher than any other revenue-generating activity, such as agriculture or industry (Samaha 2022). In addition to the haphazard urban sprawl stretching to the far-reaches of the Bekaa, the Litani's pollution, which I address in Chapter 4, became another major environmental problem wreaking havoc on human and non-human communities in the watershed, prompting scholars, activists, and bureaucrats alike to proclaim the "death of the river" (Shaban and Hamze 2018).

With the economic crisis and intensifying infrastructural degradation, the Litani's ecology continued to worsen. In November 2022, a few days after I left Lebanon for Montreal, the upper stream of the Litani was found to be contaminated with cholera, caused by the discharge of untreated wastewater and sewage. The cholera outbreak, which lasted a couple of weeks, invigorated discourses that linked death with the waterscape.[8] When I checked-in with close friends in Saghbine, they didn't entirely put my mind at ease. While they and their families were unharmed —they were lucky enough to access clean water from Saghbine's natural mountainous sources— they nevertheless concurred with views circulating both in the

[8] See for e.g., Rayya Jalabi, "Lebanon water crisis fuels cholera outbreak: Middle east. public health infrastructure neglect, bad management and climate change have led to catastrophe", *Financial Times*, December 13, 2022. https://www.ft.com/content/f1cd794b-2205-42a9-bffa-8e6468eaea2b.

traditional press and online. To everyone in the West Bekaa, the Litani had not only died, but was proceeding to kill its people as well.

My aim with this brief chronicling of a national dilapidation is not to draw a comprehensive tableau of the current conjuncture of forces at play in Lebanon while I conducted fieldwork. Rather, I want to ask what happens when crisis is understood not as an interruption, but as a chronic and permanent condition and a "governmental tool" (Hage 2015, 36). Not really seen as an opportunity to critically question prevailing orders, a normalized situation of crisis requires that people endure it while waiting it out. In fact, as Ghassan Hage observes, "the more one is capable of enduring a crisis, the more of a good citizen one is" (Ibid, 37). In the case of Lebanon, this "heroism of the stuck" circumscribes and impoverishes the political imagination, leading to a politics of people "continuously staring at the abyss" (Ibid, 39).

One way in which I interrogate the language of crisis is by invoking instead a politics of bereavement that asks how people, no longer tolerating "the stoic virtues of boundless patience and forbearance," get by (Jackson 2015, 176)? How do they produce and sustain a repertoire of political practices in their everyday encounters with the Litani—as river, infrastructure, and state bureaucracy? Neither an invitation to wait out crisis, nor a plea to overcome it, a politics of bereavement is one that operates outside analytical and political affordances of crisis. From the value of a land lost or of clean water traded in for something that never materialized, it thus finds its form in a reclaimed understanding of loss. It is, as I mentioned earlier, pessimistic because it is acutely aware of the loss of the basis of a more radical form of emancipatory politics. Informed by Janet Roitman's (2011) conceptualization of crisis as the blind spot that produces knowledge, I consider Lebanon's conjuncture of catastrophes not as an opportunity to ask "what went wrong?", but to interrogate how it is that prescriptive practices —for instance, how my interlocutors value land they lost to the Litani— obtain their normative status in the first place.[9]

[9] Considering the 2007-2008 global financial meltdown, popularly known as the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States, Roitman (2013) rightly contends that a "politics of crisis" suggests we immediately ask, "what went wrong?", contemplating how normative practices become deviant instead of interrogating how it is that they obtained a normative status in the first place. Seen from this angle, a nomenclature of crisis only generates meaning in a system that remains self-referential. Roitman (2013) illustrates it in a more tangible way: crisis forecloses the possibility of asking more fundamental questions such as "how does a house become a risk" or "how does debt become an asset".

Lebanon's permanent "critical condition" also makes palpable that political practices are not directly determined or changed by economic crises alone and that ideological predispositions do not prompt material and social change on their own (Hage 2015, 39; Hart 2009). What I mean to say is that an economic crisis alone (or the Beirut port explosion) will not spark a revolution or a major political upturning. It is perhaps more generative to suggest that economic hardship offers a fertile and nurturing terrain — *bi'a hadena* — from which contentious practices or discourses of negotiation, acquiescence, or contestation, like the politics of bereavement, might emerge (Gramsci 1999, 397-412).

As I note in Chapter 3, my interlocutors remember how they were dispossessed of their land when the Litani dam was built. Their narratives frame this past dispossession as embedded within a system of exchange, a form of non-market giving based on inalienability and reciprocity. They maintain that they gave land to the Litani and helped build the dam and that the Litani should, in turn, reciprocate with the gift of electricity. It is only in resituating this moral economy within Lebanon's deficient public infrastructural service provision that the political significance of a relation to the state, in terms of gift giving, can be understood. At first glance, this moral economy divides citizens between those who have sacrificed land and labour, and are hence worthy of benefitting from the scarce and limited state services, and those who did not and are not. But there is something else and something more at stake in how such indebtedness is framed. This moral economy highlights the enmeshment of market and non-market relations and brings into sharper distinction the way that social and ethical predispositions as well as economic and pecuniary behaviors become intertwined. While it might appear as an equal exchange centered around the ethical notion of sacrifice and reciprocity, its logic is inherently economically hierarchical. Foregrounding the moral obligation of reciprocity —between people and the state— also serves to justify austerity measures in the context of Lebanon's debt crisis: the state *must* repay its debt to the commercial banks at the expense of its citizens who will bear the cost. Paradoxically, such a political claim then helps absolve the state of its responsibilities towards all citizens, even at a time of terrible hardship.

Let me elaborate through reference to Ethiopia, another country in permanent crisis, which similarly illustrates people's fraught relations to state power and development. Writing

about the construction of road infrastructure carried out by international companies contracted by the Ethiopian state, Daniel Mains (2012) describes how residents of the city of Jimma actively contributed to the project through donations, labour, or more generally by expressing their enthusiastic support. These contributions, Mains contends, revive progress narratives, and allow city dwellers to re-establish a relation of trust to the state, which they perceive as developmental. Building on the work of James Ferguson (2010), Mains concludes that, because of these personal involvements, "the privatization of infrastructural development in Ethiopia does not fit easily with conceptions of neoliberalism" and that "neoliberalism has limited analytical utility" (2012, 20).

How Jimma's residents experience the Ethiopian state's developmental ethos, in many respects, rhymes with the narratives of my interlocutors, who describe the Litani and their work in constructing the dam and maintaining its power plants in similar moral terms. Where my interpretation differs from Mains', is that I regard the politics of bereavement as very much inscribed already within Lebanon's conjuncture of a neoliberal debt crisis. Reflecting on both Mains' and Ferguson's work, my point is neither to salvage the vague use of neoliberalism as an analytical device, nor to critique their claims about its uses being imprecise and inadequate. Rather, I wish to push back against the way that different political cultures and technical rationalities are sometimes assumed to be separate and bounded entities. For instance, if I were to adopt Ferguson's view on neoliberalism's analytical limits, I would consider the Lebanese state's decision to distribute electricity in the villages surrounding the dam as a form of distributive techno-governance that does not sit well with neoliberal logic. Instead, I align my approach with Karl Polanyi's arguments about the embeddedness of market forces.[10]

In Polanyi's view, the expansion of market forces (notably, privatization) prompts countertendencies — people in Jimma rioting for example, or interlocutors in the Litani watershed claiming their right to electricity — catalyzing new social forces, which in turn curb and re-embed market relations within broader social worlds. All these situations, from economic

[10] Mains is able to dismiss neoliberalism as an analytic because his reading establishes a direct correlation between economic relations and political claims (what he refers to as neoliberalism as a class project) without explicitly accounting for the way other forms of popular mobilizations (such as the 2005 anti-state riots that he mentions) might have informed new development policies and governance techniques. What Polanyi (2001) describes as the embeddedness of market forces is useful to make sense of these dynamics. This is very different from Ferguson's claim that there is a "surprising affinity of some aspects of what we call 'neoliberalism' with certain forms of progressive politics" (Ferguson 2010, 170).

expansion to its counterforces, unfold within capitalism (Hart 2009). The processes of embeddedness, from which development interventions are inseparable, are neither solely top-down, nor a way to alleviate the social agitations caused by economic expansion. They are also not a form of governmentality that aims to introduce market logic into all walks of life (Rose 1999). Building on these perspectives, I attend to the histories of infrastructural development in the watershed and the situated political practices they make possible against a background of ongoing economic crisis. My aim is to analyze how both —development and situated political practices—are actualized through evolving struggles, movements of coercion, contestation, and consent.

I have referred to Lebanon's contemporary condition as a conjuncture of disasters and emphasized neoliberalism's constitutive role. Relatedly, I have also found it generative to conceptualize neoliberalism itself as a conjuncture —what Donald Donham (1999, 132) calls "history at one point in time."[11] Taking Lebanon's debt crisis and its fraught history with infrastructural development as a backdrop allows me to ponder my interlocutors' political practices and claims in a manner that does not reduce them to merely 'a local variation of a global process' (Hart 2009). Rather, my aim has been to highlight how people's relations to the Litani as river, infrastructure, and state, development policies, and technopolitical rationalities are dialectically interconnected. In the politics of bereavement, the provision of public services is conceived of as a kind of gift exchange while labour relations within the state bureaucracy are understood as maintaining an *esprit de corps*—the corporatist loyalty to the Litani, as expressed by Bou Falah and many other LRA staff— despite the heavy toll it's taken on community health and livelihoods. As Li puts it (2014, 18), "rejecting notions of functional equilibrium, a conjunctural approach treats practices that appear to hold constant for a period of time as a puzzle, as much in need of explanation as dramatic change." I narrate this politics as "a history of the present" that is not without its own political and ethical implications (Hart 2009, 119). This becomes particularly evident in Chapter 2 where I attempt to develop the contested meanings of *tarabot maslahi*—a symbiotic form of *living together* that connects humans and non-humans in

[11] Within the discipline of Anthropology, the conjunctural approach was developed by scholars from the Manchester school. For a detailed description of a conjunctural approach to ethnography see Tania Li's introduction to *Land's End* (2014). For more on the relation between the temporal and spatial characters of a conjuncture, see Hart (2010) and Li (2008).

the watershed, is ambivalent, and also causes harm. As a form of power, *tarabot maslahi* is both a structural and historically contingent system.

Politics

In considering how people interact with the Litani, as river, infrastructure, and state, I am also trying to come to grips with the space of politics. This necessitates an analysis of how modern forms of institutional political power—often equated with an ideal type of state power *tout court*—have been generally understood and debated in the Lebanese context, both in academic and popular discourses (Mitchell 1999).[12] In the years leading up to the 2019 anti-government protests, which unlike previous movements of contestation were no longer circumscribed to the capital, Beirut, "*wayn hiyya al-dawlah* —where is the state*?*" emerged as the pressing refrain of disgruntled citizens, protesting deficient state services and a wide range of socioeconomic ills brought about by insufficient public welfare (Obeid 2015; Nucho 2022). In both everyday and expert parlance, *wayn hiyya al-dawlah* came to articulate a view of the Lebanese state as weak, absent, distorted by the forceful presence of non-state actors and militias, fragmented, and "failed" (Kosmatopoulos 2011; Obeid 2015; Hermez 2015). During the 2015 and 2019 uprisings, a common retort to this question also circulated amongst activists: *fi dawlah wa hayk shaklha* —"there is a state, and this is what it looks like"—a reference to the violent repression of protests by state security.[13] This response formed part of a counter-narrative underscoring the state's divestment from "public good" and its investment in brutal repression (Bear and Mathur 2015). After the Beirut port explosion in 2020, another popular slogan-statement surfaced: *dawlati faʿalat haza* —"my government did this" graffitied in both English and Arabic on the walls separating the Dora-Beirut highway from the port.[14] The slogan openly accused the state of committing a murderous crime against its own population. From the

[12] For a comprehensive discussion of the state in anthropological theory and ethnographic research, see for e.g., Das and Poole (2004); Sharma and Gupta (2006). Of note, the links between hydraulic organization on one hand, and state or societal formations on the other, have also been long been debated in anthropological literature (see for e.g., Barnes 2014, 2017; Ribeiro 1994; Swyngedouw 2015).

[13] In Arabic: *al-ajhizah al-amniyyah* — the state security apparatuses that include but are not limited to: the army, the internal security forces, the state's secret police (the *mukhabarat*), the state security (*amn al-dawlah)*, and the parliamentary guards (*harass al-majlis*).

[14] A more accurate translation of *dawlati* to English is 'state' and not 'government'. That it has been translated to government instead is noteworthy and warrants an analysis that exceeds the scope of this dissertation.

2019 uprisings to the port explosion, popular movements of contestation in Lebanon have levelled their claims against the state, dominant political parties, and their monopoly over political power. In so doing, they have foregrounded the role played by the dominant political parties in the legislative and executive bodies, highlighting how bureaucratic, legal and security systems control and regulate the population on a sectarian, gendered, and clientelist basis (Hermez 2015; Mikdashi 2022).

Complementary to discursive reframings of what constitutes political life in Lebanon, a rich body of scholarship has explored the nature, dynamism, and role of the Lebanese state in deriving, regulating, and disseminating power through technical, legal, rational, impersonal, and political means. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, this literature has placed great emphasis on the study of sectarian clientelist networks, infrastructural relations, and governmentalities enacted through the state.[15] Two prevailing models for understanding political power and the formation of political subjectivities in contemporary Lebanon have thus been the biopolitical or technopolitical state on one hand, and the communal-clientelist state on the other. Both models are chiefly invested in theorizing how the state maintains and reproduces sectarian and sexual difference among its citizens. In this literature, the state is conceptualized as controlled by communal and political party leaders, the *zuʿama*—the traditional leaders, who seize its formal structures, networks, and resources, earmark various allowances, and dispense clientelist services to their own citizen constituencies in exchange for their political loyalty and votes (Hermez 2015). The *zuʿama* state bears family resemblance to big- and great- manship —the personification of specific modes of social reproduction and political power that entail non-equivalent quantitative and qualitative exchanges (Godelier and Strathern 1991; Sahlins 1963).

[15] Anthropologist Joanne Nucho (2017) has looked at the role of state infrastructural services and their unequal provision in shaping sectarian identities and belonging. In her study of *waqf* in Lebanon (religious endowments), anthropologist Nada Moumtaz (2021) offers a compelling critique of the modern state's secular project separating the private from the public sphere and religion from the economy. Examining the sovereignty of the state, anthropologist Maya Mikdashi (2022) coins the term "sextarianism" to understand how bureaucratic apparatuses intervene in, and govern, biopolitical relationships at the juncture of secularism and the body. Anthropologist Sami Hermez (2015; 2017) draws on Yael Navarro's conceptualization of the state as fantasy (as that which could be) as a critical reflection on the idea that political power is inherent to non-state forces. As Lebanese polity and society continue to be threatened by violence, Hermez also views the state as something that exists "in the meanwhile of war". Like Hermez, anthropologist and urban studies scholar Hiba Bou Akar (2018) considers that the Lebanese state is only a temporary form of governance concerned with the technical administration of society, "for the war-yet-to-come". Political economic questions, in Bou Akar's view, are relegated to the political and religious institutions with ties to the country's mass political parties. Other perspectives include anthropologist Michelle Obeid's "state of aspiration", how people envision statecraft and yearn for it, focusing on border-making practices in the region of Aarsal (2010; 2015; 2019); and Bassel Salloukh et al's (2015) work that describes how the sectarian power system of the state also infuses other realms of social and economic life. Another recent framework for studying the Lebanese state has been that of critical security studies (El Dardiry and Hermez 2020).

These exchanges make claims of corruption leveled against state officials legible —as the intimate, hidden, unequal, and unauthorized transactions illicitly performed within and through public institutions (Muir and Gupta 2018). These academic and popular discourses of *fassad* – corruption, *zabaʾiniya* — clientelism, and *taʾifiya* — sectarianism have led to the framing of certain practices of contending with power as anomic, complacent, immoral, and nepotistic (Hermez 2011, 2015; Kosmatopoulos 2011; Mikdashi 2022; Obeid 2015).

As Lebanon has a considerable migrant and refugee population, scholars have also interrogated Lebanese state power by looking at governance mechanisms of state-noncitizen relations (Boustani, Carpi, Gebara and Mourad 2016; Janmyr 2016; Mourad 2017).[16] Politically marginalized by the state, refugees and other disenfranchised communities have developed an everyday counter-politics of the urban poor, in the form of collaborative actions concerned with pragmatic survival (Allan 2014; 2018). These political practices, enacted in the form of quotidian camp strategies, connect Palestinian and Syrian refugees together with disenfranchised Lebanese, address material needs, and unsettle ideological formations (Ibid).[17] Similarly, African and South Asian migrant workers forge their own particular politics of belonging to the city of Beirut despite their marginalization by the state and citizens alike. Their embodied experiences of, and in the city, are structured through labour activities as well as linguistic and temporal relations (Kassamali 2015; Reumert 2023). Moving away from the analytical lens of governmentality helps reinscribe what counts as political in cultural, socioeconomic, material, and mundane quotidian practices. Another aligned approach to politics examines the intersections between class-based structures and other forms of social relations, such as the feudalist and capitalist structures in pre-civil war Lebanon (Gilsenan 1996); or between sectarian power relations and social classes in Lebanon in post-civil war Lebanon (Traboulsi 2017).[18] This

[16] Between 2013 and 2019 (in the wake of the Syria uprising and subsequent war), there is a growing literature that focuses on humanitarianism and governance of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock (2019) critically reflect on the proliferation of Syrian refugee studies and the relations between knowledge production and political economic transformations in the UK and Lebanon.

[17] Though emergent and fleeting, Allan (2014) argues that these politics departs from the strict ethnonationalist claims around which Palestinian representational politics are structured.

[18] Through ethnographic research conducted on the eve of the Lebanese civil war during the 1970s, anthropologist Michael Gilsenan (1996) studied the socio-historical problem of male honor, power, and status in a rapidly changing society. He explored the resilient archetypal figure of the *qabaday* — the strong man— to understand how men maintained honourable status even when they were no longer socially and economically autonomous. While these men's performances of hierarchy and status were cast as expressions of backwardness, Gilsenan argued that this 'backwardness' was produced through the intersection between feudalist and capitalist structures.

body of scholarship has produced conceptual frames such as "mafiocracy" or a critique of the social construction of cultural backwardness (Ibid 2015).[19] Structured around honor, kinship, and the quotidian use of violence in economic, commercial, and social struggles, this literature offers a generative lens through which to reimagine what constitutes politics outside the hegemonic institutions of the state.

The space of the politics of bereavement is simultaneously a space of insecurity and possibility, both permutable and unchanging. I am particularly interested in the way that it actualizes the enmeshment of market and non-market relations, socio-ethical predispositions and pecuniary behaviors, as well as equal and hierarchical exchanges beyond the oft-normative and prescriptive frames of corruption or clientelism among the disenfranchised.[20] The 'politics of bereavement' is not a particular practice that I examine, but rather the name that I give to the diverse forms of politics, which I explore in each of the chapters of this dissertation. Akin to what Ilana Feldman (2018), reflecting on the possibility of political practice in the apolitical and depoliticized humanitarian space of the refugee camp, calls a "politics of living", these political forms are fashioned in everyday life and under the writ of chronic conditions of crises. Though centered on the way people manage to forge an existence for themselves in the face of hardship, I want to suggest that the politics of bereavement is not only a localized collective practice but also a manner of relating to power that is likewise enacted on a national scale.

Counterpoint

As crisis turns from an exceptional occurrence to a condition of everyday life, it pushes us to question our understandings of the passing of time and, necessarily, our expectations of

[19] In a more recent work, historian and political theorist Fawwaz Traboulsi (2017) argues that political power in Lebanon is the outcome of articulated relationships between two entwined structures (sects and social classes) with the aim of controlling social surplus. Traboulsi defines the workings of that power as a system of concomitant domination and exploitation, control and extraction from both state and society and that cannot be confined to the realm of what is habitually referred to as state power. Building on Pino Arlacci's sociology of mafiocracy, Traboulsi notes an increased convergence between political power, economic monopolies, and the use of armed violence in the aftermath of Lebanon's civil war (which also happens to be the era during which neoliberalism and financialization became consolidated).

[20] Another approach that is generative to think with is Nada Moumtaz's (2021, 153-192) discussion of the relations between Islamic charitable giving and the rise modern state power. Moumtaz highlights how charity and an ethics of care of the family is reframed as a form of nepotism. My approach differs from Moumtaz's in two respects. For one, I attend to the practices and discourses of communities who are not in positions of legal or economic power or advantage. For another, my methodological focus is on conjunctures and their situated politics and not discursive traditions and the ethics these afford (in Moumtaz's case — the Islamic tradition).

advancement or decline (Ferguson 1999). Michel, a friend of a friend and insurance broker who lives and works in Beirut, returning to his village in the West Bekaa only occasionally, once told me a story that perfectly illustrates how the socio-affects of crisis, in this case war, thwart linear understandings of time:

> There is this story of a young man who was born after the famine [after 1918]. Sometime during the late 1930s, he decided to immigrate to America. After he settled there, he began to phone his uncle in Zahle [city in central Bekaa] every few years to inquire about family and friends who stayed and to check whether the time had finally come for him to return. The first time he called his uncle was in 1948, the year of the Nakba. '*Khalo* - uncle, how is everybody, *Rah betmorr* - will it be over soon? Is the time ripe for me to return?', he asked. '*Taweeleh, taweeleh* – it is going to take loooong', his uncle retorted before hanging up. When he called a second time in 1958, the year of the civil strife, he heard the same answer 'taweeleh, taweeleh….' He called a third and then a fourth time in 1967, the year of the defeat, and 1973, the year of the war and the oil crisis. Finally, and that was two weeks into the civil war in 1975, he called one last time only to be told that his uncle, a very old man by then, had been found dead, sniped in the taxi that was driving him home from the hospital right as they were leaving Beirut. Bereft with grief over his uncle's murder, the man hung up the phone, murmuring to himself '*Taweeleh, taweeleh'*.

In this apocryphal tale —Michel maintains, by the way, that the young man in question was his grandfather's older brother— each moment of crisis is both a syndrome and a prodrome. What I find more tragic than the young man's futile experience of 'waiting it out' is the recursive character of crisis, the way each paroxysmic event connects with its antecedent and is also a presage of what is to come (Hage 2015, Stoler 2016). The young man's story accentuates the relevance of contrasting these different moments of "history at one point in time" to tease out the interruptions, continuities, and sociohistorical and spatial forces operating at multiple levels (Donham 1999, 132).

Comparing and contrasting different conjunctures has direct implications for my ethnographic approach. While I had initially set out to craft a historical ethnography of the Litani dam, beginning with the creation of the LRA in 1954, I understood, as soon I began my fieldwork, that I was, in fact, researching, thinking with, and writing about two interrelated and contrapuntal conjunctures. The first coincided with the planning, implementation, and completion of the infrastructural hydropower project on the waters of the Litani river between 1954 and 1968. The second conjuncture, the time of fieldwork, was being shaped by the country's economic crisis and the after-effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the port explosion, both of which had caused tremendous suffering and death.[21]

Whenever I talked about my dissertation project to friends and interlocutors, they would be quick to point out another layer of meaning implied in my approach. "Lebanon is finished, *ya di'ano mesh haram* — what a shameful loss, isn't it*?*", cried out Ghada one evening, as we prepared dinner in her kitchen in Saghbine. Her comment made me aware that the history of the Litani that I had set out to study was also a history of an aborted nation-building. Each child in Lebanon, including myself, grew up learning about the Litani project at school, much in the same way a child in the U.S., for example, learns about the Declaration of Independence, as one of the founding myths of the republic. While in the field, people would tell me that Lebanon was finished, over, *intaha*. The history of the development of the Litani project —initially conceived as the country's most important investment in technological modernity since its independence in 1943— is somehow an origin story for Lebanon, now coming to its end. Each time a crisis materializes, the infrastructure's completion is interrupted, and along with it the promises it embodied. From electrification and irrigation to technological advancement and more comfortable and consumerist ways of life, all suffered the fate of perpetual deferral. More recently, the Litani's collapse seems to mirror the country's irreversible decline. No longer a synecdoche for technological innovation and nationalist pride, the Litani has become the dead

[21] Conjunctures are neither spatially nor temporally bound in the sense but rather depend on the themes under consideration. As Tania Li (2014, 19) put it, "the research focus can be more or less fine-grained as the topic requires, but even when the grain is fine enough for an ethnographer to exercise the art of observing and listening closely, the conjuncture under study isn't bounded. It is still composed of a set of elements that have varied spatial and temporal scope. It is also formed by elements that are weak or absent."

river that poisons all forms of life in its course—from its sources in Olleik near Baalbek to where it joins the sea in Qasmieh, north of the city of Sour.

While war and, more recently, ruination and ruins, have been deployed as analytical categories and temporal and spatial framing devices, I am proposing an analytic of counterpoints to make sense of the recursive dynamics of crisis, whilst also accounting for the two diametrically opposed moments in the history of Lebanon, its beginning and seeming end (Bou Akar 2018, Hermez 2017; Khayyat 2022, Khayyat 2023). The counterpoint is both theoretical and methodological, allowing me to grasp ethnographically the interplay of forces implicated in development politics. It also pertains to my own positionality as a 'native' anthropologist returning home after a prolonged absence, only to find it profoundly transformed. Juxtaposing ethnographic and archival exploration, I engage the history of the watershed in the long-durée, together with the life histories of its inhabitants; the optimism of modern state-building, against Lebanon's ongoing and deepening state of socioeconomic and ecological devastation; and the broader forces of politics and the market with the finely textured contingencies of everyday life. The contrapuntal movement, between two divergent scales, highlights how discursive political claims embodied in the large projects —designed, negotiated, and implemented at global, regional, and national levels— are refracted materially and affectively in localized environments.

The emergent and inchoate political practices that I attend to are teetering on the edge of discourse. In the discourses of my interlocutors, I engage what could or should be said (or not) and the meanings inferred —what Freud (1989), in his study of dreamwork, called considerations of representability and intelligibility.[22] The idea is that these discourses can be read in two interrelated ways: for their manifest content and literal descriptions as well as for the desires, fears, and other unconscious thoughts and symbolism that they may carry. This approach is fraught because it entails highlighting connections or making inferences that might not be shared by everyone involved. For instance, I have built my understanding of *tarabot maslahi* (a symbiotic form of living together) as a form of exercising power in the watershed,

[22] In Freud's (1989) conceptualization of the dreamwork, dream formation entailed four specific processes: (i) condensation – the compression or conflation of several elements superimposed in one image; (ii) displacement – the move of psychical intensity or value from our thoughts onto other objects; (iii) representability – the pictorial arrangements of abstract thought; and (iv) revision of the dream content – the first façade constructed in the dream that allows it a certain, albeit sometimes incomplete, intelligibility. I draw on Freud's propositions in the way that I attend to the discourses of my interlocutors.

based on a conversation I had with Bassam, an engineer, whose family maintained intergenerational connections with the Litani. While I am aware that other interlocutors in the watershed —like Bou Falah or Roger, a former power plant worker— do not use the same language to describe their involvement with the Litani, I read their own accounts as gesturing towards similar forms of interdependencies. I have thus chosen to advance Bassam's own terminology to the level of a concept because it captures the complex interplay of forces shaping people's relations to their environments, technology, and state power.[23]

This methodological partiality also informs my decision in Chapter 4 to turn my attention to the way many people in the watershed blame the river's pollution on Syrian refugees. I build on my interlocutors' suggestion that only Syrian refugees can eat the river's toxic fish to underscore my own disagreement with these perspectives, which I interpret as part of a broader lexicon for speaking about foreign others that I could not share, agree with, nor ignore for political and analytical reasons. Tending to the edges of my interlocutors' discourses here makes it possible for me to develop a conceptual framework of 'absorption' as a logic of political assimilation. In so doing, I do not mean to dismiss my interlocutors' views or to lay claim to a bird's eye view or a totalizing gaze. Rather, I attempt to cultivate what Sherry Ortner (1995) calls an "ethnographic stance" — a commitment to thickness and a refusal to gloss over the ambivalent politics encountered during fieldwork (Allan 2014). My uneasiness with some of the views people expressed (and the differences that arise as result in between us) allows me to shift my ethnographic attention away from the individual and towards the socially determinate practice, making it possible for me to scrutinize broader socio-historical forces.

In her own work, which she describes as a conjunctural approach to ethnography, Li (2014, p.18) shifts our attention from the " 'the individual' understood as a universal figure" to focusing "on historically situated 'socially determinate' subjects, further differentiated along lines of class, gender, and generation, among others." In lieu of foregrounding agentive rational and bounded subjects, hers is an invitation to bring under further scrutiny common sense understandings, normative practices, taken-for-granted habits, material configurations, and

[23] I am inspired here by Diana Allan's (2009) discussion of the experiences of Fatima, a woman who decides to open her own shop in the fraught ecology of the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila. Allan builds on Fatima's single case to critically reflect on the gaps and tensions between idealized social and political structures and more emergent economic dispositions shaping the everyday life of Palestinian refugees.

what Raymond Williams (1977) has called "structures of feelings" in order to analyze how power and inequalities are encountered, normalized, and reproduced. Li's approach helps to de-individualize contentious differences or disagreements faced in the field and to resituate them in relation to broader socio-historical and structuring forces, like the power of the market or the state. In so doing, the ethnographer lays no claims to objectivity or a totalizing gaze, quite the contrary, they are part of the very conjunctures they study. As I show in Chapter 4, this analytical move also allows me to understand the limits of the LRA's commitment to innovative sustainability policies.

Many times, my interlocutors assumed that I shared their position or that I did not oppose it. This is one reason I do not foreground sectarianism as one of the structuring forces at play in the watershed of the Litani. My interlocutors constantly sought to situate me —socially, politically, and confessionally— in relation to Lebanon's cobweb of kinship and sectarian ties. My (and my husband's) ambiguous and confessionally queer position, meaning the difficulty of associating either of us to any particular community, and the fact that I previously lived in the diverse and cosmopolitan neighborhood of Hamra in Beirut, helped me navigate this thorny matter. Though my interlocutors never asked me about my religious affiliation, they sometimes assumed I was a Christian among Christians and a Muslim among Muslims. When they did, I appreciated the openness with which we discussed controversial topics over which we profoundly disagreed —like the legacies of the civil war, leftwing activism, or relationships to Palestinian refugee communities—and took it as a sign of trust. In other cases, when my presence was welcomed even if it caused discomfort, I learned to accept their reticence as the recognition of an insurmountable difference. Moving away from the analytical lens of sectarianism has also allowed me to attend more closely to my interlocutors' material and quotidian practices instead of the oft-idealized forms of political belonging and sectarian orthodoxies that have come to shape more commonplace understandings of national politics.

Directly connected with the contrapuntal analysis that I am proposing is the obvious but difficult constatation that my going there (to the field) was a homecoming, even in the West Bekaa, where I am not from. Additionally, and because the public health measures in place during the coronavirus prevented me from traveling to Lebanon at first, I ended up doing

preliminary archival research from my home in Montreal. Overall, the time I spent, between January 2021 and the end of September 2022, conducting ethnographic research blurred all distinctions between being at home and going to the field, whether in Lebanon or in Canada. This position delineated both the conditions of possibility and the limits of my relations with my interlocutors, making me aware of a slightly unhinged contradiction that was swiftly materializing between my research project and my political commitments. I have found Martina Avanza's (2008) attempt to conceptualize a mode of 'disenchanted ethnography'—where the ethnographer's own position is politically at odds with that of her interlocutors—helpful to think with.[24] Avanza asks whether political and ideological empathy is a prerequisite for the building of ethical ethnographic relations. As I developed, researched, and wrote this dissertation between two other counterpoints, the Beirut port explosion and Israel's attack of Palestinians in Gaza, I also find myself confronted with the delicate question of politics' relation to ethics, as well as the tension between an "engaged anthropology" and an anthropology that deliberately opts to excise itself from the messy domains of the political (Li 2008).

In view of increased militarism, revivalist neoliberalism, and the brutal ascendancy of naked power, how might anthropology contribute towards a struggle for justice?[25] To the insider-ethnographer that I am, formulating an ethnographic stance poses a critical, yet classical, anthropological question that is epistemological, ethical, and political at once. I assert this because a native anthropologist's ethnographic research is premised not merely on their entry into a field —since I am Lebanese, I am already partly immersed in the world that I have chosen to study— but also on the way an ethnographic exit helps redraw the boundaries between desk and field (Mosse 2006). Throughout many of my encounters in the field and, also later, while during the writing this dissertation, I hesitated between taking on an "ethnographic disposition of docility" and espousing "the agonistic dimension of intellectual and political dialogue, the resistance to having one's world constituted by the other's narrative" (Bardawil 2023, 136). I held space for ideological difference in the field and this is what allowed me to tease out the

[24] In Avanza's case, a group of far-right political activists in Italy who advocate for the implementation of xenophobic policies and programs.
[25] For e.g., Allen 2024; Deeb and Winegar 2024; Hart 2010; and Li 2008 reflect on this complicated and pressing question. See also, Ghassan Hage (@anthroprofhage), "Gaza and the rise of naked power", Twitter, Oct 31, 2023, 5:57PM, https://x.com/anthroprofhage/status/1719473627404333090?s=20.

political implications of what might otherwise be understood as nepotistic or morally dubious practices—as I do in Chapter 2 while discussing the LRA's recruitment strategies in the villages around the dam. Elsewhere, I chose to reclaim the space of political difference through the writing, in the way for instance that I object to my interlocutors' depictions of Syrian refugee bodies as leaky and impure in Chapter 4. My objections remain textually, and not socially, mediated (Mosse 2006). I know that any attempt from my part to express such disagreements directly to my interlocutors would have irremediably entailed broader arguments revolving around patterns of political authority in Lebanon, power, and moral and communal belonging. It is in that sense too that my own politics of bereavement permeates this dissertation. As Fadi Bardawil put it (2023, 136), "I had to accommodate myself to that space constituted by the unresolved tension between docility and resistance."

Archives and Field sites

Between January 2021 and September 2022, I spent a total of 20 months conducting archival and ethnographic fieldwork between Montreal, Beirut, and the West Bekaa. As I couldn't travel to Lebanon the first year, and as most archival institutions shut their doors during the coronavirus pandemic, I prioritized archival research that I could conduct from home. When I made it to Beirut in early December 2021, I complemented this initial research with additional work in the special collections and archives of the American University of Beirut. Overall, I studied the discourses on infrastructures, state-making and the social and cultural practices these prompted in three collections — the Litani's infrastructural project documents and correspondences in the collections of the World Bank (these included the construction phases of the Qaraoun dam and more recently the Lake Qaraoun Pollution Prevention Project (1958 – 2008); special features on the Litani in Arabic language newspapers such as *Assafir*, *Annahar*, *al-Hayat* (1958– 2016), in expert magazines such as *Commerce du Levant* interested in development and economics, in the official state gazette and legal and parliamentary publications, and in the LRA's official history book; as well as various archival documents including private archives (the personal archives of the second Chairman of the LRA, Henri

Naccache), technical documents of unrealized projects on the Litani, ethnohistorical texts (Zouhair Hawary's popular oral histories of al Mansourah in the Bekaa).[26]

It is also during the time of the pandemic, while I was stuck in Montreal, that I met Pierre Naccache whose father Henry Naccache, in his capacity as the LRA's second chairman of the board, had overseen the construction of the Litani dam and its three power-plants. In the weeks that followed the port explosion in August 2020, I recall feeling as if the blast swallowed an entire world of experience and emotions, all that I knew about Beirut. Not unlike Walter Benjamin who bid farewell to the Berlin of his childhood, I would go to bed each night and images from the city of my birth as I knew it would suddenly appear (Benjamin 2006). It was around then that I stumbled upon an article published in *Le Devoir* (one of Quebec's independent newspapers) that mentioned Naccache. The article was based on an interview that the journalist Lisa-Marie Gervais conducted with Pierre in his home in Montreal. In the article, Pierre talked about his father's legacy and described how, as the co-director of the *Conseil Exécutif des Grands Projets* (CEGP), a public body of planning and development, Henry oversaw the development of the Beirut port, as well as the construction of the grain silos that were also destroyed by the blast. Henry's own father, Pierre's grandfather, was Albert Naccache, the 'premier directeur des travaux publics du Grand Liban' during the 1920s, who proposed a dam project for harnessing the waters of the Litani shortly after independence.[27] I contacted Lisa-Marie, and after securing his consent, she put us in touch. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Naccache, whose family history was so intimately linked to the Litani's, lived close by in Montreal. We were almost neighbors. The first time we met, we talked about the article, the port explosion, and Palestine. He deplored the loss of downtown Beirut and its postwar transformation into a soulless quarter for the new bourgeoisie. As our connection deepened, I began to feel less alone in Montreal, almost closer to Beirut where family and friends were struggling to recover from the explosion's devastating aftermath. Our friendship was not only a serendipitous gift born out of these challenging circumstances but also the means by which we

[26] Of particular interest "The Litani, the river of the million poor" —a serialized dossier published in the Arabic leftist newspaper Assafir in April 1974, produced and written by Elias Abboud (who was a communist journalist from the village of Qaraoun) with the help of researcher, Wafaa Daaboul and photographer Hakim Hamra. Published on the eve of the Lebanese civil war, this dossier spoke to a concern with people's relationships to the river and the state amid rampant socioeconomic inequality decimating the communities of more than a hundred towns situated along the Litani, from the source of the river to the sea.
[27] Albert Naccache was the inaugural director of the public works department during the French mandate on Lebanon.

both inoculated ourselves against homesickness at a time when neither of us could travel to Lebanon (Benjamin 2006). My lengthy exchanges and disagreements with Pierre proved key to refining my understanding of the contested history of the Litani's infrastructural development.

The historical research I attempted to do in Lebanon was a harder task. Except for a handful of recognized institutions where archives are well organized and accessible, locating relevant primary sources usually required a heavy investment in terms of time, inventive practices, and the building of a network of well-connected and powerful persons that could yield significant *wasta* (mediation).[28] I did not manage to obtain access to the LRA's institutional archives located in Beirut. When I asked several LRA officials if they would facilitate access to the archives, they unanimously recommended I read instead the LRA's official history book, published on its 50th anniversary in 2005. While gender dynamics were not an insignificant factor, I interpreted their response as a form of institutional gatekeeping in a highly volatile political context. Other reasons for refusal I had been given revolved around issues of accessibility and availability. During the Two-Year War of the Lebanese civil conflict (1975-1976), militias ransacked and scorched the LRA's main office building on Damascus Road, the green line that separated East and West Beirut, and pillaged and squandered the archives.[29] Whatever was left was moved several times before ending up in an office the LRA occupied in a southern neighborhood of Beirut. Describing the archive's current disorderly state, one LRA director warned me that "there might be some scary rats in that dingy basement." I was also told that the LRA struggled to retain a certain "institutional memory": while technical maps and drawings were usually kept without great difficulty, bureaucrats often took personal memos, miscellaneous correspondences, staff files, and other documents with them when they left their positions or retired.[30] In the archives of the World Bank, I also came across many letters and memos sent by LRA officials to Washington. Yet, time and again, I was told to read the LRA's official history book instead, which I did. Reading the LRA's official history along its grain

[28] Years of colonial intervention, the country's history with civil wars and foreign invasions, violence and displacement have also led to the confiscation, dispersal, and destruction of the archives of many institutions and private individuals (Atallah 2017; Scalenghe and Sbaity 2003; Sleiman 2016). On the archive as an assemblage of people, places, affects, and things, see for e.g., Mikdashi (2022, 48-82).

[29] It is not uncommon to find state archival documents for sale at the antiquarian market of Basta located a stone's throw from the LRA's offices in Beirut.

[30] Occasionally, fragments of the LRA archive would serendipitously turn up in the collections of foreign institutions like The World Bank (WB) archives for the Litani Hydropower Project which retained select documents, letters, memos, minutes of meetings, etc.

eventually allowed me to reflect on how the Litani, as a term that references nature, technology, and state operates as a type of speech that both registers and reifies historical transformation — an idea I develop in Chapter 1.

When I got to Beirut in January 2022, I began looking for a house to rent in the Zahle-Bar Elias region in central Bekaa where the Litani's pollution problem was known to be particularly acute, and residents had organized themselves in protest for months on end. A few days after I settled back in Beirut, a very close friend suggested she introduce me to Ghada, a former lawyer, United Nations staff, professional opera singer, educator, activist, former municipal board member, maker of *mouneh*, and baker of delectable pasta and bread, who "knew everybody and was from the Bekaa." Between January and September 2022, I lived in the village of Saghbine in West Bekaa, renting a room in her ancestral house. From its roof, each morning, I could gaze at the dam, parts of Southern Lebanon, and Jabal al-Shaykh (Mount Hermon). The highly anticipated parliamentary elections planned for June 2022 coloured the first half of my stay, particularly since Ghada was running as a candidate for a newly created opposition party. It was thanks to Ghada that I made good friends in the watershed —Elias, Pascaline, and Hassib who in turn introduced me to their families, friends, and acquaintances. This allowed me to gradually build more sustained connections with other interlocutors in the surrounding villages. Another key interlocutor was Bou Falah — everybody knew him, and he knew everybody as well. In a small village like Saghbine, I was both a stranger and well-known to everyone as the researcher from Canada staying in Ghada's house. This meant that while I could very early on join people and participate in the mundane everyday routines— going to the store, Sunday mass, visiting the dairy farm, or someone's orchard— it took more time to establish relations of trust.

During my visits to nearby villages, particularly in Qaraoun and Jib Jinnine on the eastern banks of the Litani (Saghbine, Ain Zebdeh, Aitanit, and Machghara were located on the western side), my interlocutors were always quick to mention the striking social, ecological, and cultural distinctions between villages on either side of the river. On the western side, farmers reveled in drawing clean and fresh water from the nearby Barouk mountain's abundant springs. While more than 70% of Lebanon's population had been forced to rely on bottled water in the period following the Lebanese civil war, in Saghbine we only needed to open the tap for drinking water

(Riachi 2022). Across the river, on the flank of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, the landscape turned arid. There, along the eastern bank, near the village of Qaraoun, farmers who couldn't tap into the water reserves of an underground well to irrigate their crops were forced to switch to rainfed harvests or stopped planting altogether. They couldn't draw water from the Litani because the LRA prohibited it, claiming that the water was too polluted.[31]

Everybody in West Bekaa would also emphasize the stories and peculiarities that set their region apart from the rest of the Bekaa valley. When the dam was completed in the 1960s, the Litani project had territorialized the regions through which the river flowed into two basins: the upper Litani basin in the Bekaa and the lower in South Lebanon, separated by the Qaraoun dam (Sneddon 2015, 53).[32] The West Bekaa is the administrative region where the dam is located and is also known for it. In this region nested between two mountains, *ahali al diyaʿ* (village residents) proudly flaunted their respective village's specificities—from their political affiliations and the sacrifices they had made to the Litani, to the goat milk ice cream they had perfected over generations.[33] Our conversations highlight how their villages were radically transformed in the wake of the construction of the dam, the advent of electricity in the region, and Lebanon's broader socioeconomic and political transformations on the eve of the civil war. Their stories speak to the way capitalist modernization ruptured the timelessness habitually attributed to peasant communities, inducing proletarianization, rural flight, migration to Australia and the Americas, the gradual emergence of a small industry and a service economy structured around electricity, and more recently ecological degradation and the attendant experiential transformations of life in the watershed.

To reflect the wide array of perspectives and convey the affective, literary, and aesthetic potency of people's stories, I have chosen to include long blockquotes and to interpose them with my own voice on the page. Since it felt intrusive to record while in the field, these quotes are excerpted from longer conversations I transcribed in my notebook, where I took detailed

[31] I address this issue in Chapter 4.
[32] On scale-making and the creation of modern river basins, Christopher Sneddon shows how, through the Litani, the United States Bureau for Reclamation's engineered the concept of a river basin as the most appropriate unit of development during the 1950s. (As I mention in Chapter 1, the USBR provided technical assistance to develop the plans of the Litani Hydropower and Irrigation Project).
[33] This caza (administrative district) unfolds westward off the flank of the Barouk mountains, hence its name. Part of the West Bekaa (the western bank of the river) is known for its viticulture. For a thorough discussion of landscape formation and power relations in this wine region, see Saleh 2014.

notes as conversations unfolded. In moments where this too felt inappropriate, I reconstructed these conversations from memory as soon as I could and in as much detail as possible. Whenever excerpted passages from interviews or from archival documents were in French, I kept them as such — largely to gesture to the significant role and enduring influence of French technopolitics and francophone culture on Lebanese social and political life. While my aim is to allow readers to perform their own haptic interpretations of this ethnographic material, I recognize that how I have chosen to contextualize it necessarily informs how it will ultimately be received. To protect my interlocutors' privacy and anonymity, I use pseudonyms throughout, except in the case of Ghada and Pierre Naccache.

My research methodology was also structured around more formal encounters with the LRA bureaucracy both in Beirut and in the West Bekaa. This included formal semi-structured interviews with three LRA officials —Dr. S. the chairman of the board, Dr. G. the head of the LRA's hydropower department, and Dr. N. the head of the newly established water governance bureau. I use initials to designate the LRA officials, considering that I interviewed them only in their capacity as spokespersons for their institution. In the course of these conversations, many of my questions were deemed sensitive or too political. This allowed me to track the LRA's scripted language — a technocratic speak that focused on the importance of sustainability, transparency, and conservation that I explore and discuss throughout the dissertation's different chapters. In addition to the interviews, I was able to go on a guided tour of the Litani infrastructural facilities and to visit the underground structures of the dam as well as the Markaba power plant. I describe the tour and the insights gained from touring as method in the opening chapter.

Outline

In the dissertation's opening chapter, I trace the multiple meanings of the term 'Litani', used interchangeably in the watershed to refer to the river, the hydropower project, and the Litani River Authority (LRA). Thinking with the Litani's indexicality, I explore the sociohistorical and ecological processes that produce a "type of speech" (Barthes 1991) that condenses nature,

infrastructure, and state bureaucracy and I interrogate its effects. I argue that the Litani project congealed unequal relations as well as a national politics of development that continues to advocate for the interests of urban elites at the expense of rural communities. I show how during the 1950s and the 1960s, the implementation of the Litani infrastructure prioritized hydropower generation at the expense of irrigation and promoted modern and consumer ways of life over agrarian cultures. I also trace how rural electrification was deployed as a tool for demographic governance aimed at keeping rural communities from migrating to the city. Structured around a national imperative of 'social unity', this politics of development sought to shape myriad dimensions of social change: between city and countryside, in relations of production and consumption, but also in the production of subjectivities and psychic relations. These inequalities still express themselves in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. The chapter also remarks how, in the more recent international shift towards sustainability and environmental conservation, the priorities of the LRA parallel global changing capitalist practices.

Focusing on the experience of power plant workers who have become sick because of the river's pollution, Chapter 2 explores the social relations and fields of power embedded in the Litani (as river, infrastructure, and state bureaucracy). Theorizing from the discourses of my interlocutors at the LRA, I call this specific mode of governance '*tarabot maslahi*' — which in English gestures towards a symbiotic form of living together with the Litani that can be beneficial, commensal, or detrimental. As a conceptual framework, *tarabot maslahi* offers a lens through which to address the set of interactions — larger geopolitical forces, but also socioeconomic and kin relations and rituals— structuring peoples' interactions with water and machines in the powerplant. It illustrates how the workings of abstract systems of power in Lebanon are materialized: how workers become full-time civil servants based on their social connections, and how they afford and access healthcare services. Workers who fall ill because of the river's pollution, continue to toil in the powerplants, as they have no alternative. The ambivalence of this "regime of living" raises questions about how Lebanon's dominant systems of power have not budged despite a swelling national collapse since 2019 (Murphy 2016). As *tarabot maslahi* reveals different ways that living with and relating to others involves constantly brushing up against the limits of power, it provides an alternative to dominant popular and

scholarly understandings of the lived experience of ongoing crisis and people's coping mechanisms. In such interpretations, people are typically either blamed for their continual engagement with dominant structures of power or their actions are diagnosed, viewed through the lens of corruption (routinely invoked in the Lebanese context through the concept of *wasta*). *Tarabot maslahi*, on the other hand, constitutes an understanding of, and opportunity for, a politics where the resilient ideas, languages, and actions that inflect this mode of relationality express neither resistance nor subservience.

During fieldwork, as the rest of the country plunged into darkness because of nationwide power shortages, the hydroelectric stations of the Litani project continued to provide more than 22 hours of hydraulically generated electricity per day to select villages in Lebanon. Chapter 3 traces the repertoire of political, ethical, and value claims that Lebanon's inchoate and incoherent electrification enables in five of these villages, located near the dam in West Bekaa. I focus on residents' claims that their villages receive electricity from the hydropower plants as their just due for lands given to the Litani to make way for the dam. I consider how Lebanon's deepening conjuncture of crises, including its national electric power outage, recasts dispossession as a form of sacrifice, made in the name of a civilizational project of capitalist modernity. Such a regime of value—which frames electricity as a gift that is due or as a service owed in exchange of another object— has explicit political effects in Lebanon's broader context of national debt accumulation, and social and financial collapse. It illustrates how inalienability of land is realized only in relation to the workings of capitalism (Moumtaz 2023). As a form of justice or repair, it paradoxically confirms the dominant and authorized scripts of modernizing capitalist projects, while also absolving the government from its role in providing basic services to its citizens. In emphasizing the duty to repay, this discourse also contributes to the authorization of a wide range of neoliberal measures, like austerity, that benefit only the elite (Graeber 2011).

Chapter 4 opens with a description of the LRA's latest sustainability project: a constructed wetland that absorbs the pollution from the Litani. Focusing on how pollution is absorbed from the watershed and how it contributes to the production of meaning, this chapter addresses how Syrian communities who live and work near the Litani are castigated for soiling

the river and defiling the entire watershed. From fishing and irrigation practices from the polluted Litani water to the dumping and stench of untreated sewage from refugee camps near the Jib Jennine bridge, I examine how my Lebanese interlocutors describe the "patterned behaviors" of their Syrian neighbors (Douglas 2002). Thinking with Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject and Mary Douglas' (2002) famous proposition that dirt is disorder, I interpret these pollution beliefs in relation to their broader context: the LRA's sustainability priorities, but also the mundane rhythms of everyday life in the watershed. Focusing on cleansing obsessions as well as the different conceptualizations of human waste and sexual and reproductive mores, I show how different meanings are ascribed to pollution beyond mere bio-physicality, and how a strict morality is erected around demographic anxieties, the regulation of sexual desire, and the debasement of manual and agricultural labour.

Chapter 1: Al-Litani

In May 2022, I found myself in the underground facilities of the Qaraoun dam and the nearby AbdelAal plant in Markaba, in the West Bekaa. Before embarking on fieldwork, while still conducting archival research from my home in Montreal, I had already spent considerable time reviewing journalistic and investigative dossiers about the river, as well as technical reports, project proposals and appraisals of the Litani infrastructure. Yet, despite this preparatory work, I found it hard to visualize. It was unclear whether the different phases of the project —as conceptualized in these documents and including several power plants, irrigation canals, and reservoirs— were even still in operation or if they had been built at all. The project's unfinished character, inherent to all infrastructural development, sparked my curiosity.[1] In it, I recognized a theme that emerges and persists in critical theories of development practice: the gap between technical representation and material realization (Li 2007). This chapter dwells in that distance. Pondering the Litani as a polysemic form that indexes nature, technology, and bureaucracy, my aim is to trace a history of the infrastructural project and Lebanon's politics of development.

And so, shortly after my return to Lebanon, I made a field visit. Like other dams around the world, the lake and the crest of the barrage in the West Bekaa are well-trodden tourist sites, although water pollution has caused numbers to dwindle in recent years. I was able to obtain a special permission from Dr. S., the Chairman of the Board of the Litani River Authority (LRA) — the semi-autonomous public body tasked with overseeing the development of projects on the river— affording me access to the lower galleries and power plants, normally closed to sightseers. A distant cousin who knew Dr. S. from law school connected us and Dr. S. accepted my request to visit.

It was a particularly hot May day and I had woken early to make the short drive from Saghbine to Qaraoun. Passing through Deir Ain al-Jawzeh (the convent of the walnut tree's spring), I looked at the lake and remembered what my friend Elias had described for me the day before —how, as a child during the 1980s, on his daily bus ride to the Antonine Sisters School in Aitanit, he would become so absorbed watching the little fishing boats on the Litani that he

[1] For more on the unfinished character of infrastructural development see Carse and Kneas (2019).

would lose track of his whereabouts, not even noticing when the bus finally arrived at its destination.

On the day of my visit, Dr. S. arranged for Bou Falah, "the LRA's patrol worker from Machghara who knew the Litani inside out", to accompany me despite his demanding work schedule. My tour with Bou Falah began at the regional office building of the LRA in Qaraoun, which was erected in the early nineties to replace an older construction razed during the 1982 Israeli invasion. Winking at me, he told me that we had to start there for a very important reason:

> Doctora, you must meet the *moudir* (boss) first. It is not necessary because you are with me, and you have the permission of Dr. S. but you know, it is always better. We must follow the hierarchy. Though it doesn't always work that way. But it is of course better to pay respect where it is due.

The *moudir* in question was *estaz* M., a seasoned engineer and, I had been told, a graduate of the Soviet Union who managed the site and supervised the staff since the 1980s.[2] We found him waiting in the parking lot, standing in the shade of tall green poplar trees, planted almost one hundred years earlier by French colonial forces during the mandate in Lebanon. Like many LRA field staff, *estaz M.* had the reputation of being a strong and courageous man. Known to have lived through wars and invasions without ever abandoning his responsibilities, he too knew the dam facilities inside out. After countless years of service with the Litani, he still performed some of the routine checks himself, even abseiling down the parapet walls of the dam. He ran the inspection protocol, examining the joints that connected the concrete blocks together and prevented water from seeping in. Though he was not very tall, his presence was towering.

In his office, *estaz* M. offered us coffee and patiently answered my questions about the different components of the Litani project. He gave me a detailed overview of the infrastructure and its functions, painstakingly showing me, with the help of technical drawings, how the

[2] Estaz: professor or educator. It used here as a form of address that is meant to express respect.

Qaraoun dam, the three power stations of Markaba, Awali, and Joun, as well as the irrigation canals at 600, 800 and 900 meters of altitude were interconnected. He narrated how, in the summer of 2016, a group of people unloaded rubbish, dirt, and debris to close off canal 900, which was part of the Bekaa irrigation scheme. "This was near Qaraoun", he explained, and underscoring that it was "in protest of the sewage smell", he pointed his finger to his nose. He also described how the *maslaha* – the Litani River Authority still sought to move forward with the canal 800, the controversial South Lebanon irrigation scheme, which had been planned since the late 1960s, but not yet executed. "Maybe one day there will be a reservoir near Kelia", he added.

On a map on his office wall, *estaz* M. circled the famed Awali tunnel with the back of his pen and told me it was "one of the greatest engineering feats ever" and "dug with tremendous technical difficulty during the 1960s". Almost 10 km long, the tunnel ran beneath the mountain and connected the village of Markaba in West Bekaa to the town of Jezzine in the southern region of Mount Lebanon. Taking a piece of paper, *estaz* M. drew the outline of the rock-filled dam, "like the bony structure of the human chest filled with rocks in between", he said with the certainty of an engineer addressing an audience of non-specialists. I told him anthropomorphism did not help explain how and why the dam had stood the test of time and several wars, or if that was even the case. "The bones move, but they're linked to a solid core," he replied, emphasizing the Qaraoun dam's flexible structure. "The central section is broad, thick, and very sturdy, while the side sections are piles of large blocks that gradually thin out, and everything, the blocks and the rocks are covered with reinforced concrete tiles that prevent water from leaking." I was moved by this bodied (and vulnerable!) image of the dam as a being that needed to be cared for. It seemed to gesture to the messy and personal kinds of relations that *estaz* M., Bou Falah, and their colleagues had built and maintained with the Litani infrastructure over time.

As *estaz* M. finished his exposé, it was Bou Falah's turn to point at the maps and sketches that hung on the office walls. "See how important all these *injazat* are, these achievements! Unfortunately, not one line was added to the project's technical documents after AbdelAal", Bou Falah continued, reiterating a claim I had often heard about Ibrahim AbdelAal, a prominent Litani engineer and bureaucrat. Funded through the 1955 World Bank loan to the Lebanese State, the

Litani facilities bore the names of all the engineers who had contributed to the project: the Qaraoun dam was named after Albert Naccache, who, as early as 1946, was among the first to propose to the Ministry of Public Works that a dam be built on the Litani; the Markaba power plant was named after AbdelAal; while the Awali power plant took its name from Paul Arcache, who died in an accident while working on the dam in 1963.[3] But Bou Falah's comment also gestured to the way that AbdelAal's name had become synonymous not just with the infrastructure itself but with the making of the modern nation; he belonged to a celebrated epoch of state expansion, institutional building, and development engineering, which, according to Bou Falah, had since withered away (Lawson 2021; Riachi 2022).

When I finished the strong coffee, Bou Falah invited me to join him in his white *Renault Rapid*. Together with Jalal, another Litani engineer, we headed towards the Qaraoun Dam. At the embankment, Bou Falah and Jalal parked their vehicles and, crossing the road, we went down a couple of stairs, where we entered through an unassuming metal door at the foot of the dam. "Boulos Arcache fell to his death right here", Jalal told me, as we made our way along the moldy ramps of the gallery that led inside the structure. He evoked the work accident not to startle me, but to emphasize the sacrifices that the men who built the Litani project had made for the nation. "Don't scare her!" Bou Falah added, as we stood by the overflow evacuation tunnel beneath nearly 220 million tons of water.

Navigating the space involved a learned precision and care —of course, we were not wearing any kind of protective gear. To enter the gallery, I bowed at the small door at the toe of the dam, so as not to bump my head against its heavy metal frame. Balancing along the footbridges and stairs, we approached the outlet channel of the dam's spillway — the structure that resembles a giant hole in the water when the lake is filled to its brim. In the cold, enveloping humidity and the mildew, I feared I might stumble, while Bou Falah, familiar with the site, remained unfazed. Despite his age and large stature, he moved dexterously on the slippery footbridges where workers once swarmed.

[3] See for e.g., Naccache, Albert. "La valorisation du Liban par la planification de ses eaux". *L'Orient*, Beirut, Lebanon. 08 September 1946. In this study, Naccache outlines his vision for a comprehensive planning of Lebanon's waters. He defined planning as the coherent roll-out of a series of capital work projects at a national scale while still fostering a delicate balance between water's different uses (irrigation, domestic use, drinking water, and hydropower generation). In this study, he includes an initial design for a dam on the Litani. On another note, the Joun power plant, which was the last to be completed, thanks to a loan from the Kuwaiti fund, was named after Charles Helou who was president of the republic at the time of its inauguration in 1968.

Talking to a friend later that day, I likened the maneuvers of the Litani workers and engineers in the gallery to Maussian techniques of the body. I saw in their movements "physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions" (Mauss 1973, 85), themselves prerequisites for the other kinds of learned technical labour. Comparing the tour of the dam to a corporeal ritual that made visitors submit to its imposing stature, I expressed my appreciation of its carefully engineered modernist aesthetic. In hindsight, I realized this admiration may have had more to do with the experience of encountering this monument to modernity in the present context of Lebanon's overall state of national infrastructural fallout and public service collapse. That the Lebanese state had been capable of damming the Litani more than half a century ago, in that moment, appeared a worthy accomplishment—one redolent of the forms of competency and possibility expected of a modernizing nation. The physical foundations of the Qaraoun dam—Lebanon's oldest, largest, and most famous barrage—seemed to reveal not only the technical arrangements that formed the basis of the embankment and its operations, but also the pillars upon which the nation had first been built.

* * *

Al-Litani as form

Guided tours of hydropower projects that offer breathtaking panoramas and engineering feats produce specific physical and affective experiences, constituting visitors as particular kinds of subjects (Loloum 2020; Nye 1994). They are a powerful tool not only for showcasing technical expertise but also catalyzing modes of corporate communication (Loloum 2020). I know that it would have been nearly impossible for me to access the lower galleries of the dam and the Markaba power plant had it not been for the intervention of my relative, and his introduction to Dr. S., the LRA's chairman. This act of *wasta* (mediation) points to the ways kinship ties function

as a kind of shadow infrastructure of connection and social capital in Lebanon, one that is woven into myriad aspects of life.[4]

It occurred to me later that the permission I was granted to tour the facilities fulfilled a specific objective. At some level, it was not inseparable from the LRA's "legitimation strategies" — a "set of discourses frequently obscured by technicalities" that authorize large infrastructural projects of development (Ribeiro 1994, 157). [5] After Dr. S. had been appointed chairman in 2018, the LRA had actively sought to cultivate values of openness, transparency, and respect for other researchers' and experts' works.[6] Inherent to the corruption/anti-corruption complex of countries across the global south (Gupta 2005; Muir and Gupta 2018), such displays of "good governance" are meant to weigh against the widespread accusations of corruption and establish new disciplinary loci. In the wake of the Beirut port explosion in 2020 and the socioeconomic crisis of 2019, these accusations had proliferated and escalated in Lebanon, targeting all institutions of the state, including the Litani.

In the context of infrastructural development, geography, hydrology, people's practices, and state politics become entangled in the delivery of services, while landscapes become expressions and catalysts of modernizing visions (Ballestero 2019). In my officially sanctioned visit to the dam and power plants that day, I was privy to the Litani's institutional histories, corporate discourses, and cultivated meanings. After all, bureaucracies like the LRA embody a "raison d'état" —the reason of the state (Feldman 2007; Weber 2006)— and are invested with the coercive, technical, and ideological functions involved in the governing of society (Althusser 2006; Gramsci 2003).

Beyond this technical rationality, I was struck by how lovingly LRA staff—most of whom hailed from surrounding villages—talked about the infrastructural project and how they

[4] Wasta means intermediary or mediation but is commonly used as a shorthand for favors, a kind of remedy arrangement enacted through social ties and informal avenues.
[5] I borrow the term "legitimation" from anthropologist Gustavo Lins Ribeiro whose work on the Yacyretá High Dam in Argentina explores the efforts deployed to justify hydropower and irrigation projects in rural regions. Ribeiro weighed these discourses against the deleterious consequences of the dam and critiqued the prevalent models for development premised chiefly upon ideas of economic expansion and growth. In the case of the Yacyretá dam, the legitimation strategies had cast hydropower and irrigation projects as cost-effective and appropriate solutions for the development and the regional economic growth of the rural areas in which they were built. These claims to legitimacy are inherent characteristics of dam projects, assuming that energy resource extraction will drive development and progress. Illustrating how a particular dam project is "the best and most reasonable solution for an economic or social problem of national or regional scope" (1994, 157) they also highlight how development projects generate their own ideologies, usually inseparable from universal notions of technoscience, economic prosperity, and modernization.
[6] Interview with Dr. Sami Alawiyyeh, Beirut, May 10, 2022.

expressed their manifest dedication to the Litani. This discursive loyalty to the dam extended to other villagers I spoke with, who also adopted this language of promise and possibility to evoke the Litani.[7] It was only after leaving Lebanon in autumn 2022 that I became aware of the political, aesthetic, and ethical values that the Litani conjured for friends, and interlocutors in the watershed, but also for me. In what follows, I bring these values under sharper scrutiny to trace a history of the infrastructural development —itself underpinned by specific ideas about human relation to the non-human, as well as a particular understanding of temporal and ecological difference. I also hope to show how these unequal sociohistorical and environmental forces, captured in the Litani infrastructure, continue to express themselves in the lives of my interlocutors.

Like many infrastructural development projects, the Litani dam and power plants illustrate how natural environments, particularly rivers, are implicated in the production of political and infrastructural formations, connecting people and things, and delivering services, and vice-versa (Bear 2015; Carse 2014; Larkin 2013).[8] At some point in the course of fieldwork, I realized that in most of my conversations, there was a degree of speculation about what the word al-Litani actually referred to. At any given moment, it was often hard to discern what exactly was being referenced. This realization most likely dawned on me when I began to understand that there were diverse ways of talking about the Litani in the watershed. My interlocutors and friends would describe modes of relation to the Litani that often extended beyond the realm ascribed to nature. For instance, while describing hardships, they might exclaim: '*hayda al-Litani*,' this is (because of) the Litani. Most of them used Litani interchangeably to designate the river, the hydropower project, or the Litani River Authority (LRA). Only on rare occasions, would bureaucrats refer to the latter as *al-maslaha* (an abbreviation of *al-maslaha al-wataniyya li nahr al-litani*, or Litani River Authority), the public body now headed by Dr. S., which since the 1950s had been tasked with the development of the river basin and, more recently, with its "good governance". I, too, picked up this habit, of using

[7] In her study of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, Allia Mosallam (2012) beautifully captures how "bunat al-sadd", (builders of the dam, an endonym referring to the communities of workers who constructed the barrage) developed their own language "kalam al-sadd" (language of the dam). This language underscored how workers proudly and actively shaped the larger world they belonged to and how, in turn, that world had become part of them too.
[8] For e.g., Laura Bear (2015) refers to the Hooghly as an infrastructure, a waterscape, and a river.

Litani, generally or liberally, even when I would only be referring to a specific part of the whole. Somehow, in these conversations about the Litani, we all understood what was being implied. In retrospect, it is striking that I never tried to disentangle signifier from signified during fieldwork.

How does a river become a kaleidoscopic image, a chimeric sign gesturing towards a combination of objects and situations? Thinking with the Litani's indexicality, I am interested in the sociohistorical and ecological processes that produce a "type of speech" that condenses river, dam, and bureaucracy (Barthes 1991). Congealing specific relations between nature, infrastructure, and state, the Litani is a signifier that operates as a substitute for many others. It registers the diverse social and economic changes introduced during the country's nation-building era of the 1950s and 1960s introduced —namely, popular understandings of environmental transformations, meanings associated with technological change, novel perceptions of the state and its role, and individual and collective responses to modernization processes. As a kaleidoscopic image, the Litani's logic encompasses a shared "sensory reality" and "sufficient rationality" associated with the development of infrastructure and is hence part of a shared history (Barthes 1991, 116). More broadly, I wish to demonstrate that in popular parlance the Litani (river, dam, and public body) expresses a synthetic form that is material, ideological, and semiotic at once —what Brian Larkin (2015), commenting on formal infrastructural relations, defines as "a particular set of qualities" that does far more than "simply express historical transformation" as it also "acts on people to produce new experiences of the world." One of the effects or experiences captured and achieved through this synthetic form is precisely the politics of bereavement, the set of pessimistic discourses and practices around diverse forms of loss, that I am trying to trace throughout this dissertation.

Unpacking the Litani's indexicality — meaning the specific socio-natural entanglements it gestures towards— amounts to interpreting the vivid impressions of quotidian life together within broader structuring dynamics. Part of what I wish to get at is how the metonymical Litani itself encompasses and expresses the broader tenets around which big D-development is constructed.[9] Its indexicality exposes the politics and policies of development in Lebanon since

[9] I am also thinking here with Roland Barthes's conceptualization of mythical speech (1991), which allows me to consider the Litani as *meaning* and *form* and as *sign* and *signification*. In speech, the Litani becomes the starting point (a *form*) from which new meanings (or *significations*) emerge and circulate —what Barthes (1991) refers to as mythical speech. In other words, I am considering the Litani as an indexical that is anchored, structured, and interpreted in relation to the watershed's infrastructural

the 1950s, ushered in, among other things, by the World Bank's first loan to the Lebanese state financing the construction of the Qaraoun dam and two power plants.[10] It brings into sharper focus the contested and unequal histories of public planning—specifically the entwinement of technological progress with capitalist expansion and extraction, alongside the extension of the state into rural areas. In the context of the Bank's project for harnessing the waters of the Litani river, these inequalities, and the way certain people and places were deemed to be more or less expendable, were also implicated in what became a prioritization of the production of hydropower over irrigation.

Hydropower or irrigation

In 1948, Ibrahim AbdelAal published a study —*Le Litani: Étude Hydrologique* — that considered the water problem in Lebanon together with its economic development. In his introduction to the massive volume, AbdelAal wrote:

> Le réajustement de l'économie libanaise, impérieusement appelé par la situation nouvelle du pays, trouvera dans l'aménagement du Litani les ressources importantes qui lui manquent, par le développement de son agriculture et surtout par la production de l'énergie. (…) L'aménagement entier du Litani permettra de tripler la production agricole actuelle dans le bassin du fleuve et de fournir à l'industrie l'énergie qui manquait à son développement.[11]

This study was the result of a decade of research conducted by AbdelAal in his capacity as the head of the Department for Hydrological Research in the Ministry of Public Works and as the government's scientific liaison with the Point Four Mission —a committee of technicians,

development and to the forces that shaped it. But I am also considering it as something that "has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (Barthes 1991, 115).

[10] I do not mean to infer that the World Bank alone, together with its crew of international experts, designed and implemented the Litani infrastructure (dam and power plants). Rather, this outcome was a result of regional, local, and international dynamics.

[11] The readjustment of the Lebanese economy, imminently required by the country's newfound situation, will find, in the planning of the Litani, the important resources it is currently lacking through the development of its agriculture and more notably because of energy production (…) The comprehensive planning of the Litani will allow the tripling of current agricultural production in the river basin and will provide to industry the energy required for its development.

bureaucrats, scientists, and engineers from the US Bureau of Reclamation, dispatched by the Technical Cooperation Administration that formed part of American President Harry Truman's foreign policy program for development. AbdelAal's approach "rendered technical" the Lebanese water problem and identified the Litani river as a possible area for state intervention (Li 2007). It suggested that the development of hydropower and irrigation schemes would eventually lead to sound economic growth, particularly in the industrial and agricultural sectors. His was one of many proposals targeting the waters of the Litani. It offered a way forward by positing that the upper river could be rendered suitable for irrigation while the lower Litani, flowing between Qaraoun and Khardaleh in the South, could be harnessed for hydropower, due in part to a sharper inclination in the region's topography.[12] Though AbdelAal became known as "the Father of the Litani", he never lived to see it completed. He died in 1959 in the operating room of the American University of Beirut, a couple of years before the dam was completed. Deploring AbdelAal's untimely death, Bou Falah's largely rhetorical remark in *estaz M.*'s office that day spoke to the way this era of state-building in Lebanon is still remembered—as a period of unparalleled technological advancement and optimism, which had promised a bright and abundant future.

Bou Falah's comments about AbdelAal reminded me of another conversation I had in the headquarters of the LRA in Beirut with my friend Hassib, a consultant and water engineer from the West Bekaa. It was around the time that I was wrapping up my fieldwork and readying myself to go back to Montreal that I asked Hassib whether he thought I should meet someone from the Ibrahim AbdelAal foundation. I had not yet managed to speak to anyone there. While the foundation, which was headed by Ibrahim's daughter, Iman, was once very active, it had in more recent years gradually receded from public view. Their website was down, no one answered the organization's listed phone numbers, and their offices, located across the street from the LRA's,

[12] Except for a study prepared by water concessionaire George Maasry, and published in 1946, most other development plans similarly emphasized a carefully balanced relationship between planning and development and hydropower and irrigation, offering varying scenarios for how the state might regulate and collaborate with private enterprises to harness the Litani's waters. These include a report by Joseph Naggear on behalf of Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique —SLEP (1948) as well as a study by Sir Alexander Gibb and Partners (1948) on the development of Lebanon, Vladimir Yordanof's *Le Litani: Probleme de l'exploitation totale* (1950), Albert Naccache and Maurice Gemayel's *Planification Intégrale des Eaux Libanaises* (1951), and Henri Olivier on behalf of Electricité de France (1953). These project designs proposed to develop the Litani mainly as part of Lebanon's resources and a national development scheme. There are other studies that have also incorporated the Litani river part of regional water development plans such as the Lowdermilk plan —the Jordan Valley Project (1944) or the Johnston plan —the Jordan Valley Unified Water Plan (1953).

always seemed empty. Hassib encouraged me to contact the foundation's current director, Mr. Nasrallah, "a very fine statesman from the West Bekaa" he told me, while also alerting me to "the role that politics played in general" in the valuation of the work of the foundation:

> You know when the foundation was first established, right after the war, these were its heydays. It would receive funding, accolades, support. Now that the times are different, and that the LRA is strong and well empowered with Dr. S. and his team, it's almost become secondary. I imagine that they must find it more difficult now to lead projects related to the Litani and the Lebanon's waters in general.

Hassib insinuated that political rivalries had allowed Ibrahim AbdelAal's name and stature as the father of the Litani to first rise to prominence and then quietly fade away.[13] Though he never explicitly expressed it as such, I understood his comment as alluding to the way dominant ideological predispositions shaped the emplotment of people, places, and events into cohesive historical and national narratives. Above all, Hassib's remark heightened my curiosity and brought to my attention the fact that there must have been other competing visions and values that the Litani infrastructure could have embodied at some point in time.[14]

In fact, there had been numerous schemes aimed at harnessing the waters of the Litani, some produced as early as 1899. But concrete infrastructural development only began to take shape after 1948 —an outcome of contingent socio-historical circumstances, and the result of several competing technical and political schemes.[15] By the mid-1950s, a specific version of the infrastructural plan for development came into being, funded by a loan from the World Bank, and based on the Point Four Mission's technical propositions. This Litani design was chiefly the work of the Bank, which approved the development, administrated the loan, proposed a structure of governance for the LRA established in 1954, oversaw the different phases of the project's construction, and evaluated—according to its own standards—its economic soundness

[13] Between the Future movement, which rose to power right after the civil war, and the Amal movement, which recently gained stronger influence in the LRA.
[14] Of note, when I contacted Mr. Nasrallah, he welcomed my request with great interest though our schedules did not allow for the meeting to happen. Mr. Nasrallah was traveling and wouldn't be back in Beirut before I left for Montreal.
[15] I am grateful to Owain Lawson and Zouhair Hawary for pointing those out.

and relevance for national economic growth.[16] Centered on hydropower, this project resulted in the construction of the Qaraoun dam and the two power plants (in Markaba and Awali), which were linked by a tunnel through the mountain (the engineering feat celebrated by *estaz* M). It was with a loan from the Kuwaiti fund that the LRA would complete a third power plant in 1968, the Joun power plant, at a location downstream from Awali.[17] The project's overall design and implementation drew upon a myriad of technical contributions including, but not limited to, AbdelAal's 1948 *Étude*, reports of the Point Four Mission and, later, modifications proposed by the *Groupe Français du Litani* (GFL) — a consortium of 3 French engineering groups— together with *Electricité de France* and the expert engineers and consultants at the LRA. [18,19] As different as it was from what AbdelAal and other engineers initially envisioned (Kardahji 2015), it became the grounds upon which both LRA workers and my other interlocutors in the watershed forged their relations with the Litani.

In this heyday of 20th century's modern state-building, the World Bank insisted that an investment in hydropower was indispensable for the country's sound economic growth, while irrigation was seen as a suitable, yet necessarily deferred, addition. Without hydropower development, the exorbitant costs of irrigation projects were unjustifiable. With the dam, the canals, and the tunnel in the mountain, the Bank viewed hydropower as an infrastructure that could eventually be used for the purpose of irrigation.[20] It scrapped irrigation —including the

[16] In 1955, the Lebanese government presented to the World Bank (at that time, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development —IBRD) a development plan as the basis for a loan approval request for $27 million US Dollars. In his thesis on Lebanon's political economy, Nick Kardahji (2015) provides an overview of the World Bank's role and of alternative funding sources that the Lebanese state had considered. I am also grateful to Owain Lawson for underscoring the primacy of the World Bank's intervention in the planning and implementation of the Litani Hydropower Project and the emphasis it placed on hydropower generation. As I have said earlier (fn.10), it is not only thanks to the Bank and international experts that the Litani infrastructure (dam and power plants) was built. Rather, it was the outcome of myriad forces interrelating at different scales.

[17] The Kuwaiti fund here refers to The *Kuwait Fund* for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), the state of Kuwait's fund for financial and technical assistance.

[18] Point Four funded the Litani Development Plan and provided technical assistance with the help of the USBR. The total amount was $738,600 USD in 1954, which accounting for inflation is today the equivalent of more than 8 million USD. AbdelAal was Director General of the Ministry of Public Works and had ensured the liaison between the Lebanese government and the Point Four Mission. He was also a well-reputed engineer who taught at the Ecole Supérieure d'Ingénieurs de Beyrouth (ESIB) and gave public talks on the importance of science and engineering for the bettering of society. During the summer of 1955, when the Lebanese government was looking to secure funding for the Litani project, AbdelAal travelled to the World Bank's headquarters in Washington D.C. and participated in the loan negotiations and discussions on electricity tariffs. For more on AbdelAal see Lawson (2021).

[19] The LRA together with the GFL (Groupe Francais pour le Litani a consortium of 3 companies Ominum Lyonnais, SARU pour l'aménagement rural et urbain, and Etudes et Entreprises Coyne) would introduce several modifications, one of which would come to be known as "variante nouvelle" or "variante sud" of the Litani Project. During the 1960s, a controversial irrigation component, not covered by the loan, would also be introduced by Water and Energy Minister Kamel al-Assaad (currently known as the Canal 800 or South Irrigation Project).

[20] Report Number: A.S. 37, Report of Mission to Lebanon, June 10, 1955, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States

South Bekaa irrigation system (Canal 900)— from the project design it would eventually approve for loan consideration.[21]

The resulting Litani project financed by the World Bank was thus aimed, primarily, at producing 171,000 kW of hydropower with most, if not all, electricity destined for greater Beirut.[22,23] A World Bank report from 1955 confidently asserted that it was "the best possible solution for Lebanon's power problem" providing an "ample and cheaper supply of power from public utilities" —itself an "essential pre-requisite of further economic development of the country"[24]. Throughout, the Bank remained primarily concerned with the project's financial viability.[25] Working together with the LRA, local experts and engineers, it advocated that an adequate power market should develop concomitantly with the infrastructure, in a way that would justify allocated costs and proposed installations.[26] Bank officials along with several LRA board members seemed to concur that irrigation would always come later. On the day of my visit to the Litani facilities, I noted that most, if not all, of the plans to irrigate agricultural land in the regions of the Bekaa, the mountains, or in the South had either been discontinued because of pollution, or never realized at all.

The developmental state

While the loan was ratified in 1955, with works set to start soon after, the construction of the dam and power plants was arduous, technically difficult, and plagued by scandals. Reading

[21] While older versions of the project's plan had at one point included a substantial irrigation component (to irrigate 8,000 hectares of agricultural land in Qasmieh, north of Sour, in addition to some 3,400 hectares located near Bisri, along the coastal area between Saida and Beirut), it was now no longer the case. Started during the French Mandate, the Qasmieh irrigation project was expanded and added to the Litani Project. While negotiating the loan, the LRA also sought to include, as part of the project funded by the IBRD an irrigation program in South Bekaa. This irrigation project was not to be retained as part of the plan, and the LRA agreed to develop it through different means.

[22] Of note, kW (kilowatt) is a measure of electric power production. KWh (Kilowatt-hour) is a measure of energy consumption over time. For e.g., if a lamp bulb requires 0.5 kW to be lit, turning its light on for 3 hours will consume 1.5 kWh. These measurements are important in the sense that they reflect electricity's material properties. Electricity cannot be stored; and electric power and consumption need to be synchronized. The benchmark of 170,000 kw evokes the power plants' productive capacities but also the kinds of political imaginations required to produce the needs for such electricity consumption.

[23] 1) Report Number: T.O. 87-b, Appraisal of the Litani Power and Irrigation Project Lebanon, August 15, 1955, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States; 2) Report Number: A.S. 37, Report of Mission to Lebanon, June 10, 1955, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.

[24] Report and Recommendations of the President to the Executive Committee on a proposed loan to the Litani River Authority in Lebanon, August 16, 1955, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States

[25] Discussions with Lebanese Delegates on July 18, 1955, Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Negotiations - Volume 2 (July 5, 1955 - August 29, 1955) Folder ID: 1859485, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.

[26] I develop some aspects of national electrification politics in Chapter 3.

through the Litani project files in the World Bank archive, I was struck by the LRA's cunning and the political maneuvering on display in many of its correspondences and interactions with Bank officials, both in Beirut and Washington. During the implementation phase for example, the frictions around the completion of the Zouk Mikael thermal power plant, which has nothing to do with the river and the development plans that targeted it, exemplify the way power is maintained, reproduced, and consolidated. The record of the conversations taking place between Bank officials and LRA bureaucrats paints a lively tableau, revealing hidden practices and conspiratorial half-truths. I recognized in these schemes the kinds of political shenanigans that have become so routine for people living in contemporary Lebanon. In noting this, I do not discount the role of the Bank in implementing an infrastructural project that actualized unequal relations; nor do I mean to imply that the operating logic of Lebanese bureaucracy is unchanging. Rather, I want to point to the space of politics in which such negotiations unfold. They remind us of how 'the raison d'état' is never entirely rational, nor dispassionate, and illustrate how formal structures and networks get constructed in institutional settings.

In a letter dated May 8, 1956, Felix G. Bochenski, a key member of the Department of Operations Asia and the Middle East at the Bank in Washington, wrote to F. Dorsey Stephens (the regional representative of the Bank for the Middle East) to inquire about the LRA's decision to fund the construction of this steam (thermal) power plant in Zouk Mikael, located on the coast north of Beirut:

> If you look at Section 3.04 of the Guarantee Agreement, referring to the Office de l'Électricité et du Transport en Commun in connection with the two units of the Zouk Mikael steam plant, and at our "side letter" of August 25, 1955, which states that it is the Litani River Authority's policy not to finance any development other than the Project except after consultation with the Bank, you will appreciate that we were somewhat surprised to learn that the Litani River Authority was preparing tenders for construction of one of the Zouk Mikael units. We are even more surprised to hear from you that the Authority is apparently intending to take over the construction and operation of Zouk Mikael and to finance it with funds at its disposal, including the Bank's loan. By the way,

> has the Litani River Authority's statutory law been changed or is a change intended; you will recall that the present terms of reference of the Authority do not include the construction or operation of thermal plants.

Some two weeks later, on May 22, 1956, Stephens' reply to Bochenski does little to clarify matters:

> With regard to Zouk Mikael, Bisri has renewed his promise to give me something in writing. According to André Tueni it was the intention, even before the loan negotiations, to include the second unit at Zouk Mikael in the Litani project and the Authority's financial calculations were based on this assumption. But somehow in the haste at Washington, Zouk Mikael got left out of the project description. This is a subject on which I must talk to Lahoud, after which I shall write you in full detail.[27,28]

This brief, early exchange about the LRA suggests that it was intent on surpassing the Bank's restrictive limits (which excluded the building of a thermal unit) but that it was still nevertheless reluctant to pursue projects that prioritized agriculture. Under the leadership of its first Chairman of the Board, Salim Lahoud, the LRA had not really considered irrigation plans but had continued to pursue an agenda solely structured around the generation of electric power.[29] The idea was that the LRA would eventually be the sole agency in Lebanon responsible for the generation of electric power and that all other agencies, including Electricité de Beyrouth, would limit their role to buying electricity from the Litani and distributing it to users across the country.[30] This was a plan that would eventually not work out.

* * *

[27] Letters 27 and 37 respectively. Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Administration - Volume 1 (August 23, 1955 - August 30, 1956), Folder ID: 1859486, Project ID: P005324.World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
[28] Bisri refers to Ibrahim Bisri, Director at the LRA at the time. André Tueni is the Director General of the Ministry of Public Works. Lahoud is Salim Lahoud, Chairman of the LRA Board. See also Kardahji (2015, 76).
[29] Lahoud had wanted to approach the Bank and ask for an additional loan of approximately $2 million US dollars to construct a second unit for the Zouk Mikael thermal plant. The Chairman of the Board had even contended that the LRA could take over the plant's existing unit, complete the second, and run the entire operation.
[30] Letter to Dr. E. Wayne Rembert, September 7, 1956 from Mario Piccagli, Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Administration - Volume 2 (September 1, 1956 - November 25, 1957), Folder ID: 1859487, Project ID: P005324, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.

Over the course of the next few years, works on the Litani infrastructure did not progress much. In fact, most attempts to make headway were significantly hindered, and not merely because of the civil war of 1958. In May 1960, the Lebanese government appointed Henry Albert Naccache, a Lebanese engineer, to replace Salim Lahoud Chairman of the Board of Directors of the LRA. Aware of the technical, bureaucratic, political, and administrative challenges that had arisen early in the execution of the Litani Project, Naccache welcomed this news with great reservation. Works on the river continued to suffer delays. A year earlier, during the sweltering August of 1959, large swaths of the Awali tunnel had also collapsed and the Bank, who viewed the digging of the tunnel as the only sort of progress being made on the project itself, had threatened to suspend the loan[31]. If Naccache had expressed serious misgivings about the management and implementation of the project, he was also uncertain of its overall value and significance.

The first time I heard about Henry Naccache and his involvement in state building projects like the Litani was right after the Beirut port explosion in August 2020. I was stuck in Montreal; most archives and institutions had shut their doors during the coronavirus lockdown. Unable to reach Lebanon because of national and university-related travel restrictions and other public health guidelines, I was conducting digital archival research in the online collections of the World Bank and had read a newspaper article in *Le Devoir* that mentioned both Henry Naccache as well as his son Pierre Naccache who turned out to be my neighbour in Montreal.[32] Pierre and I became good friends and each visit to his house was an opportunity for both of us to debate Lebanon's current development politics and its fraught history. A couple of years later, on a balmy fall afternoon, after I completed my fieldwork research, I paid Pierre a visit to talk to him about Henry's work and how I was planning to write about it. Pierre prepared coffee, the best in Montreal as he often joked, and in the living room of his Montreal home, he began to narrate his father's accomplishments:

[31] Internal Memo 9 July 1959, Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Administration - Volume 4 (January 9, 1959 - October 31, 1959), Folder ID: 1859489, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States
[32] Gervais, Lisa-Marie, "Souvenirs du port de Beyrouth, entre colère et espoir", *Le Devoir*, 14 août 2020. https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/584147/souvenirs-colere-et-espoir?

Mon père, ancien élève de l'École Polytechnique et de l'École des Mines, avait été l'un des trois ingénieurs responsables de la construction de l'aéroport de Beyrouth au début des années cinquante. Le nommer lui, ancien élève de l'X, était en quelque sorte un gage de bonnes relations entre l'ONL [Office National du Litani] et les Français. Il est crédible de penser, à mon avis, que l'équipe Fouad Chéhab en était consciente et que ce fait ait joué un rôle dans sa nomination. Ce dont je me souviens de l'époque, l'image que je m'étais faite—j'avais onze ans— c'est qu'il y avait Chéhab, mon père et les Français d'un côté et Chamoun et Lahoud et, je ne le réalise qu'aujourd'hui, les Américains de l'autre… C'est au cours de sa présidence et grâce à la protection politique assurée par Fouad Chéhab et la compétence, l'intégrité et la collaboration de Salah Halwani, directeur général de l'ONL, nommé en même temps que mon père, que des projets majeurs ont été menés à terme, soit le barrage du Litani, l'usine AbdelAal, le tunnel et les usines du Awali et de Joun. Cette dernière a été inaugurée en 1968 alors qu'Henry avait démissionné en 1967. Pour moi, l'enfant que j'étais, c'était la confirmation que j'étais le fils d'un grand constructeur qui avait prouvé que son propre père avait eu raison contre tout le monde et ce même si j'ignorais certainement quels étaient ces adversaires. Cette atmosphère se manifestait concrètement dans ma vie. Dans la cour de mon école, lorsqu'il pleuvait, je bâtissais des monticules de sable pour ne pas laisser l'eau s'échapper. Mon père construisait ses barrages et moi les miens. Malgré l'absence notoire de toute réalisation majeure concernant le Litani avant et après le mandat de mon père, son nom est passé aux oubliettes Libanaises. Par exemple, le livre du jubilé du Litani publié par l'ONL lui accorde une présence aussi réduite que possible, un rôle secondaire, alors que l'historique du projet présenté dans une des publications de la Fondation AbdelAal ignore superbement son existence.[33]

[33] My father, graduate of l'École Polytechnique and l'École des Mines, was one of the three engineers in charge of the construction of the Beirut airport in the early 1950s. To name him, an alumnus of l'X was in a way a pledge of maintaining good relations between the LRA and the French. In my view, it is credible to think that Fouad Chehab's team was well aware of that fact and that this had played a role in his appointment. What I remember from back then, the image I had drawn for myself —I was eleven years-old— was that there was Chehab, my father, and the French on one side and Chamoun, Lahoud, and, I only realize this now, the Americans on the other side. It is during Chehab's presidency and thanks to his political patronage, as well as the competence, integrity, and cooperation of Salah Halwani (the LRA General Director who was appointed around the same as my father) that major works were completed: the Litani dam, the AbdelAal power plant, and the tunnel and power plant in Awali and Joun. The latter was inaugurated in 1968 while Henry resigned in 1967. To me, to the child that I was, this confirmed that I was the son of a great builder who had proven that his own father had been right in the face of all his opponents. I thought so although I had no idea who these might have been. This atmosphere was concretely refracted in my own life. In the playground at school, when it rained, I built small

I was very moved by Pierre's account, which I understood as a personal narrative of a child's relation to his father and a protest against the erasures within Lebanon's national historical narratives. While Henry held a most central place in Pierre's account, his absence from more official records was glaring. Listening to him evoking Henry Naccache's legacy of infrastructural achievements in Lebanon, I wanted to ask him whether grieving for his country reminded him of the loss of his father, or whether it was the other way around. "It is neither", he would later clarify.

In Pierre's narration, Henry appears as a founding father, responsible for the execution of several projects that once promised a brighter future for the nation — what Tania Li refers to as occupying the position of trustee (2007). In addition to completing the Beirut airport, parts of the Beirut port, and the Litani, Henry Naccache, as Pierre would later show me on his father's CV, was also the General Director of Air Liban (the national airlines now known as Middle East Airlines-Air Liban) and, in his capacity as the co-director of the CEGP, had been directly involved in rural electrification programs, the construction of the port of Jounieh, the national coastal highway to northern Lebanon, the Lebanese University's Faculty of Sciences, as well as the development of the Beirut and Tripoli rivers.[34] The biography of Henry Naccache — representative of a segment of the elite who were educated abroad, lived in Beirut, and concentrated social, cultural, and economic capital— emerges as deeply entwined with a national history of development and modernization.[35] Reflecting both the personal and the political, Pierre's recollections of his father's life thus bring to light the tensions at the heart of Lebanese society and polity on the cusp of the civil war: a history of Franco-American involvement in Lebanon, the temporalities of infrastructural development that are always necessarily delayed, and the popular distinction often made between the mandates of two of the early presidents of the Republic, Camille Chamoun (1952-1958) and Fouad Chehab (1958-1964).[36]

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sand mounds to hold back the water. My father built his dams and I mine. Despite the glaring absence of any new realization on the Litani and in the wake of my father's mandate at the LRA, his name sunk into Lebanese oblivion. For example, the Litani's history book, published by the LRA on its jubilee, only grants him a secondary role, whereas the infrastructure's history, as presented in one of the publications of the AbdelAal foundation, superbly ignores his existence.

[34] Henry Naccache was also behind the invitation extended to the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer to design the International Fair of Tripoli.

[35] For more on the role of local experts and engineers in the modernization of Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, see Verdeil 2010.

[36] For more on expertise and the broader politics of development in Lebanon between the Point Four mission and the Chehabist and Chamounist eras, see Verdeil 2008.

Pierre's story evoked among many things the problems the LRA encountered during the initial phases of construction of the dam — "*des éboulements*", or rockslides. These problems shaped the trajectory and outcome of the project and led to the dismissal of the *Groupe Français du Litani* (GFL), the French engineering consortium that was initially selected to work on the dam project. When GFL was replaced by *Electricité de France* as a consultant on the project, the LRA, now under the leadership of Henry Naccache, moved forward with the construction, opting for a rockfill dam structure with concrete blocks (as *estaz* M. said like a human chest) instead of a multiple arch dam, which was deemed incapable of efficiently and safely retaining water.[37] In the temporality of infrastructural development, project delays, incompleteness, negotiations, and modifications are the norm rather than the exception, and a project's initial timeline and design are rarely taken at face value (Carse and Kneas 2019; Mitchell 2002). But the gaps and tensions between different project documents, or between designs and actual outcomes are also always political. In addition to bureaucratic hurdles and geophysical delays, there were ideological impulses, political economic forces and sociocultural dynamics that had a direct bearing on the project itself.

Rooted in the spirit of the time and the Cold War's hubris of development, the Litani project was one of the US Bureau of Reclamation's first interventions in a country of noteworthy geostrategic importance for the United States (Gendzier 1997; Sneddon 2015).[38] In those early years of the Republic, state development projects were significantly shaped by a Franco-American (and to a lesser extent Anglo) geopolitical and economic rivalry over the region — including but not limited to containment plans for communism, foreign capital investments, and growing flows of petrodollars (Gendzier 1997). In addition to the effects of oil, the war with Israel and Israeli interests in harnessing the Litani's waters (Naccache 2022), the problem of a Palestinian refugee reserve army of labor after the Nakba (Sayigh 1979), Lebanon's economic separation from Syria and the economic crisis that ensued (Safieddine 2019), as well as the local

[37] "Litani Project — Lebanon", Letter from Mario Piccagli, April 6, 1961, Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Administration - Volume 6 (July 1, 1960 - May 31, 1961), Folder ID: 1859491 Project ID: P005324, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States. See also, Kardahji 2015.

[38] It is worth noting here that in her seminal study on the role of US foreign intervention in Lebanon, Gendzier (1997) notes that development projects like the Litani targeted rural areas to maintain a sociopolitical status quo. Sneddon (2015, 53) makes a similar argument stating that the Litani produced paradoxical developmental effects and that it did not necessarily amplify US geopolitical power.

refraction of other Arab states' planning policies and nationalization programs, all played a significant role in the materialization, design, and implementation of the Litani dam project.

In the distinction that he traces between the two groups « Chéhab, mon père et les Français d'un côté » et « Chamoun, Lahoud et les Américains de l'autre », Pierre's account captures part of the national socioeconomic and intellectual transformations, popular movements of contestation, and internal political turmoil that molded what state development plans would come to look like in the two decades following Lebanon's independence in 1943 (Abu-Rish 2014; Safieddine 2019; Traboulsi 2012). If President Camille Chamoun (1952-1958) was known for his outright support of American policies and intervention in Lebanon, his successor President Chehab (1958-1964) was seen as a Francophile who worked to modernize the country's peripheral areas and to bridge the social and cultural gaps between communities. Elected in 1952, in a climate of regional political instability and local popular unrest, Chamoun's ascent to the presidency began with a promise of social reform that it never really delivered. While Lebanon's economy grew exponentially under Chamoun's mandate, the newfound prosperity, coupled with an increased presidential authoritarian bent, exacerbated social and economic inequalities as well as regional and sectarian divides. Wealth and power remained concentrated in Beirut and some of its peripheries, while rural areas remained marginalized with their disenfranchised communities struggling to survive. Some six years later, Chamoun's presidency ended in circumstances worse than it started with accusations of corruption, the 1958 insurrection, and an American military intervention. Unable to secure a second mandate for his presidency, he was replaced by Fouad Chehab.

It was against this political atmosphere and under Naccache's tenure at the LRA (1960-1967) that the dam, the tunnel, and the power plants were completed. In the Lebanese popular imagination, the Chehab administration is remembered as being reformist and developmentalist and as an administration that sought to rescue the country from sliding further into violence, following the civil strife of 1958. Inspired by the planning and development study and program of the French IRFED (Institut de recherche et de formation en vue du développement) whom he had contracted, Chehabism entailed the pursuit of an active national program for development

of both rural and urban areas.[39] This was in part due to the IRFED study on Lebanon, which had highlighted how affluent neighborhoods in the capital city of Beirut were enjoying the country's newfound prosperity —derived primarily from finance and trade— while the rural poor lived in wretched conditions.[40]

Overall, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as state institutional building and development plans intensified, so did struggles over the nature of the state itself.[41] By this I also mean to say that the development of the Litani was not actualized only under the presidency of Fouad Chehab, but rather that it was the outcome of a history of ruptures and continuities. So, when the Litani Project was completed, it embodied the paradoxical position in which the Chehab government had found itself, advocating for a more just distribution of wealth while also keeping structural conditions intact. By the end of these two decades, it had become clear that the Lebanese state, its regulatory roles, and modes of intervention in the economy strove to serve the interests of capital and the country's social and economic elites, whilst occasionally weighing the careful question of national unity (Kardahji 2015; Safieddine 2019). The Litani Project was thus paradoxical in that it promoted development and yet was also inscribed in a politics that actively sought to avert lasting social transformations — put differently, an economic development servicing the few in lieu of a broader political and economic enfranchisement and a vision that Henry Naccache repeatedly attempted to challenge.

Rural electrification

That the Litani's initial purpose—to provide both hydroelectricity and agricultural irrigation—was repeatedly overturned is neither surprising nor unusual. While I may critically reflect on the consequences, I am in fact rather unable to technically explain why the Litani infrastructure became centered on the production of hydroelectricity at the expense of irrigation. As an anthropologist, I am perhaps ill-equipped to compare and contrast the financial

[39] For more on developmentalism under the Chamoun and Chehab eras and the role of IRFED, see Bou Akar (2018, 152-170).
[40] Led by Père Louis-Joseph Lebret who saw in the Litani Project tremendous potential for change, the French IRFED assumed a social reformist Catholic approach to development and had roots in the planning and execution of projects in Latin America and in various parts of the African and Asian continent. See for e.g., Schayegh (2013); and Institut de formation en vue du développement, (1963).
[41] I am grateful to Owain Lawson for pointing this out.

and technical argumentations laid out in thousands of pages of studies conducted by Point Four experts, engineers like Ibrahim AbdelAal or Albert Naccache, and in the project documents of the World Bank, to name a few. Reading about the Litani in the language of calculations and measurements, deployed to assert one aspect of the project's financial benefit and its cost-effectiveness over another, makes it difficult to extrapolate or comment on —in fact they obscure— the complex social and historical forces that underpin such forms of techno-reasonings, which in turn produce the world (Mitchell 2002). In part, these processes of abstraction, and the objective quality they take on, are revelatory of development's entwinement with economic expansion and a system of government that promotes it (Hetherington 2020). Conversely, and to go back to Pierre's image of the two approaches led by Chamoun on one hand and Chehab on the other, I became more interested in how the development schemes enabled the reproduction of a situated politics that was already at play (Li 2008). If a loan from the World Bank in the mid-1950s first catalyzed the project, the project's infrastructural arrangements also recast relationships between city and countryside. It shaped class mobility and belonging, and was swiftly integrated into global, regional, and national narratives of growth, unity, and prosperity.

The more I read about the prioritization of hydropower, the more I saw the realization of the Litani infrastructure as a project emerging within two decades of social turmoil and effective political contestation in the capital, prompted by successive electricity crises and protests, as well as intensifying rural flight.[42] These popular mobilizations, coupled with the imperative to maintain national unity in Beirut and contain further dissent elsewhere, played a significant role in catalyzing the Litani project into being. More particularly, the popular unrest over electricity cuts and costs —which indirectly ushered Camille Chamoun's ascent to the presidency on a promise to address the issue of power distribution (Abu-Rish 2014)— elicited a series of questions around how, where, and what kind of electricity Lebanon would produce, and, most importantly, for whom.

By mid-1955, the Lebanese energy market was already transforming: a new thermal plant had been installed by the newly nationalized Electricité de Beyrouth, now dubbed the OETC

[42] See for e.g.: Abu-Rish (2014) on the 1952 electricity strike and Eddé (2002) on earlier mobilizations.

(*Office de l'Électricité et Transports en Commun*); plans were being designed for the construction of another (that Lahoud and the LRA had hoped to fund with the Bank's loan); and additional concessions to produce hydropower had also already been granted.[43] The rapid expansion of the grid throughout the 1960s formed part of a renewed purposeful policy for rural electrification.

Rural electrification was pursued and expanded under the mandate of Fouad Chehab, in the wake of both the Palestinian Nakba in 1948 and the short-lived civil war of 1958.[44] In addition to the influx of Palestinian refugees, the Nakba led to the intensification of rural flight from border towns, while the 1958 crisis brought regional disparities into sharper focus. Rural exodus was precipitated by Zionist militias' bombing of bordering Lebanese villages on the border. The economic fallout —itself a result of the loss of work and market opportunities in Palestine, specifically between the regions of Jabal Amel and Galilee— worsened the situation further (Beydoun 1992).

Lebanon's program for rural electrification was additionally inscribed in a logic of expansion that required the engineering of innovative market avenues as well new sources for electric production and consumption. Because of electricity's materiality and its synchronous properties, rural electrification posed a veritable challenge. The set-up of distribution networks covering vast and sparsely populated areas, where consumption was likely to be low, was a costly undertaking.[45] If private concessions produced hydropower to illuminate major urban centers, they would find little to no motivation to do so in the countryside, at least initially. Only the state could fund such a loss-making enterprise. To increase electric consumption, the Lebanese state unified electricity tariffs (which previous had increased in expense the further one got from Beirut).[46]

In line with correlated projects unfolding around the same time (such as the Green Plan or the Office for Social Development), rural electrification also sought to foster the development of new occupations (such as small industry and crafts). These would keep farmers busy during

[43] Discussions with Lebanese Delegates on July 19, 1955, Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Negotiations - Volume 2 (July 5, 1955 - August 29, 1955) Folder ID: 1859485, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.
[44] The rural electrification project was pursued by the CEGP, which included Henry Naccache, Fayez Ahdab, and Farid Trad. The latter two were later replaced by Malek Salam and Ferdinand Dagher.
[45] The transmission of electricity over long distances also entails inevitable energy losses. The stability and efficiency of the grid itself requires balancing out electricity generation, transmission, and use/
[46] Sanlaville, Paul. L'electricité au Liban, *Commerce du Levant*, 15 February, 1966.

the long winter months, de-centralize industry, create new centers in rural areas where labour was cheap, and promote the use of technology (such as electric water pumps) in farming and agriculture.[47] For these reasons, the program for rural electrification had to be state sponsored and was thus intimately interconnected with efforts aimed at keeping rural communities in their villages and stemming rural flight to Beirut. When the Litani project materialized as a hydropower project *par excellence* it had become enmeshed with the country's electrification priorities, set against a background of a national political economy dominated by urban elites and monopolistic commercial and financial interests.

Averting social reform

That the Litani Project privileged the production of hydropower over irrigation was, in Henry Naccache's view, cause for concern and an impetus for the LRA to require different plans and goals. In June 1960, in a letter he addressed to the Minister of Public Works asking the government to reverse its decision and find another Chairman for the Board, he deplored the course that the Litani Project had set for Lebanon:

> Pour avoir des Kilowatt-heures —que le Liban pourrait se procurer d'autre façon— on aurait donc sacrifié à tout jamais les possibilités de développement de certaines régions. En particulier, l'irrigation des villages de montagnes.[48]

Naccache's request, that he *not* be considered for the position, was declined by the Minister. He was appointed Chairman of the LRA Board that year, a position he would retain until the end of 1966, despite several attempts to resign, each met with a refusal. When the LRA had already made significant progress on the hydropower project, Henry continued to contest the direction of the Litani project. "Avec l'achèvement du 'projet hydroélectrique', se tourne une page. Il faut

[47] Fouad Bizri, Notes sur l'électrification du Liban, *Commerce du Levant*, 15 February 1966.
[48] Letter of Henry Naccache to the Minister of Public Works, 3 June 1960, Henry Naccache Private Archives, courtesy of Pierre Naccache. Original in French. "To obtain Kilowatt-hours — which Lebanon could get some other way— we would have thus forever sacrificed the possibilities of development of certain regions. In particular, the irrigation of mountain villages."

en ouvrir une autre, très différente", he wrote halfway through his mandate.[49,50] Calling for the overhaul of the LRA's structure, scope of work, and objectives, Naccache sought to push forth an agenda to implement irrigation works. As his endeavor proved repeatedly unsuccessful, he was able to identify the challenges that prevented the irrigation program from materializing as part of the Litani Project. If the LRA's administrative structure, including that of its board, was limiting, what he had found most difficult was the "conflit de doctrines", the doctrinal conflict animating both state and society over the logic of intervention of the LRA and, more broadly, of the Lebanese state itself.[51]

During a meeting held with Fouad Chehab in 1963, Naccache made his reservations clear — his typewritten notes, likely in preparation for the meeting, are revelatory:

> La nouvelle œuvre, très vaste, complexe, périlleuse,
>
> Exige:
>
> - Élaboration d'une doctrine d'utilisation de l'eau et de l'intervention de l'État dans les problèmes socio-économiques du développement.
> - Des actions multiformes imbriquées telles que :
> - Remembrement
> - Coopératives
> - Orientation des productions
> - "" des débouchés
> - "" des crédits
> - Polarisation du développement complémentaire
>
> - Et des moyens d'action rapides et adéquats.

[49] Henry Naccache. Resignation letter to the Prime Minister, 09 May 1963. Henry Naccache Private Archives, courtesy of Pierre Naccache.
[50] "With the completion of the hydropower project, a new leaf is turned over. It is imperative that it be very different."
[51] Henry Naccache. Note Verbale sur le programme d'irrigation non-inscrite au registre des déliberations, 10 June 1962, Henry Naccache Private Archives, courtesy of Pierre Naccache.

> C'est une grande œuvre. Peut-être la plus difficile de toutes celles à tenter au Liban.[52,53]

Hastily composed, these notes speak to the way Naccache inhabited two interrelated positions — nation builder and engineer— and underscore, as was the case of many engineers of his time, his engagement with political and technical questions alike (Lawson 2021). Foregrounding water's entanglement with political economic questions, Naccache's notes make evident the Litani's potential role in shaping social configurations as well as individual and collective subjectivities. "*C'est une grande œuvre. Peut-être la plus difficile de toutes celles à tenter au Liban*" —the most difficult of all undertakings. From Naccache's point of view, the perilous undertaking he had wanted to propose to the President of the republic provided the grounds from which to foster a certain notion of justice. Bolstering the responsibility of the state, Naccache called for an overturning of the nation's politics of development, in addition to a bold restructuring of all activities of production and consumption. In that vein, the difficult undertaking he had been considering entailed the much larger question of an overturning of social and, necessarily, psychical relations.

While Henry Naccache does not directly question the legitimacy of the Litani as a hydropower project, he does ascertain the difficulty of implementing any scheme in which the waters of the Litani would be used for the purpose of agriculture and irrigation. Going through Naccache's papers, I reflected on the dangerous suppositions implied in these practical notes. These notes seem to suggest that, only a few years before the eruption of the Lebanese civil war, cooperatives and new labor opportunities were already understood as contentious and antagonizing. What if that 'difficult and grand undertaking' — "*La nouvelle œuvre, très vaste, complexe, périlleuse"*— had indeed been implemented? In neglecting irrigation, the Litani embodied specific infrastructural relations and expressed a politics of development in which

[52] Henry Naccache. Notes, 1963. Henry Naccache Private Archives, courtesy of Pierre Naccache. Emphasis in original.
[53] "The new undertaking, very vast, complex, dangerous, Requires: (i) the elaboration of a doctrine for water use and for state intervention in development's socio-economic problems; (ii) multiform and interrelated actions such as: Land consolidation, Cooperatives, Steering of productions, outlets, and credits, and focusing on complementary development; (iii) And swift and adequate means for action. It is a grand undertaking. Perhaps the most difficult of all those that should be tried out in Lebanon."

democratically controlled labour organizations as well as the planning and regulation of people's relations to their environments was already inconceivable.

Capitalist transitions: from growth to sustainability

In 1955, when the Lebanese parliament was still considering the World Bank's proposed loan, the parliamentary committees in charge of public works and agricultural and economic development had disagreed over the project on offer. While several members refuted the primacy of hydropower over irrigation, they had nevertheless agreed that the project was indeed one of the country's most vital enterprises and that its swift implementation was a matter of national duty, particularly in light of Israeli ambitions for the waters of the Litani.[54] When deputies finally gathered, on a cold December morning, to move ahead with the controversial loan ratification, they reflected on how the proposed Litani project would shape the future of Lebanese society. Jamil Mekkaoui, Minister of Public Works and interim Minister of Finance (replacing Jamil Chehab who had resigned in protest of the loan), opened the session with a daring, electrifying, speech:

> It is my privilege, at this decisive hour of this country's economic history, to present to you a project, one of Lebanon's most daring, and on which we pin all our greatest hopes, the Litani project (…) How civilized a nation is, is measured by the extent to which it exploits the natural resources bestowed upon her by God. And a civilized nation exploits these resources to the greatest extent possible. If nature has not been kind to Lebanon by depriving it of most raw materials, the Lebanese people can attain the utmost levels of civilization by exploiting the human energy found in the minds and arms of its sons and by exploiting important natural resources like the waters of Lebanese rivers. Controlling these waters will eventually lead to highly productive agricultural investments but more importantly to the generation of substantial hydropower especially when measured

[54] It is important to note here the several debates surrounding Zionist and Israeli interests in the waters of the Litani, starting as early as 1919. For more information, see for e.g.: Amery (1993); Naccache (2022).

> against the population which will be making use of it (…) The Litani is a special river for it is also a Lebanese river and its hydrological abundance is entirely made from the Lebanese sky.[55]

In the minister's declamation, I recognized a familiar trope — that of the Lebanese (ideally male) citizen who can ingenuously work to overcome the constraints imposed on Lebanon by virtue of both the paucity and the singularity of its territory. A country that has no oil but can serve as a place of transit for oil; that will only develop small agriculture and minor industry but will heavily invest in services and trade and work towards weaving ties with the outside world; and that has been divinely endowed with the gift of water in an otherwise barren Arab region. In connecting civilizational progress with extractivism, the minister's speech underscored the logic of capital-intensive interventions at the heart of big D-development during the 1950s and the 1960s, a logic that has much in common with colonial ordering principles (Escobar 1995). It illustrated the ways in which Lebanon's geography, topography, and demography set the small nation apart from its immediate neighbours. More indirectly, it also capitalized on a national angst that Lebanon's rivers, aquifers, and delectable water sources were coveted by its enemies.[56] Contemporary global infrastructural politics continue to instrumentalize this discourse in a way that helps absolve the state from its responsibilities. Now in new form, modernist extractivism has been replaced by a performance of state power (but also of non-governmental organizations and civil society groups) designed to foreground sustainability, minimal intervention, and, still, the exploitation of natural resources.

In a prescient interview from early 1989, Ivan Illich (1999) likened development's forward-looking temporality to "a shadow our future throws". His critique addressed the Brundtland Report (1987), titled "Our Common Future", published by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development. Against this report that sought to popularize the term 'sustainable development' as way to reconcile economic growth and environmental protection,

[55] Eighth legislative cycle, Second ordinary session, Minutes of the Sixteenth Sitting, Meeting held at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, December 22, 1955.
[56] I am referring here to Israeli interests in Lebanon's waters. This angst was heightened during Israel's Operation Litani in 1978, its invasion of Lebanon in 1982, its repeated wars of aggression until its withdrawal in 2000, during its 2006 war on Lebanon, and, more recently, following the events of October 7th 2023.

Illich argued that sustainability frameworks often remain firmly rooted within the ethos of development and advocated a radically different conceptual vocabulary, pointing towards other political horizons. Globally, we are no longer living in the era of sustainable development but of sustainability *tout-court*. Dropping 'development' suggests specific social, political, and temporal transformations, reflecting "an economy that can continue forever" instead of an "economy that is asked to grow limitlessly" (Rival 2017, 183). Propelled by the forces of finance, such a shift towards sustainability is usually accompanied by a move away from institutional discourses of progress and growth towards a greater emphasis on transparency and inflation. As critical theorist Randy Martin (2002, 193) observes in his study of the increased financialization of everyday life, these have become "the watch-words to measure the human condition". If these two dyads (development/sustainability) produce different meanings, they nevertheless perform similar functions (Ibid). Again, in Martin's words (2002, 193): "If progress is a hopeful vision of the future, transparency lays the future bare in the present so that further discipline can be applied."

I find Illich's image of a teleological temporality, whose shadow is cast over the world, particularly compelling because it describes the way life is always already lived as a future in ruins.[57] Writing today about development in the Litani watershed might seem idiosyncratic, not least because the discourse now rather centers on sustainability. From the perspective of friends and interlocutors, development had little relevance to them because there was no talk of the future either. Illich's insight speaks to and resonates with many instances of my own fieldwork. Since the Litani project's initial implementation during the 1950s and the 1960s, Lebanon witnessed a protracted civil war (1975-1990) that definitively shattered the delicate balance between development and social unity that the Litani once embodied. Following the war, an era of neoliberal reconstruction, unfettered expansion of the banking and financial sectors, several wars with Israel, and ongoing political instability reshaped the country's broader political economy, leading up to its current condition of social, economic, and financial collapse. "Future, what future?", was the response of interlocutors when asked; even the horizon had become a

[57]In his lifework, Illich sought to situate ruination in relation to hegemonic forms of capitalist development. Rooted in eighteenth century liberal thought and Cold War imperatives, Illich contended that this development ethos claimed to overcome the limits that bounded, regulated, and circumscribed the possibilities of human life. But what it really did was widen inequalities and transform human necessities into reified lacks and gaps to be satisfied through various forms of hapless consumption.

dead end, *al ufuq masdoud*. Neither unknown nor unknowable, the future in Lebanon, as a historical, temporal, and embodied forward-looking move, was simply unthinkable.

What becomes of the time of infrastructural progress in the watershed now that the bright light of development has dimmed? When I met Dr. S. (who is also a lawyer) in his office in Beirut to ask for permission to tour the interior structures of the dam and power plants, he foregrounded anti-pollution projects and the legal instruments that would allow him to achieve them. "We no longer do things old-school by organizing awareness sessions and distributing pamphlets in community centers", he assured me. Recovering the river's pristine waters, he explained, went hand-in-hand with the planned development of the Litani's unfinished Canal 800 (the South Lebanon irrigation project initially devised in the late 1960s). To Dr. S., the LRA had to adopt the language, tools, and processes of current times updated to prioritize environmental conservation and prevent what he described as the Litani's premature death.

The discursive shift to water conservation has been gradual and entwined with Lebanon's fraught history of environmentalism. Since the end of the civil war, environmentalism in Lebanon has been driven by the agendas of international donors, funders, and grantmaking agencies; a heightened popular and activist interest in ecological questions (spurred locally by the 2015 national waste management crisis); and political and financial rivalry between the country's major political parties, particularly over water related projects (Kingston 2001; Makdisi 2012; Nagel and Staeheli 2016; Nassour 2020; Riachi 2022).

Nowadays, what does environmentalism look like in the Litani watershed? When the Lebanese parliament passed Law Number 63 on governance and the environmental protection of the Litani River Basin in 2016, it gave the LRA direct power to prosecute polluters. It also outlined a financial scheme for the funding of anti-pollution projects, namely the treatment of wastewater, as well as solid, industrial, and agricultural waste.[58] More recently, USAID —which succeeded the Point Four mission that helped design the Litani infrastructure— has also prioritized water and sanitation programs in the watershed. Many interlocutors and friends in

[58] The funding scheme amounted to a total of $800 million, to be secured through a mix of state budget allocations, loans, and grants. Two recent loans from the World Bank to the Lebanese state also concerned the Litani river's ecology: the World Bank's "Lake Qaraoun Pollution Prevention Project" in 2016 ($55.5 million allocated for the building and rehabilitation of the wastewater network), as well as the Lebanon National Comprehensive Environmental Management Program in 2020 (Phase I – Litani River Basin), estimated at around $200 million.The latter was dropped in 2022.

West Bekaa who used to irrigate their crops from the Litani's discontinued Canal 900 project expressed reservations about the LRA's priorities. My friends Wafic and Wissal for example often complained about the LRA's paradoxical decisions to continue to foreground anti-pollution projects (including decisions that banned people from fishing and irrigating their crops using Litani waters), whilst simultaneously advancing the development of the Canal 800, part of the South Lebanon irrigation project.

Thanks to the newly set legal frameworks —including the decisions of the governors of Baalbek-Hermel and the Bekaa to prohibit the use of the Litani's polluted waters for irrigation— the LRA could appoint patrol guards like Bou Falah. In collaboration with the Interior Security Forces, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Industry, and the Lebanese State Security (to name a few), LRA employees monitored the implementation of various decisions and documented pollution violations in the watershed.[59] As a patrol guard, Bou Falah spent his day driving the *Rapid* making sure no one along the basin breached the law. He surveilled encroachments on the riverbanks and collaborated with municipalities, local and regional water establishments, and experts who sampled water from the river at different locations to monitor pollution levels, whether from sewage, untreated domestic wastewater, or discards from industrial or agricultural activity. In conjunction with his colleagues at the LRA, he could even alert relevant departments to sanction or prosecute the individuals, entities, or institutions who were committing environmental crimes and threatening the ecological integrity of the Litani waters. When these accusations were proven, he usually followed up on the implementation of judiciary, legal, and technical decisions to remove encroachments and remedy to the illegal dumping of polluting water into the river.

That Bou Falah could still afford gas to perform all these duties throughout the financial crisis was thanks, primarily, to a monthly subsidy he and a few select colleagues received from the LRA. As I later learned, these subsidies formed part of broader programmatic schemes for development and sustainability and were funded by international donor and granting agencies. As he repeatedly pointed out, the *maslaha*, empowered by this recent water legislation that

[59] These measures are part of a broader national plan and framework developed by the Litani River Authority, and of which Law Number 63 is a key component.

granted it judiciary prerogatives, claimed it was more determined than ever to clean the river and hold accountable those littering and destroying its ecology:

> Fighting against pollution is one of our most important priorities. But our job is more than just that. We must ensure the protection of *al-munsha'at*, the infrastructures. I cover all these grounds to make sure no one is fishing, hunting, trespassing, or polluting. I come after those who do. Here let me show you, I still have some photos on my phone. I even do more without anyone even asking me to. Let me tell you. That was after the Lebanese Army had launched their operation in *Jurud Arsal* against Daesh,[60] I noticed people walking around the dam over several nights and a day. I found that situation very unsettling. One day, I came up to them—there were three of them—and I said to them: 'Who are you?? What are you doing here??' I think they were armed. Yes, they had weapons! Maybe they wanted to blow up the dam? They said they were a group of tourists visiting from the north. They were part of a large group that had come in big buses and trucks. I said give me your papers, but they ran away. The next day I called the army and the armed group of men never showed up again.

I found Bou Falah's narrative striking, particularly in the emphasis it placed on the dam as a security site and space of imagined social vulnerability, and as a kind of synecdoche for the state. Though pollution barely figured, it constituted the discursive frame through which such claims of honour, bravery, and integrity are articulated — in other words, an opportunity for a different political practice, which was also aimed at mitigating further loss.[61]

Centered on pollution, the LRA's 'novel' approach for managing the Litani river basin has shifted from 'planification', valorization, and commodification, towards conservation and, as I

[60] In 2017, the Lebanese Army launched *Fajr Al-Jurud* a military operation against ISIS combatants who settled in the bordering area between Lebanon and Syria, near the town of Aarsal.

[61] Relatedly, I address the gaps between the institutional discourses of pollution and the practices that aim to address environmental degradation in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. I address the indeterminacy of the pollution problem particularly among power plant workers and show how environmental policies are re-negotiated at differing scales. These negotiations are not inscribed within the institutional and international trends of conservation and sustainability. I would also like to note that institutional and popular discourses converge elsewhere: they underscore the nefarious consequences of the Litani's pollution in the regions of North and Central Bekaa, particularly its alleged effect on a rise in cancer diagnoses. When I conducted fieldwork in West Bekaa, most people did not draw water from the Litani to irrigate their crops (as I mention earlier in this chapter, the irrigation canal 900 was closed due to pollution) and so, with the exception of power plant workers, their primary concern with regards to the pollution was the Litani's stench. See for e.g., Al Hajal (2022).

show in the dissertation's last chapter, the possibility of future financialization.[62] Older institutional mandates and agendas for the Litani, on the other hand, emphasized maximizing the exploitation of the river's waters for economic expansion. That the river's infrastructural development took the form of a hydropower project was structured by technical, material, and ideological struggles. One of its unintended consequences was the increased pollution from which it now needed to be saved. As a sink for the dumping of waste and sewage, the dam became a chokepoint catalyzing an irreparable rift and introducing the specter of the Litani's "death", to use Dr. S.'s words. But chokepoints are "zones of operative paradox" where limiting dynamics can also be instrumentalized (Carse et al. 2023). Picture the Litani dam as a generative chokepoint: while it has become a sink for the dumping of untreated wastewater, sewage, and toxins, it also opened the possibility for a move from development works to anti-pollution activities. The LRA's evolving institutional goals —from public institution tasked with the implementation of a hydropower project to one that prioritizes the protection of the Litani river water quality—reflects broader global shifts from development to sustainability.

* * *

One fine evening in Saghbine, I witnessed my friend, Elias, getting into a heated debate with his father over the importance of the Litani. Like Mekkaoui above, Elias wanted to assert the specialness of Lebanese rivers, particularly the Litani. Disagreeing with him, his father, Ammo Mouhib, had retorted: "Do you think the Litani or Nahr al-Kabir [the large river, which forms Lebanon's northern border with Syria] are like the Nile? There are places where you can easily cross by foot, in the middle of spring. Let's be real. It's also a question of geography!". "No father", Elias replied, "it's a question of history." Large dams like the Qaraoun on the Litani have often been associated with the production of "monumental modernities", nation-building, and the physical and imaginative transformations that concern development and progress (Nixon 2011, 150; Roy 1999). The scientific, discursive, and bureaucratic apparatuses needed for the

[62] I borrow the term valorization from Albert Naccache, prominent Lebanese water engineer who advocated the comprehensive *valorization* of all of Lebanon's waters for the development of the nation. In his writings, valorization is understood as the process by which science is used to produce economic value from an object (like the Litani). See for e.g., Gemayel and Naccache (1951).

functioning of infrastructures like the Litani are also inherent to this modernist project (Ferguson 1994; Ribeiro 1994).

In his critical reflection on modern ideologies and semiotics, Roland Barthes (1991) asserts that modern myths can transform history into nature. I take Barthes' reference to nature to mean not the natural world that is opposed to the social world, but rather to signal a kind of automaticity and second nature, much like Mauss's "physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions", which I invoked earlier. The Litani becomes what Kregg Hetherington (2020), remarking on the polysemic figurations of soy in Paraguay, calls a "character of the Anthropocene", a multifaceted national, political, social, and environmental presence. [63] Enlisted in a modernizing project, the transformed Litani waterscape reproduces a situated politics that prioritizes modern urban life and its elites at the expense of rural communities. It also embodies a specific politics of development that obviates social rupture and change and, in the more recent international shift to sustainability and environmental conservation, parallels global changing capitalist practices.

I do not mean to imply that the infrastructural development of the Litani watershed has been one immovable, top-down undertaking, or that a development project centered on irrigation and the promotion of agricultural practices would have set the West Bekaa and Lebanon on a different path altogether. Whether aimed at hydropower or irrigation, harnessing the waters of the Litani was likely to have posed a challenge either way. During the 1960s, agricultural production and distribution in Lebanon was already dominated by commercial and financial elites, monopolistic agribusiness, and exploitative forms of land-leasing. Though not directly implicated in the overturning of agricultural production, the implementation of the Litani hydropower project coincided with an era of state policies and social transformations that became associated with the passing of a certain rural way of life. If half of the Lebanese population worked in agriculture in the 1950s, only 20 per cent still drew a living from that sector by 1975 (Traboulsi 2012).

[63] Hetherington (2020) reflects on the campesinos' claim that "soy kills" to explore the role of the monocrop as a set of social, political, and environmental forces. He likens soy to what Timothy Morton (2013) calls a 'hyperobject' that is undefinable and difficult to grasp but that nevertheless becomes endowed with capacities that far exceed human control.

On one occasion, I told Pierre about the localized transformations that occurred in the watershed when the Litani came, *lamma eja al-Litani*. The construction of the dam in Qaraoun had left many farmers without land to till, turning them into power plant workers or migrants. Pierre's reply was shattering: "Dur réveil pour le fils de celui qui était responsable du projet…".[64] Somehow, our conversation conjured up Henry's presence and his legacies as a reformist and a nation builder. I realized Henry's presence was vividly felt not just because of the stories that Pierre narrated about his father and his work. Most of the furniture in Pierre's living room, had been shipped to Montreal, all the way from Henry's apartment in Beirut. It hit me then that many of the discussions with Henry that Pierre relayed to me had occurred in the exact same setting, though at another time and place. What we had just experienced was a mark of diasporic existence —what Ghassan Hage (2022) calls lenticular reality, a way of being neither entirely here nor there, and a manner of existing in both places at once. We were all sitting there in silence in this salon. Then, Pierre turned to me and suddenly said, "Je suis content que mon père soit mort et qu'il n'ait pas vu ce que tout ça est devenu».[65] In 1976, a year into Lebanon's civil war, Henry Naccache was kidnapped and killed. His body, like thousands of others of Lebanon's disappeared, was never found.

[64] "A hard awakening for the son of the man who was in charge of the project."
[65] "I am happy that my father died and that he didn't see what all this has become."

Chapter 2: Tarabot Maslahi

Bassam's family hails from a quaint village located on the other side of the Litani valley. Nestled on the western flanks of Mount Lebanon, its population of 400 makes a living from agriculture, fishing, and a small local hospitality industry. Like several of his colleagues at the power plants, Bassam's connection to the river, and that of his family, spans several generations. They were present when the power plants were built in the 1960s and the dam's technological modernization began to change how people related to and lived with the Litani. Early on, his parents were recruited to work in the nearby hydropower plant. Soon after the civil war began in 1975, a demarcation line isolated their village, but the power plant, as Bassam describes, remained accessible:

> The hydropower plant was at the heart of it all, in the middle of the borderline. The surrounding hills and roads were controlled by militias and armed groups from both sides, they all had a vested interest in keeping it running, as did we. No one could cross, everything was shut, it was you know… *waʾt al-ʾijtiyah* [the time of the invasion] … society was... how to put it... divided. Electricians who worked at the plant were given *laissez-passers* from both sides throughout the war, so we'd meet there. To anyone coming from outside the region, the area was unreachable but those who lived in nearby villages could still go [to work] every day despite the bombing and chaos. When I graduated with a degree in electrical engineering in the early 1980s, I took after my parents… I, too, joined the Litani and worked at the power plant until the end of the war (…). My parents loved the Litani. They laboured there together, daily, with other villagers. People had an expression for it. 'Engaged to the power plant,' they would say. *Khateb al-maʿmal*. These jobs and the tasks at hand were and still are important to everyone. It wasn't just because of the war, I don't think… With the Litani, a kind of *tarabot maslahi* [a symbiotic form of living together] with the people of the region was born.

I was sitting in his office in Beirut that day, jotting memos down in my red notebook and chatting about life in Lebanon and in Montreal, where he had also lived for a short while during the mid-1990s. Even behind his solid wood desk of a bureaucrat at the *maslaha* (the Authority), Bassam was a gentle and generous interlocutor. Having known and worked with the river for over four decades, he was one of the oldest staff of the Litani, and according to many of his peers, among the wisest. Throughout our meeting, I exhausted him with questions that were at once personal, technical, and political. He occasionally paused to print out graphs and charts that illustrated the Litani's capacity to generate hydropower over the years. Rising from his leathered armchair, he would walk back and forth from one side of his office to the other to retrieve print outs that would help me "more clearly visualize the data." At other times, his silence pointed to more complex and painful memories from the time of the *ahdath* (the incidents).[1] I had heard many war stories, of residents mobilizing in West Bekaa at the beginning of the civil war, during *harb al-santayn* the two-year war (1975-1976), to ensure the protection of the dam, power plants, and their communities from the national chaos.[2] But when Bassam recounted what it had meant for his parents to work with the Litani, I wrote "*tarabot maslahi"* in my notebook, circled it once and underlined it three times.

The processes of 'symbiotic living together' with the river that he described for me centered on vital employment, conviviality, kinship, and, among other things, the production (and consumption) of electric energy in the watershed. Talking to Bassam, I found myself instinctively challenging the positive social and natural aspects he had just ascribed to life with the Litani. To my mind, the Litani's pollution, and a broader national neglect of infrastructure, outweighed the beneficial or productive connections to the river. "But what happened to *tarabot maslahi* during those years especially after everyone began to experience the Litani's degradation?", I asked. His reply was unsettling. While I was expecting a description of familial hardships and the tragic loss of their village's environmental (and economic) integrity due to pollution, his response— a reflection on his own professional trajectory— rather underscored ways of relating to the Litani that were inexorable, even when they were harmful:

[1] Colloquial term used to refer to the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).
[2] During the first two years of the civil war, the most intense and violent fighting erupted around Beirut. With the exception of a few sporadic incidents and other shootouts, other areas, like the West Bekaa, were still relatively spared.

> At the end of the war… currency devaluation struck though not as badly as today's …! My monthly salary was worth no more than $80 American dollars, although I was overseeing not one but two power plants. I thought of leaving then, and I did for a while. I went to Montreal for a few years and did a second master's degree there. I was happy to return when things began to improve and so many people were optimistic again. And here I am today, with the Litani still! *Wayn badna nrouh*, where else should we go? Anyhow, it was around that time, as early as 1995, that the *maslaha* had already raised the red flag, advocating for a comprehensive plan to deal with the pollution problem. Other institutions like the CDR began to design schemes —the *plan directeur* for wastewater — to treat the Litani waters in 2005, but nothing has come out of it.[3] Since then, we have seen how a turbine does not last as long when the water is polluted. Workers have also been suffering for years from microbial contamination and from the emission of toxic gases like H_2S [Hydrogen Sulfide], which affected their lungs and central nervous system. [4] But it's a terribly complicated affair. You have seen already or perhaps it is that you are yet to see… After all these years, the Litani is now *'amiss Uthman*, Uthman's blood-stained shirt, waved as proof of indescribable injustice over people and the environment, not to recover a certain justice but rather to produce even more problems.[5]

As a lead engineer at the Litani River Authority, Bassam considered the immediate repercussions, of Lebanon's recursive socioeconomic crises and currency devaluations on the Litani since the end of the civil war, citing also the consequences of the ecological destruction. It is actually quite uncommon, within both official and popular discourses around the LRA, to hear about the detrimental effects of the Litani on its own workers and their families. Yet, Bassam highlighted how workers who became sick from the polluted Litani or who had seen their salaries depreciate by more than a hundred percent of their value had nowhere else to turn — neither for work nor

[3] The CDR is the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction created during the civil war to assess infrastructural needs and implement relevant projects.
[4] H_2S : Hydrogen Sulfide or sewer gas has a pungent rotten egg odor. Prolonged exposure to this gas has been proven potentially toxic.
[5] '*Amiss Uthman* refers to Uthman's blood-stained shirt that was allegedly waved to incite opposition against Ali Ben Abi Talib in Damascus. Uthman Ibn Affan's assassination and Ali's accession to the Caliphate would eventually provoke a profound rift and divide Muslim communities between Sunnis and Shias.

redress. They had no choice but to keep toiling in the power plants or leave the country altogether when they could.

Echoing the Greek notions of *Pharmakon* (which means both poison and cure) as well as *Pharmakos* or scapegoat, his narrative presented the Litani as a scapegoat of sorts, forcefully evoking the polluted river as the blood-stained shirt of Uthman, an image of pollution as a twofold injustice. For one, the Litani's pollution shortened the lifespan of equipment, resulting in infrastructural disrepair and precipitating workers' sickness. [6] For another, if the blood-stained shirt symbolized people's attachment to the dying river —embodying an ecological bereavement— it also implied the foreclosure of a certain 'just' politics that never really existed. In other words, the pollution of the river was flagged as a problem not necessarily because of a commitment to improve the living conditions of communities affected.

It was interesting to me how Bassam's narrative punctured the official LRA discourse, while still holding it up. Referencing the workers' struggles with occupational illness together with the political recuperation of a discourse on ecological degradation, it both betrayed and reinforced the formal institutional boundaries within which our conversation was (literally) taking place. Even if Bassam's answer was partly structured by what I knew to be the LRA's official script, highlighting, among other things, the plurality of institutions and actors involved in water governance and the compounded difficulties of dealing with the pollution problem, it also opened a little door through which I could catch glimpses of the messy worlds the Litani had created — "the terribly complicated affair" he mentioned.

My conversation with Bassam (and, later, other LRA staff) alerted me to the different ways of deploying dominant and authorized scripts generated by development projects, to produce something different. In particular, it was his framing of "*tarabot maslahi* with the Litani" that struck me in its ability to articulate clearly the multifaceted and complex ways that people could relate to, and speak, about the Litani, whilst simultaneously muddying the distinctions between nature, infrastructure, and the state. I have since come to understand this phrase as

[6] While the anthropological literature has utilized the conceptual frame of pharmakos/pharmakon with regards to medical, biosocial and individual regulation and control (Biehl and Moran-Thomas 2009), I take it up here as an analytic through which to reflect on communities' political response to material and social inequalities. See for e.g., Derrida (1981) on writing; Martin (2006) on pharmaceutical pills; and Schull (2006) on addiction.

gesturing towards forms of living together not only with the Litani river, but also with the hydropower project and the bureaucracy that it spawned.[7]

It is only with the benefit of hindsight that I am able to convey why I found Bassam's expression of *tarabot maslahi* so captivating, that I wrote, circled and underlined it in my notebook several times. I understand it now as the expression of an ambivalent political relation that opens a space for negotiation and hesitation between well-being and ill-health; harmful wage labour and personal and collective fulfilment; as well as collective violence and gain. Cultural, biosocial, and historical at once, this ambivalence around the Litani seems not divorced from the specific structures and relations that catalyzed the construction of the hydropower plants to extract and generate value from the river, whilst also wreaking ecological devastation. In more concrete terms, I see that *tarabot maslahi* expresses a symbiotic relation to the Litani that is beneficial, commensal, and harmful and that actualizes forms of exchange, with the state bureaucracy for example, that are both affective and rationally neutral. It is in its broad and ambiguous sense that *tarabot maslahi* is able to capture how different communities with links to the Litani respond to inchoate forces, enlisting them to meet personal and collective needs in the face of social and ecological breakdowns —akin to what Katherine Lemons (2016), remarking on processes of dispute adjudication in the informal arbitration centres for women (or *mahila panchayat*) of East Delhi, has called "a politics of livability."[8]

While the implementation of the Litani infrastructural project became associated with the passing of a certain rural way of life, it also evolved a national politics of development that enabled the reproduction of entrenched inequalities, particularly between city and countryside.[9] Against views of modernity as a prescriptive "North Atlantic Universal" (a seductive yet vague and confusing formulation that evokes more than it defines), I want to suggest here that Bassam's *tarabot maslahi*, which is not common parlance but a frame that he alone sketched for me, might be understood as an emic reordering of socioeconomic, ecological, and, necessarily,

[7] In Chapter 1, I describe how the Litani can be understood as a polysemic form. I also note how I, too, said and wrote just Litani each time I meant to refer to the river, the dam, or the LRA.
[8] Building on the work of Judith Butler, Lemons (2016) observes that livability is the learned capacity required to lead an acceptable life in circumstances that are far from ideal. Premised on kinship, this learned capacity foregrounds material concerns.
[9] I discuss these questions in Chapter 1. The implementation of the Litani infrastructure prioritized hydropower generation at the expense of irrigation and embodied unequal social relations that promoted the interest of urban elites at the expense of rural communities. Rural electrification was also deployed to mitigate radical social change (in both relations of production and consumption but also in the production of subjectivities and psychic relations). In more shifts, the LRA conservation priorities also paralleled global changing capitalist practices.

political relations following the dam's construction (Trouillot 2003, 35-37). In this chapter, I centre LRA workers' experiences to reflect on the way that *tarabot maslahi* denotes a political practice of bereavement that does not fall outside of the purview of dominant systems, but that strives within them instead.

Circumscribed by loss, this mode of political relationality —and the ideas, languages, and actions that inflect it— strive neither for enfranchisement nor further subservience. What it does, however, among other things, is unsettle familiar conceptual categories, like 'corruption' or 'nepotism', which are typically deployed in popular discourses to indicate more, let's say, accommodating ways of contending with power in Lebanon. To reflect upon all these questions, I focus on two key domains of activity where workers interact with the Litani, as nature, culture, and infrastructure: gainful and meaningful employment as well as occupational health in the power plant. In so doing, I wish to engage the complex of implicated interactions — the larger geopolitical forces, but also the everyday life relations— that shape human and non-human life in the watershed. Throughout, I also consider my own anthropological engagement with the river and its people and ask if it is not, too, a kind of *tarabot maslahi* that emphasizes a certain way of muddling through over other forms of contending with Lebanon's fraught sociopolitical landscape.

Untranslatability

Before I turn to the stories of Bou Falah and Roger, two former workers in the power plant, I want to speak to how *tarabot maslahi*, although a phrase culled from my conversation with Bassam, constitutes an emic expression of a political relation to nature, infrastructure, and the state. While generative to examine the specific and uneven refractions of development in a particular community (what Gillian Hart (2009, 119) calls "small d-development"), I am aware that borrowing local concepts —in this case, *tarabot maslahi*— from interlocutors in the field might raise questions about the appropriation and generalization of ideas, representation and representativeness, and how particular words become extracted and inscribed in wider discourses. Claiming this phrase as a form of local theory, even when it was only ever articulated

by Bassam, illustrates the uncertain ways in which theory travels and recognizes the ambiguous movements implicit in concept work as "both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity" (Said 2014, 115). It also speaks to the fraught relations drawn between abstraction and the concrete, thick description and fine theorization, and empirical reality and ideational world.

The more I reflected on Bassam's intergenerational involvement with the Litani, however, the more I realized that *tarabot maslahi* offered a generative lens through which to capture the experiences of others, particularly LRA workers, in the watershed. What I mean is that evolving *tarabot maslahi* to the status of local theory produces a meaningful image of the concrete set of relations, practices, and determinations that, in this thesis, I am calling a politics of bereavement. In so doing, I am suggesting that Bassam's way of relating to the Litani, which can be understood as a manner of contending with power and loss, is also enacted at a collective level in the watershed. *Tarabot maslahi* offers a vivid depiction of plant workers' entwinement with the landscape, their villages, the power plants, and the state. It also illustrates how abstract systems of power in Lebanon materialize at different levels of reality and life. Shaping a widespread and commonsensical understanding of reality, the relations encompassed by *tarabot maslah*i are also continually being shaped by broad sociohistorical forces as well as the mundane practices of everyday life. For instance, in Bassam's experience, *tarabot maslahi* is an infrastructure of familiarity and closeness, which serves to reposition the discursive operations of dominant political logics of development in the intimate institutions, practices, and relations (including ecological ones) that enact them (Wilson 2016). Bou Falah and Roger's experiences with the Litani, as we shall see, express the ambivalence of this mode of political relationality —how it is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful. This, in turn, allows me to better construe why Lebanon's systems of power have remained largely in place, despite the 2019 uprisings and the intensifying socio-economic crisis that followed, and why they also did not yield to the devastating explosion of the Beirut port in 2020.

I assert that another reason that the phrase *tarabot maslahi* is relevant to making sense of the workings of power in the watershed is its untranslatability. Framing *tarabot maslahi* as a vernacular form of local governance means that the Arabic language, and its rendering in

English, matter. "Sympoiesis" —from Greek sun (together) and poiesis (production), meaning 'collective creation or organization'— is a close yet coarse English translation I found for the tender expression that captures, with fine-grained attention, how village residents, LRA workers, the river, and state institutions are interlaced. I borrow the term 'sympoiesis' from Donna Haraway (2016) who, in *Staying with the Trouble,* uses it to describe the creative acts of 'making-with' and 'tangling-with' intrinsic to all living assemblages, from singular cells to complex organisms.[10] Though I am translating *tarabot maslahi* as a symbiotic form of living together with the Litani, this approximate translation does not fully convey the expression's original semantic range or versatility of an interdependency between technological transformation, political and social economy, ecological relations, and modes of representations.[11] Again, I arrived at this insight when I understood the Litani indexed more than one object — an excess that registered the conversion of the Litani river and landscape into an infrastructure that produced hydropower and delivered different types of services.

Reviewing my field notes much later, I gathered all the English words and meanings that were associated with the expression's different connotations and that I interpreted as capturing different ways of grappling with power:

> *Tarabot*: knotting, weaving, tying, connecting, capturing. *Tarabot* also: fusion, union, cohesion, tenacity, coordination, coherence, immutability. *Maslahi*: implication of relationality and rapprochement. *Maslahi* also: a reference to a process that is reconciliatory, reparatory, mending, appropriate, good, suitable, fitting, beneficial, right. *Maslahi* again: shares the same root as maslaha? *Maslaha*: requires the mastery of an art or craft, a trade; *Maslaha*: public authority, corporate body of the state; *Maslaha* in the negative: unscrupulous opportunism, greed. *Tarabot maslahi* then: a useful connection? A social solidarity like *assabiya*? an oxymoron where fixity (*tarabot*: intimates immovability and connectedness) and change (*maslahi*: is contingent) are interconnected; and where one would not possibly exist without the other.

[10] While Donna Haraway (2016) defines "sympoeisis" as "a word for worlding-with, in company" that embodies the pluripotent and imbricate nature of diverse processes, my aim here is to underline how *tarabot maslahi* opens more specific spaces of political possibility.
[11] I address the Litani's polysemic character in Chapter 1

My choice of substituting a translation with a compilation of words is also not aleatory. In Arabic, listing is a poetic and epistemic act that is also profoundly political. Enumeration works as a "word activation" and as a form of conceptual reclamation that allows for multiple meanings to emerge (el-Ariss 2016, 286). Like etymology, lists help track the historicity of language and meaning. Reflecting the fluidity and ambiguity of the concept itself, lists also constitute a frame within which the specific modes of relationality between nature, power, and signs become legible. In lieu of an approximate translation, I am thinking that this list of words and associated possible meanings addresses *tarabot maslahi*'s conceptual ambiguity whilst also retaining its relational grammar —as a political relation of bereavement that is as stable as it is historically contingent. If the type of symbiosis with the Litani changes from, let's say, commensal to parasitic, an enduring structure and form continue to govern the meanings of loss.

The stories of Roger from Aitanit and Bou Falah from Machghara illustrate what happens when infrastructural development makes new demands on society by transforming old relations, including ecological ones. Their experiences of ill-health and work with the Litani highlight how society itself responds with new forms of mobilization, or by repurposing older forms.

Logics of exchange

Alongside several of his colleagues at the Litani in West Bekaa, Bou Falah belonged to the *Amal* Movement, a Shiʿite political party powerful in the region, whose gunmen made frequent appearances in the streets, and whose enigmatic leader, Nabih Berri —staunch capitalist entrepreneur and former warlord— has served as the unchallenged Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament since 1980. Lebanon's water resources, particularly the Litani, have been at the heart of Lebanese politics, including the political demands of Imam Musa Sadr, the founder of *Harakat al-Mahrumeen*, the movement of the deprived that would eventually transform into the *Amal* Movement in the early 1970s. Mobilizing Shiʿa lower and middle classes, Imam Musa Sadr promoted a discourse of Shiʿite modernism and the integration of marginalized rural communities, particularly in the Bekaa and in the South, into the building of the nation-state (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014). In a speech he delivered in Baalbek, on the eve of the Lebanese civil

war, Imam Musa Sadr likened the Litani hydropower project to a tragedy that struck both the South and the Bekaa:

> Allow me, oh heroic sons of the Bekaa to talk to you about a tragedy that is like the tragedy, which struck you… (…). Since we are talking about this region, and the irrigation of this region, listen, and allow me to relate to you this story, for it is a tragedy in another part of this homeland, the tragedy of the Litani. The waters of the Litani rise from your land, run, and flow to the sea (…). The South is the poorest and now driest area. This poor area once had great quantities of water [from the Litani], but alas they have plotted against that area and have diverted 300 million… Listen oh brothers, listen, do you know why there is this anger?! Why there is pain?! You know that I am usually calm… Then why is it that I am shouting now? Why am I suffering? Listen to this story… 300-million- cubic metres of water, diverted from the Litani basin to the Awali basin. There is another river there [on the other side of the mountain] called the Awali river, on the pretext of electricity, they installed three power plants (…), and now they want to divert 60-million-cubic metres again, from the Litani to Beirut, so that they kill whatever crumbs of hope we have left.[12]

Accusing the political establishment of theft—in its diversion of the Litani waters away from the valley to produce electricity and benefit the wealthy residents of the capital city Beirut— Sayyid Musa spearheaded what Karim Makdisi (2012) dubs the "environmentalism of the poor." Framed in terms of "a crisis of participation," this environmentalism was delineated along sectarian lines. More broadly, Imam Sadr's discourse of the underclasses interpellated and addressed the political and economic Shiʿite elites and the bourgeoisie.[13] Not unlike the nation's unequal dynamics of state development (that I describe in Chapter 1), Sayyid Musa's politics

[12] Audio-recorded speech of Imam Musa Sadr on the *Arbaaeen* of Imam Hussein, Ras al-Ayn square, Baalbek, March 14, 1974. Archival collections of Imam Musa Sadr Center for Research and Studies. Transcript of audio-recording available at: https://imamsadr.net/News/news.php?NewsID=6569 (last accessed 22 July 2023).

[13] Once, while giving a talk in Beirut to the graduates of the Arab University, he confided that he had met with "the rich men of the south" who would soon announce their financial backing of infrastructural development projects to be implemented in collaboration with the state. Imam Musa Sadr, Talk held at the alumni club of the Beirut Arab University, 11 April 1974. Transcript available at https://imamsadr.net/News/news.php?NewsID=5994 (last accessed 18 May, 2020).

embodied paradoxical forces that sought to tackle the disenfranchisement of lower classes and rural communities without addressing the broader conditions that structured and reproduced these inequalities (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014). Sayyid Musa's mobilization efforts, which recognized and accepted the uneven foundations of the Lebanese state, eventually weakened the pluralist opposition to the state (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014).[14]

Bou Falah often invoked the Imam, as well as Nabih Berri, as leaders to be respected and he described his tightknit working relationship with Dr. S. with pride. "I am his [Dr. S.'s] hands, eyes, and ears in the field," he once boasted. In the watershed, many praised Dr. S. for being an honourable lawyer and bureaucrat, noting, too, his close ties with the Amal Movement. Over the past two decades, the influence of two political parties —the Amal Movement and their rivals, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)— has grown in the public electricity sector, including in the LRA and the *Electricité du Liban* (for Amal), and the Ministry of Water and Energy (for the FPM).[15] I bring up the Imam's speech here as a detour to highlight that, in an unlikely turn of events, Sayyid Musa's staunch supporters in the Amal movement (like Bou Falah and his family) now found themselves working in the power plants he had once firmly opposed.

Bou Falah's family hailed from Machghara, a village perched atop the dam, known for its tanneries and Zaki Nassif, a composer and singer who, towards the end of his career, gifted Fairouz one of her most beautiful albums. Like Bassam, Bou Falah's involvement with the Litani was multigenerational and tightly linked to their presence in their village. Unlike Bassam, he was not an engineer. His eldest daughter was the only member of his family to go to university, completing a degree in political science. She worked with a prestigious Arabic language newspaper, a source of pride for her father who had had to "talk to a couple of people" to get her an interview. "After the interview was tightly secured, she did everything else on her own, a very competent girl this one," he asserted once. I recall wholeheartedly agreeing with him that it would have been nearly impossible for her to get in otherwise.

Bou Falah's father was a road traffic attendant. Recruited in the early 1960s through local contacts, he was the first man in their family to join the Litani, organizing the movement of cars

[14] And even challenged Palestinian liberation movements in the Bekaa and the South from the mid-1970s.
[15] Lebanon's energy sector is also expected to expand over the course of the next few years to include oil and gas.

commuting between West Bekaa and the South and helping with the regulation of the daily flow of trucks that transported rocks and stones from the quarry to the dam site. The quarry, a stone's throw away from the dam, was unmissable. Still, Bou Falah always made sure to point at it each time we drove by. Like all quarries in Lebanon, it looked like an imposing mountainside from which too many chunks had been bitten off. Staring at it from the crest of the dam one day, I imagined the father waiting for long, scorching hours in the sun, waving little flags in his two hands, and Bou Falah as a young child waiting for his father to come home. Continuing family tradition, Bou Falah's eldest son followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps and had been recruited by the Litani to work as a full-time technician in Markaba.

Bou Falah himself had held three jobs with the Litani in almost forty years. "Initially, I was among those who were just on the payroll, I had a job, but I was not supposed to come [to work] to Markaba [the power plant]", he told me. When his small smithy shop in the village went bankrupt and he found himself with nothing to do, Bou Falah started showing up to work —first, as a technician "always drenched in foul water and grease" in the Markaba Power Station, and then as patrol officer, who surveilled the entirety of the river's course, from Olleik near Baalbek to where it joined the sea in Qasmieh. "I needed something to do, I couldn't just stay idle", he explained, adding "Now, *hamdellah*, all is good, thanks also to Dr. S. who runs the LRA with integrity and strength".

I knew many people in the watershed who, like Bou Falah, inventively resorted to family ties and political connections to secure jobs (particularly within the state bureaucracy) or improve their livelihoods. In the wake of the 2015 and 2019 uprisings, and even more so after the port explosion, many friends in Beirut castigated these kinds of dealings with power in pejorative terms. More broadly, popular and scholarly discourses conceptualized the modes of relationality that emerge from familial and political networks through the prism of sectarian politics and a clientelist exchange of political loyalty for services —*al-zaba'iniya* where former warlords highjack and instrumentalize the institutions of the state (Hermez 2011).[16] Often described as deriving from practices of *fassad* (corruption) or nepotism, these diagnoses

[16] Drawing from ethnographic accounts of Lebanese communities, Hermez (2011) argues that clientelism is an enduring and adaptable structure of power that is further reinforced by sectarian relations.

indirectly cast blame on people who continue to engage with these dominant structures of power, for better or worse, and in myriad ways.

However, listening to Bou Falah narrate his family's involvement with the Litani allowed me to tease out the many forces implicated in, and structuring, these modes of cooperation, which cannot be reduced to privileged or unethical transactional exchanges between patrons and clients, mediated by the state (Kingston 2001; Scott 1972). From village sociality to an ascriptive history of political and communal affiliations, personal interactions of reverence and respect, and direct family inheritances, these forces loosen the conceptual categories of what is typically considered corruption or nepotism. Bou Falah's employment at the LRA alone highlights how a lived experience with the Litani, which includes the passing of time, shapes the political influence of 'patrons' on one hand, and the loyalty of 'clients' on the other, structuring mutual relationships to the state. This entails, for instance, different kinds of "kinwork" —the physical and affective efforts needed to attain certain objectives, like wage labor, within the constraints of kinship (Lemons 2016).

Tarabot maslahi offers an alternative system of meaning and value that does not undermine bureaucratic authority but that is, rather, constitutive of it. It also suggests that the complex interactions of individuals like Bou Falah with the Litani, mediated through the involvement of his family, village, and political party, recast our understanding of the forces governing social relations and exchange in Lebanon. The latter are no longer understood as relations of objectifiable and measurable interests (as one would infer from the frame of clientelism for instance). Rather, and in the way that they are constantly brushing up against the limits of power, they complicate dominant diagnoses of the ongoing crisis and the mechanisms people devised to cope with it.[17] What I mean to say, in the most classical anthropological sense, is that the forms of human and non-human exchanges that I am describing are messy and that the realm of things commensurable with a calculated interest—that can be objectified, measurable, tradeable— is somehow always already entwined with various ethical obligations

[17] What I mean to say, in the most classical anthropological sense, is that the forms of human and non-human exchanges that I am describing are messy and that the realm of things commensurable with money or calculated interest—that can be objectified, measurable, tradeable— is somehow always already entwined with various ethical obligations (Graeber 2011). Economic behaviours cannot be understood separately from social and moral values while rational dealings with state bureaucracies, for instance, might also be endowed with potent affective force.

(Graeber 2011). If economic behaviours cannot be understood separately from social and moral values, rational dealings with state bureaucracies, for instance, might also be endowed with potent affective force.

When capitalist development targets rural regions, communities in the countryside are confronted with new relations that replace old modes of subsistence. *Tarabot maslahi* speaks to the way these transitions unfold, particularly as the emerging capitalist relations might grip communities and landscapes in the most unlikely places, including family ties or communal belonging (Li 2014).[18] As was the case with Bou Falah, labour relations with the LRA became embedded in local networks forged with and through the communities of people who stayed in the villages following the construction of the dam.[19] Both temporal and spatial, this localism is inflected by fraught relations to the history of the Litani project, national development politics, and a certain sense of belonging —both to their villages neighbouring the dam but also the power plants (Carbonella 2014). Bou Falah's *tarabot maslahi* with the Litani exceeded the category of a wage contract because landing a job with the Litani was experienced as an inheritance of sorts. It entailed familial, affinal and even fictive kinship ties, inseparable from certain realms of social reproductions. The making of this symbiotic living together with the Litani did not emerge by virtue of proximity or mere presence. Rather, and as I have discussed in Chapter 1, it was structured by the region's fraught history with infrastructural development. The forms of relation, obligation, care, and reciprocity created through work at the power plant have, in turn, also produced a different order of relation with the river.

Tarabot maslahi, which I am invoking to make sense of this register of relations (and emotions!), accounts for the role played by local and global histories, the multiplicity of actors and modes of sociality involved, as well as the family legacies shaping political power. Bou Falah and his family had meaningfully participated in the creation and consolidation of the social and political configurations instigated by the infrastructural development of the Litani. Over three

[18] I follow Tania Li's (2014) shorthand definition of capitalist relations in her work with dispossessed Lauje highlanders as the "ensemble of relations characterized by private and unequal ownership of the means of production (land, capital), a group of nonowners compelled to sell their labor, and the use of capital to generate profit under competitive conditions". Additionally, Li (2014, 5) contends that to make sense of these transitions, we must come to terms with "the chaotic 'common sense' of lived realities" in which people enter these new relations of life and work.

[19] In Chapter 1, I discuss how the construction of the dam came to be associated with the withering away of a certain mode of rural life in pre-civil war Lebanon.

generations, Bou Falah, his father, and his son had toiled to build the dam, manage the power plant, and tend to the river's pollution. Seen in that light, their interconnectedness with the Litani appears intrinsically grounded in a sense of experienced reality, "lived at such depth" and practiced by all communities affected, from LRA workers and engineers to the residents in villages surrounding the dam (Williams 2020, 42).[20]

Claiming *tarabot maslahi* with the Litani as a logic for these various exchanges thus challenges teleological conceptualizations of a Lebanese state overtaken by patrons who mobilize public resources and institutions to dispense services to passive clientele. Seen from that perspective, the state is neither 'deficient' nor taken over by the *zuʿama*, the communal leaders like Nabih Berri. The relations of 'client to patron' (let's say, Bou Falah to the Amal Movement and its leaders) cannot either be diagnosed as a condition warranting corrective measures —how transparency for instance is posited as a remedy for corruption. Rather, *tarabot maslahi* renders visible the way that kin and social ties are wrapped up, inherent to, and upheld by a relation to the Litani (as river, dam, and bureaucracy). Forged across time and space, these connections aim to secure a certain sociopolitical and economic status quo by steadying relations of labour as well as regimes for rural development, state intervention and neglect in questions of welfare, employment, and social life.[21]

Though Bou Falah was very committed to his work and duty towards the Litani, he also joked about how impossibly difficult it was, even in his new role as patrol guard:

> *Ya doctora*, one time, we all wanted to stop a group of unlawful individuals who were hunting wild birds. The matter was even more serious because it was in an area located between the dam and the wetlands of *Ammiq*.[22] I coordinated everything with the captain of the army patrol on duty. They were going to catch them in action. So, the army

[20] I am interested here in what Raymond Williams (1977), expanding the Marxist (and specifically Gramscian) theoretical elaboration of hegemony, has called a corporate system —the central, dominant, and effectual frameworks within which people concretely make sense and produce meaning. Permeating every aspect of life, these mutually validating practices, behaviours and predispositions are inherent to the way human and non-human worlds are understood.

[21] Examining the role of kinship ties in factory recruitment and employment in Eindhoven, Don Kalb (2016)'s concept of flexible familism — defined as a set of interactions that molded familial life, local industrial relations, as well as the regions in which these industries were located — similarly captures part of what I am trying to grapple with here. Contrasted with Fordism for example, flexible familism is useful to understanding how political power is maintained and reproduced in ways that cannot be reduced to the rationality of the state or market-centered logics.

[22] The Ammiq Wetlands in West Bekaa are an important stop in the migratory routes for bird.

> jeep intercepted the hunting party, and soldiers stepped out of the vehicle ready to intervene. The soldiers looked around at first. But then all I saw and heard were hand gestures and shouts of *ʾamrak sidna*! (At your orders, sir!). To everyone's surprise, the first thing the soldiers had to do when they got out there was salute the hunters who turned out to be their [army] superiors!! Their intervention led nowhere!

The day I visited the power plant in May 2022, we'd lunched at a restaurant Bou Falah recommended. The restaurant had its own fish farm and drew drinking water from Ain Az-Zarqa, a powerful source that fed both the Litani stream south of Markaba, as well as the Awali power plant located on the other side of the mountain. During lunch, Bou Falah recounted another story about the challenges he faced while on the job. He had longstanding and complicated working relations with the restaurant's owner, who had infringed the law by building a terrace that encroached on the riverbanks:

> In the past, I wanted to shut the restaurant down because they poured concrete directly into the Litani, which in our books is not allowed, but then we got a *Doctora* specialized in water and the environment to study the case. In the end, she told us not to remove the concrete as it would cause the river to swell and change course, a high risk of flooding and danger! And so, we allowed him to keep it.

Bou Falah explained that the LRA had refrained from removing the concrete when presented with the scientific evidence that doing so would disturb the river and be potentially dangerous. I recall thinking at first that the owner of the restaurant was, in a sense, corrupt and that Bou Falah, for a reason that was not entirely clear to me, had had to accommodate him. In between all the stories he narrated, we ate grilled trout and carp with garlic, lemon, and herbs. The waiters brought Bou Falah his favorite *arguileh*, unbidden, and when we finished eating, we did not pay; the owner evidently treated us.[23] As we made our way back to his *Rapid*, Bou Falah told me to look at the mountains that loomed against the sky. "Can you guess the restaurant's

[23] Arguileh: shisha, hookah, waterpipe.

name?" he asked? I glanced at the sign nearby, it read: "*Hone al sama 'aribeh*", 'here the sky is near'.

Later that day, I paused. Weren't these two anecdotes (with the army patrol and the restaurant owner) reconceptualizing corruption in other terms? Bou Falah underscored the plural implications of both infrastructural maintenance and landscape conservation—as a process that is technical, environmental, but also social. His reframing of irregularity in both these instances, and the enchanting lunch invitation, highlighted how "people as infrastructure" created flexible spaces for leisure, and socioeconomic and cultural activities, particularly amid capitalist ruination (Simone 2004). My experience with Bou Falah reminded me of Star and Ruhleder's (1996, 113) point that it is also important to ask "when – not what – is an infrastructure."

Bou Falah often talked about the difficult conditions of labour at the power plant, and how his shifts, when he was a maintenance technician in Markaba, went on for several days on end. When I visited the Markaba facilities, I was struck by the humid and cold air that circulated, reeking of sulfur, rotten fish, and sewage. I also heard the deafening noise of the underground water turbines while they spun. "Ma hada byotlaʿ sagh mn hon", no one walks out of here sound, Bou Falah sighed, as we made our way back into the open air that day. He also told me how his son fell ill: soon after he was stationed at Markaba he caught a resistant bug from the river's polluted waters. As the superbug responded poorly to antibiotic treatment, it forced him to leave his employment for good. With help from friends in high places, namely Dr. S., the family had received financial support to pay for the expensive treatment. "What would any of us had done otherwise? How would we have worked our way through life, or sickness and health?", Bou Falah admitted. I never asked him whether he thought that the irregular and unfair practices he witnessed, was subjected to, and participated in were akin to *fassad* - corruption or nepotism; or if he meant that he'd been particularly thankful to *al-harakeh* — the (Amal) Movement. Decrying national immiseration, Bou Falah would often repeat: "Hayda kello b sabab al-fassad w nehna akid duddu – this is all because of corruption and we are surely against it".

Understanding political life in the watershed as a form of *tarabot maslahi* speaks to the inchoate forms of praxis and power that emerge to meet people's changing needs. But it also

intimates specific spaces of political possibility that resist reification. In offering both the poison and the cure, these modalities of power prompt recurrent displacements that leave little predilection for oppositional relations or ways of being, effectively foreclosing any reach beyond dominating sociopolitical arenas, in other words emancipation. Thanks to his family, village, and political party ties, Bou Falah landed a job with the Litani, which had then made both him and his son sick. In turn, it is these same ties that allowed his family to access the expensive treatment they needed. As the framework of *tarabot maslahi* muddles political society and civil society, it also helps us reimagine politics as the steering of personal and collective attachments. It is perhaps unsurprising then that these modes of relationalities in Lebanon, operating at the intersections of sect, kin, and dominant political parties, have endured throughout the dramatic events of the past few years in Lebanon —namely, the 2019 uprisings and the ongoing financial crisis. These attachments secure and legitimate power in ways that do not require a forceful or military intervention to quell any uprising. Even the cataclysmic explosion in the Beirut port, which was heard as far as Cyprus, did not manage to puncture these ties.

Politics of sacrifice

Throughout fieldwork, I came to learn how power plant workers bore the brunt of the river's ecological degradation, as well as Lebanon's social and financial collapse. Bassam explained that currency devaluation and crisis meant that the LRA could no longer afford the *entretien préventif*, the maintenance checks, which their technical teams conducted with the help of foreign experts on behalf of transnational technology corporations. Workers often faced the hazardous breakdown of equipment. The very structure of public employment had changed tremendously over the years. In the LRA, myriads of permanent positions had been replaced by precarious day labourers known *al-muyawimoun,* whose roles and contributions were at the heart of many political disagreements and heated debates about public service. For instance, while the *Maslaha* used to employ around 600 staff —200 of which were civil servants assigned to their positions through competitions organized by *Majlis Al-Khidma Al-Madaniya* (the Council of Civil Service)— the number of full-timers in the power plants during my fieldwork did not

exceed 50. [24] I found it difficult to have open, critical conversations with power plant workers about their difficult working conditions. I assumed people were concerned about potential reprisals, the risk of losing of jobs, or appearing disloyal to, and betraying, their own communities. Finally, one day, after several failed attempts and phone calls —Bou Falah for example stopped returning my calls— Roger accepted to speak with me about his experience.

Roger was the co-leader of the LRA's workers union. Because he belonged to the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a political party that had recently gained influence in Lebanon's water sector, he often found himself assuming the thorny task of liaising between the LRA (under the influence of the Amal Movement) and the Ministry of Water and Energy (under the influence of the FPM) in matters pertaining to plant workers. I met him at a café in a mall in Beirut, walking distance from the LRA's offices. He had recently been reassigned to an administrative position and so it was more convenient to meet in Beirut. Prior to his desk job in the LRA building on Bechara al-Khoury Avenue, he had developed all sorts of ailments from working as a technician in one of the power plants and had waged, in his words, "a long struggle" to get his relocation approved.

As soon as we sat down, Roger told me two things that shaped our conversation. He explained how we could have met in the now defunct LRA workers' union club on Monnot Street, one of Beirut's most charming, located right behind the offices of the *Maslaha*. Founded in 1958, *nadi al-naqaba*, the union's club, had been closed for the past 15 years or so and the other two union clubs in the remote regions — near the Markaba and Awali power plants— had suffered a similar fate. Roger then posed a disclaimer, clearly intended to delimit the scope of our conversation while authorizing it at the same time. He explained that he had talked to Dr. S. before he agreed to meet me. "Dr. S. is now in the know of all this and he gladly agreed. I did this also to ensure that I would be properly responding to your questions by giving you the right numbers and statistics," he asserted. Startled by Roger's statement, I awkwardly explained that I was not an investigative journalist looking to expose the LRA but a researcher interested in workers' personal experiences with occupational illness. At this moment —and during several other encounters I had during fieldwork— I found myself returning to Zora Neale Hurston's

[24] Interview with Ghassan Gebran, 12 September 2022, Beirut, Lebanon.

(2008) “spyglass of anthropology.” Both insider and outsider, confidante and betrayer, I regularly felt compelled to re-negotiate and clarify my position to my interlocutors, especially when it came to political questions, which were deemed sensitive. The fallout from the 2019 protests as well as the Beirut port blast made me even more worried about possible, even minor, reprisals that might affect anyone involved in my research. I was always careful not to antagonize people, even when I disagreed with them, or push them when my ethnographic approach appeared problematic or inappropriate, as was the case with Roger.

Roger whose family hailed from Aitanit, a village near the dam, had cumulated jobs and completed his military service before he joined the Litani. He sat for the competition of *Majlis Al-Khidma Al-Madaniya* (the Council of Civil Service) and, a few months later, when a position became vacant in the LRA, he was selected. “There was a local connection, I am from the region, you know”, he swiftly replied when I asked how he knew he would win the competition. His response concretely illustrated *tarabot maslahi* as a relation shaped by the contradictory impulses embodied in the Litani’s infrastructural project, as a response to a politics of state planning which sought to develop the countryside by prioritizing urban elites and their interests, as well as modern consumer ways of life at the expense of marginalized rural communities. At the heart of these contradictions were questions about welfare, upward social mobility and worth, and the search for job security in an unstable and fraught conjuncture (Kalb 2016). Roger then clarified that when his name was listed on the job roster, he had to wait some time before he was formally selected to fill a position. In fact, there was a widespread, I should say unequivocally national, understanding that landing a job within the state bureaucracy —*wazifa bl dawla* particularly through *Majlis Al-Khidma*— was impossible without strong *wasta,* mediation. I assumed that this had been the case for Roger too and, once again, figured it would be futile to ask him whether his response meant that he, too, had received help from friends and family in good places.

In retrospect, I find that the way Roger landed a job with the Litani speaks to a concern with regards to the many-sided expressions of *tarabot maslahi*. Here, *tarabot maslahi* evokes Karl Polanyi’s key arguments on the embeddedness of market exchanges and exemplifies the entanglements of human economy and market forces (including capital and labour) with non-

market social and ecological relations like state politics, kin relations, religion, and other moral and ethical principles (2001). As such, *tarabot maslahi*, and in the way it implicates family, village, and kin, might be viewed as a local expression of what Polanyi (2001, 139) famously described as the countermovement of economic liberalism: the innovative ways different social classes protect themselves against "the general degradation of existence" that arise from the volatility and imposition of self-regulating markets on humans and non-humans alike.

Taken together, the different expressions of *tarabot maslahi* constitute a conceptual structure through which to make sense of sociopolitical and economic interdependency (Ong 1999). Throughout our conversation, Roger kept trying to convey yet another form of connection forged with the Litani. Since 1996, he told me how he held different jobs at the Markaba power plant until, in 2005, he finally "went inside —*fettet la jowa"*. It is with this striking expression that he described to me his entrance into the plant's control room. "Now no one wants to work in operations anymore, everyone wants maintenance, the routine checks, so they don't have to go inside," he confided. Roger repeated this expression several times, as if to ensure I understood the transition undergone by power plant workers who made it to the *salle de contrôle*:

> I think most workers will eventually become ill. Do you know what it means to enter [the control room]? *Btaʿrfeh shu yaʿni enno al wahad yfut la jowa?* When you go inside, it's something else. You engage all your senses to learn how the machines work. You must feel, listen, observe, learn, take risks. Shifts sometimes go on for 48 hours. Markaba is isolated and remote. Workers are alone. Workers, who used to take the LRA shuttle to commute to and from the union clubs near Markaba and Awali, to rest or have lunch, are now alone. You also can't do this job while reading from a manual. It requires specific skills acquired and developed after you go inside. It takes time to learn how to listen to the turbine and to understand if it's working alright or not. You are not only underground but inside the mountain. The filters installed are not enough because you are inside the pollution. Inside the humidity, the noise, and the smell. There is no sun inside. One day I brought a plant to work, it died because of the vibrations. In less than six hours I promise you it was already dead.

Roger's account of working at the Markaba power plant draws a finely nuanced portrait of the Litani infrastructure as factory. As an "industrial workplace with its disciplining rhythms," the power plant disrupts the flow of social time and beclouds boundaries between human and non-human. The mountain engulfs the workers and swallows their labour (Salamanca 2019, 12). If they are toiling to generate value, this setting renders their social world invisible and devalued (Ibid).[25] In that world, workers maintain unruly relations to the Litani that are as individualized as they are collective. To perform their work, they must negotiate a multivalent and non-neutral relation with technology, which they engage as a tool, for the generation of electricity but whose sensory awareness they must also take on. Registering the machine-effect, they suffer a bodily decline that accelerates further with the broader dereliction of the infrastructure and the overall collapse of the nation.

Roger went on to describe how working at the Joun power plant (the Litani's third and final hydropower plant completed in the late 1960s) was different. Illuminated by high and bright windows, the Joun power plant was not located underground. But in Markaba where he once worked, the backdrop was more hostile:

> I lost many friends and colleagues to cancer, to infections. A long time ago, one colleague had an x-ray and his physician had told him: 'your lungs are rotten, rotten!' I lost my health too. It began to deteriorate as early as 1997. I suffered from a very serious respiratory illness, from allergies and asthma. Because of the humidity, I now have limited mobility in my left arm. I also have insomnia and terrible migraines. Starting in 2008, I suffered a terrible cough, I caught a virus too and I was ill for a very long time. Others caught the same virus and I know people who have been on oxygen since. It was only much later that I was diagnosed with *kahraba bl qalb* — electricity in the heart [heart arrhythmia]. Doctors said all this might be due to the pollution and to working in the power plants, but the cause could not be established. You can't prove it. So, any support for healthcare or sick leave is granted exceptionally, on an individual and case by

[25] I draw here on Omar Salamanca's (2019) pertinent interpretation of Omar Amiralay's film trilogy on the Tabaqa dam, built on the Euphrates River in Syria. Comparing Amiralay's film trilogy to Dziga Vertov's work, Salamanca highlights how the filmmaker pictures the dam as a lively factory.

> case basis. In the union we are a family, and our goal is to retain workers and to maintain good relations with all employees. But the *naqaba* (union) has no money, it can only cry out for help. I was able to secure approval for my transfer from the power plant to an office job because yes, I will say it, it helped that I am a member of the Free Patriotic Movement.

Roger's illness narrative shed light on the way he experienced and understood his symptoms, as an unmaking of the world, and how his wider network of family, friends, and co-workers interacted with and responded to them (Good 1994; Kleinman 1988). Like Roger, Bou Falah, and Bou Falah's son, workers who became sick encountered many challenges in seeking care. Care was not immediately available in their village, their conditions could not be adequately diagnosed as linked to the Litani, and they struggled to afford the cost of treatment within Lebanon's privatized healthcare system. Their gendered and differentiated bodies were implicated in the manning of heavy equipment and the running of complex operations in the power plants. Through labour, "uncertain" chemical and organic exposures also registered in those bodies (Murphy 2006, 2008).

Roger's account gestured towards the way individual and collective entitlements to health and care had been shaped by the symbiotic forms of living together with the Litani. In the semantics of epidemiology, this entailed an uncertainty and an indeterminacy that complicated access to care. When I looked for studies that established a correlation between the polluted Litani and an increase in the burden of diseases Roger mentioned, I found none. While several research projects assessed the deteriorating quality of water and the degradation of land, none directly addressed their implications on disease (Shaban and Hamze 2018). I do not mean to say that there were no links between the Litani's pollution and the symptoms felt by the workers. Rather, I want to stress that when such connections are difficult to make, this has direct implications on the experience of illness. Wael, an oncologist friend, who worked in the Litani watershed, confirmed that the only mention he'd seen was a statement by the LRA noting an increase in the incidence of cancer cases in the upper Litani Basin. Creating a direct, yet anecdotal, association between the river's pollution and the rise in cancer diagnoses, this

statement coincided with another LRA decision to shut the Canal 900, which brought farmers water from the Litani and allowed them to irrigate their crops.[26] My friend Wael asserted that there were other studies that blamed, not the Litani, but the excessive use of pesticides, diesel generators, and tobacco smoking for the increase in skin and respiratory diseases and malignancies. What if it was not just the Litani killing people, but other things killing the Litani too?

Roger's narrative asserts that a definitive diagnosis of workers' conditions was critically needed. This indeterminacy —or rather difficulty of naming a condition of disease or, say, pollution and identifying its root causes— more concretely illustrates what happens when there is no political will to diagnose the pollution-health problem (a slower form of violence) and to "render it technical" by having epidemiologists and experts assess the impacts of toxicity and study the relations of causality (Hetherington 2020; Li 2004). It also resonates with what Kregg Hetherington (2020), commenting on the public health repercussions of the soy boom in Paraguay, has called agribiopolitics —the entwined governance of human and non-human bodies. While agribiopolitics is concerned specifically with plant life and agricultural practices (and a form of governance entwined with the Green Revolution), it also offers a generative lens through which to reflect on the governance of bodies of water, like rivers. The particular agribiopolitics at play in the Litani further widened the gap between human and non-human wellbeing on the one hand, and the effects of technological transformation on the other.

When the workers' union ran out of resources, there was a shift to a workforce made up of non-contract day labourers who did not benefit from union membership. In the context of Lebanon's highly privatized healthcare sector, LRA workers' access to care depended on the modes of sociality enabled by *tarabot maslahi*. The services they received, "on an individual and case by case basis" as Roger explained, cannot be reduced to a selective logic of welfare —what Melani Cammett studying the sectarian dimensions of social and health service distribution in Lebanon has called "compassionate communalism" (2014). It is in that sense, too, that entitlements to health and care seem neither fully commoditized, nor understood as inalienable

[26] See for e.g., Abi Rached, Joelle. "Cancer, Catharsis, and Corruption in Lebanon" Jadaliyya Magazine, January 29, 2020. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40587 and El-Hage, Anne-Marie. "Les Taux Alarmants de Cancers Chez Les Riverains d'un Litani Superpollué Suscitent l'inquiétude." L'Orient-Le Jour, September 9, 2019. https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1185962/les-taux-alarmants-de-cancers-chez-les-riverains-dun-litani-superpollue-suscitent-linquietude.html.

universal right that must be protected and upheld equally for all. Rather, they are inscribed in a logic of exchange that is transactional and that is constantly reordering relations between people at the same time.

While Roger and Bou Falah understood the perils and returns of living and working with the Litani, their narratives underscored the conditions under which the public good —like hydropower, access to health treatments, or an ethic of social care— could be generated and how it was understood (Bear 2015). Their labour, and the care their bodies required to keep going, can also be construed as a mode of continuance and homeostasis, a manner of keeping the body —or machine— of the nation living at any cost. Such is the ethics of the politics of bereavement. Bou Falah, Bassam, Roger, and several of their colleagues that I came to know— estaz M., estaz N., Jalal, and Nihal — were all permanently employed civil servants from the villages located in the vicinity of the dam and its power plants. Their family histories were for them a source of pride, even as toiling for the Litani compromised the health and viability of their communities. They —engineers and workers of the Litani—laboured day and night, against the forces of nature and the vagaries of Lebanon's complex sociopolitical system, including the civil war, to keep the infrastructure functional and properly maintained. This was at the crux of their narratives about their families, work, and lives. The LRA was animated by a strong *esprit de corps*, a continuity through which the staff formed a seemingly autonomous group with shared values and, at this moment of Lebanon's (and their) history, the common tasks, which united them (Gramsci 1999).[27]

The lives of workers were being consumed because of the labour they exerted to maintain the Litani infrastructure. To Roger, full-time civil servants, whose very position was increasingly threatened by government austerity and the economic crisis, were the trusted keepers of a technical yet intimate and embodied knowledge:

[27] Here I am also inspired by Raymond Williams' theoretical elaboration of hegemony (Williams 1977, 2020). The *esprit de corps* - corporate system is processual, not inert, and constantly made and remade through a means of selection or exclusion of certain expectations, attitudes, and meanings (Williams calls this process "incorporation"). Critical anthropological studies of development have investigated how development discursive regimes unfold and are imbricated with practices that produce underdevelopment (Escobar 1995). My point here is not so much to explore the sociopolitical and cultural implications of development discourses in the rural areas they target, at least not in the sense of a development discourse producing underdevelopment. Rather, I am interested in the dominant political relations that are continuously co-constituted.

> There was a generation of workers that came in right after us, they didn't care about work, rigour, or learning on the job, but *faramnahom* — we diced them [disciplined them] and instructed them in the proper ways in which they ought to perform their work. With everything that has happened... Despite it all, at the end of the day, we are proud of what we have all been able to accomplish. After the war, we had to work hard. We managed to preserve and maintain the power plants. Everything else in this country has gone to ruin but not the Litani. The reason: our own culture of work with the Litani.

If the construction and maintenance of the Litani hydropower project accelerated the integration of West Bekaa into regional and global markets, the Litani facilities were also spatially and socially woven into local and regional communities and depended on their active participation.[28] Roger's insistence on maintaining the Litani reminded me of my conversation with Bassam. In telling me that the power plants remained open and operational throughout the bloody civil war and that workers could (relatively) safely commute to keep them running, Bassam, like Roger, spoke to the way the Litani contributed to the creation of veiled spaces for different modes of sociality, relations, and actions. It also highlighted both the creative and destructive means through which humans interacted with non-humans in times of crisis— what AbdouMaliq Simone (2004), expanding our understanding of infrastructure to include people's activities, describes as the ever-present possibility of being able "to do something different (…) than is specified by these domains of power while, at the same time, acting as if one remains operative inevitably only within them."[29]

The specific entwinement of people and the Litani (as river, infrastructure, and state) denotes the production of a 'regime of living,' in which relations to the river extend outside of the biological world and become entwined with the hydropower infrastructure, diverse economic activities, time, and the power of the state.[30] The many meanings of Bassam's *tarabot maslahi* found their expression in the way LRA workers and their families recreated their

[28] For e.g.: through the involvement of multinational companies (what Ribeiro 1994 calls 'consortiation') or through the expansion of markets for electric appliances.
[29] Simone provocatively likens these duplicitous lines of flight in the ruined urban cityscape of Johannesburg to "tactics operating at the interstices of strategic constraints" (Simone 2004, 409).
[30] I adapt this term from Michelle Murphy's work (2008) on chemical relations and toxicity.

relations with state bureaucracy —the Litani's own "*raison d'état*" — and with each other, against conditions of deepening social inequality and ecological anxiety. Beyond the LRA's managerialism or dichotomies of power and resistance, *tarabot maslahi* forms part of the "hidden transcripts" of development that foreground how residents navigate and adapt to the challenges of life in the Litani watershed, building their lives symbiotically with it (Mosse 2005, 7; Scott 1990).

* * *

Though I still find it difficult to account for the multifaceted character of *tarabot maslahi*, I have tried to show how this untranslatable phrase is generative to describe the situated political relationships forged with and through the Litani as river, infrastructure, state. Insofar as infrastructural projects of development rationalize social fields and expand state reach and power (Ferguson 1990; Scott 1998), *tarabot maslahi* escapes the dominant conceptualizations used to describe how political subjectivities are formed and sustained. Departing from discussions that usually centre "swarming" or "controlling state power" (Gilman, Ticktin, and Ferguson 2014), it is a framework that shifts our analytic attention to the way the boundaries between state bureaucracies and civil society, formality and informality, and nature and cultural forms of organization are always blurred. Moving away from framings that describe Lebanon's contemporary political system as a state system of power-sharing plagued by corruption and clientelist networks, *tarabot maslahi* expresses these specific modalities of power in Lebanon as relations that are agonistic and antagonistic at once; and as an experience of subjectivity that is personal and disinterested at once.[31]

Reflecting on the stories of Bassam, Bou Falah, and Roger's, I intuit that neither the war, the financial collapse, nor the river's ecological degradation has caused the undoing of the symbiotic forms of living together forged between the Litani and those who stayed in their villages, working with the LRA, and their families. The taxing conditions only underscored the ambivalent and, necessarily, enduring character of this symbiosis. The histories of the Litani, as

[31] I discuss how Lebanon's polity is conceptualized in the Introduction.

river, infrastructure, and public body, contrast between its persistent and intergenerational workforce on the one hand, and the obstinate disruption of both national and biographical time — from the civil war to the latest economic collapse on the other. *Tarabot maslahi* produces its own temporalities, where overlapping experiences with time and recursive conditions of crises continue to foster personal and collective investment in the Litani despite its literal toxicity (Baraitser 2017).

But then, what are the larger moral and ethical dimensions of this local theory of power? Who were these communities keeping the Litani operative for? And to what ends? Throughout fieldwork, in the wake of the port explosion and as the effects of the crisis in Lebanon became more palpable, I found it increasingly difficult to ascertain under which exact conditions would communities continued to perform such acts of sacrifice, and for what purpose. It was almost as if the only other alternative was leaving the country, which entails a whole host of other sacrifices.

As my interlocutors in the watershed repeatedly pointed out, the mere talk of futurity had become impossible. Others highlighted the way in which state institutions were crumbling one after the other. “Have you been to a ministry lately?” Estaz N., another friend who worked at the LRA, had asked me once. “There are no employees, they don’t even have paper,” he had added. I must concede perhaps that *tarabot maslahi* is not a relation where a beneficial mutuality suddenly turns parasitic. To paraphrase Roger, it has no outside. Rather, *jowa* - inside, there is an interdependence where positive rewards and negative connotations are mutually reinforcing.

Chapter 3: The Gift of Electricity

When I returned to begin fieldwork in Lebanon in 2022, I found Beirut transformed into an uglier, less hospitable version of itself. The socioeconomic crisis that had been wreaking havoc on the country since 2019 had unraveled its social and material infrastructure. Much of the city suffered from the effects of the spiraling currency devaluation, permanent power cuts, and water shortages. The infrastructural fallout exacerbated inequalities that long predated the crisis, thrusting an overwhelming majority of city dwellers into literal and figurative darkness. Adapting to life in Beirut after a prolonged stay in Montreal proved unexpectedly challenging: I struggled to complete the most basic everyday chores—washing my clothes, rinsing vegetables, or eating perishables out of a non-functioning refrigerator. Each week, when the time came for me to catch a ride on Tareeq Al-Sham, Damascus Road, and head to the Bekaa, I would leave with joy in my heart. Going to Saghbine and staying with my friend Ghada in her family home quickly became a much-coveted respite. There, I was treated to stories of local anti-heroes, Ghada's homemade jams and breads, fresh water from the village spring, and her music. But the most striking aspect of life in Saghbine was the uninterrupted supply of electric power that made life 'easy' again. From the moment I first met Ghada in her city home in Karm Al-Zeitoun, I recall her telling me not to worry. "There is *kahraba* (electricity) round the clock in Saghbine", she had assured me. Given the most recent power shortages across the country, I had assumed she could only be referring to private generators.

For as long as I can remember, there has always been a dual system for the provision of electric energy in Lebanon. Electricity power outages have not been the result of a spectacular one-time failure but rather a longstanding low-grade history of repeated failures, dysfunctions, aggressions, and malfunctions that became particularly acute in the last two years. Electricité du Liban (EdL) —Lebanon's state run power company, which prior to the economic crisis controlled most (more than 90%) of the country's electricity sector— had always provided rationed hours of *kahrabat al-dawleh* (state electricity). In popular parlance, among neighbours and friends, this source of electric energy was commonly referred to as just *al-dawleh* (the state). Privately-owned generators, known as *moteur*, provided households and institutions with additional

power, particularly in poorer neighborhoods outside of Beirut where electricity was cut off for more than 10 hours each day.[1] But during fieldwork, the country's most recent calamities —notably, the port explosion, coupled with state bankruptcy and its inability to pay for fuel—had taken Electricité du Liban (EdL) down and off the grid. Whereas most households, government buildings, and public infrastructures within Beirut received around 21 hours of electricity per day, they now experienced a full-blown, permanent blackout. Novel battery storage technologies, solar or wind powered electricity along with privately-owned diesel generators subsequently emerged as the only available sources of power.

These infrastructural transformations were accompanied by shifts in the language used to refer to the various sources of electricity, which is what led me to misconstrue Ghada's initial assertion about Saghbine's *kahraba* (electricity). Whereas *dawleh* (state) or *moteur* (generator) had been previously used to describe distinct sources of electric power, both terms had been replaced by the more generic term *kahraba*. With the total collapse of state provision, accessing electricity required an alternative source altogether. This complete disavowal of EdL-generated energy prompted linguistic alterations that registered more than people's changing relation to electricity. I saw in the gradual disappearance of the term *dawleh* a discursive proof of the definitive negation of the role and responsibility of the state (*dawleh*).

For the duration of my fieldwork, there was no *dawleh* in Beirut, in other words, no state provided power. Privately owned, diesel-run generators produced and sold *kahraba* to anyone who could afford it. *Moteur*, or generator electricity, was costly, scarce, and irregular, and for the most part distributed and consumed intermittently by those with means. While Beirut's elite came to rely on *moteur* subscriptions to sustain energy-intensive modes of consumption, those less fortunate sold their refrigerators or repurposed them for storing clothes, papers, or shoes. Shops hiked their prices to compensate for money spent on *moteur*, streetlights were always off, and at midnight, the entire city, along with its most essential services, and infrastructure, was engulfed in darkness. The thickness of those Beirut nights was so impenetrable that it almost overshadowed other somber episodes in the country's history. From the end of the civil war until

[1] It is also important to note here that several densely inhabited areas in Lebanon were not connected to the grid. As Diana Allan (2014) shows, in refugee camps and the poorer neighborhoods of Beirut's suburbs, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese often resorted to the practice of 'stealing power'.

the end of the 2006 war, the Israeli army would deliberately attack civilian infrastructure with their fighter jets bombing bridges, highways, and, most importantly, electrical power plants and substations.[2]

Plagued by mismanagement and maintenance deferral, the poor supply of power in Lebanon was the product of unequal distribution of resources but also the legacy of repeated invasions and Israel's active targeting of civilian infrastructure. While this long history of inadequate and unstable power had wearied people living in Lebanon of the modernist narratives of energy abundance, the complete collapse of state infrastructure still precipitated a profound recalibration of everyday life.

Initially, I assumed that Saghbine would be similarly affected, though when the sun set my first day there, I found that the whole village was *mshaʿshaʿ*, gleaming. Homes, shops, the one hotel, sole restaurant, municipal buildings, the public telecom provider, local dispensary, and all roads leading to and from Saghbine were sparkling with lights. I shivered with delight at the prospect of this unexpected return to 'normalcy'. Walking on the streets after sunset felt joyous, even sensorially opulent. All the lampposts were lit, houses too. My eyes followed other sparks in the sable night: *Qamar Machghara,* the radiant moon of Machghara, reflected on the Litani waters, fireflies, and the twinkling of houses and streetlights from neighbouring villages that also benefited from uninterrupted power. The patterns of light redrew the landscape. The string of glittering villages around the dam eclipsed all other villages in the surrounding darkness and stood in stark contrast to nights in Beirut. I was soon to find out that it was neither private generators nor *kahrabat al-dawleh* (state electricity) that provided all this luminosity, but rather, as my interlocutors would later explain to me, *kahraba* from the Litani. *Hayda al-Litani*, this is the Litani, they would say.

Focusing on the peculiar case of this string of lit villages bordering the Litani dam and of the way their residents remember the past, I want to approach electricity as a *dispositif* for understanding the thorny and ambivalent relations between the urban and the rural, as well as

[2] Between 1996 and 2000, I had witnessed firsthand the deliberate destruction of the Jamhour and Bsalim substations, located near my parents' and grandparent's homes respectively. In 2006, standing on the balcony, outside a cousin's house on a cliff off the coast of Beirut, I heard and then saw Israeli fighter jets bomb the thermal Jiyeh power plant, plunging the country into darkness and causing a devastating crude oil spill, the burning of fuel for days on end, and the pollution of hundreds of kilometers along the eastern Mediterranean shores.

the politics of accessing power—both literal and metaphorical—in Lebanon.[3] More specifically, my aim is to examine how claims to electricity formulated in the watershed become consequential, particularly when considered against the backdrop of a national economic crisis and an unraveling of the "infrastructural power of the state" (Mann 1984).

In what follows, I reflect on one story that my interlocutors, who have access to the scarce and prized resource of *kahraba* from the Litani, repeatedly shared with me. In it, they describe how people in the West Bekaa had given their land to the Litani dam in exchange for electricity. I have found it generative to think with, and about, this story of reciprocity through the frame of moral economy, particularly since the advent of electric power in the Bekaa was coterminous with both the implementation of the Litani hydropower project and the land dispossession that the dam's construction entailed. I am especially interested in the way that emergent moral economies have been forged not only in the crucible of a nationwide power crisis, but also in the context of the curious reversal of fortunes that villages around the dam found themselves in with regards to the unequal distribution of electric power. Specifically, I ask, how might land dispossession come to be reframed as a form of sacrifice?

To address the entwinement of a hierarchical socioeconomic exchange (dispossession) with a moral and ethical obligation (sacrifice), I chronicle and trace Lebanon's history of electrification, related sociotechnical arrangements, and the shaping of national ideologies — all of which have crystallized social relations of electrical production and consumption. I then turn to my encounter with Ammo Mouhib who was among the first I heard underscore the fraught affects of loss that the abundance of electricity paradoxically evoked for people in the watershed.[4] Conjuring past dispossessions together with the heightened uncertainties of life in contemporary Lebanon, the narratives of my interlocutors (like Ammo Mouhib) trail electricity's movement as commodity, gift, and right. As land is traded for power, peasant ways of life for

[3] By *dispositif*, I mean a structural and structuring apparatus and device. I am inspired here by Giorgio Agamben's (2009) work on 'the apparatus' as anything capable of shaping and being shaped by the multilayered social lives of beings. I also draw from Andrea Ballestero's conceptualization of 'the device' as a pivot that makes possible different forms of political and epistemic labour. Examining the changing meanings of water —from commodity to human right, Ballestero (2019) contends that these sociolegal categories have shared formal properties and common market and non-market features. Building on these similarities, Ballestero uses various devices (which are in fact technopolitical instruments) as distinct analytical frames through which to understand the production of meaningful difference.

[4] Ammo means paternal uncle in Arabic. It also serves as a title with which to respectfully address older male acquaintances and fathers of friends.

modernity, and rural for urban experiences, these narratives illustrate how electricity becomes tangled with different forms of unequal exchanges.

Throughout this chapter, I try to grapple with electricity's delight too. I consider how a national power crisis —sparking joint illuminations (in the Bekaa) and blackouts (in Beirut)— might recast social practices, values, and interactions. Juxtaposing Lebanon's national power crises and my interlocutors' experiences with electric modernity, I hope to show how a story of dispossession, narrated as a reciprocal gift exchange, unsettles more normative understandings of citizen-state relations. In the way that it informs expectations of, and hopes for, redistributive justice, the politics of bereavement at play here risks amplifying loss for most, rather than mitigating it.

A history of electrification

Electricity first arrived in Saghbine and its neighbouring villages — from Ain Zebde to Machghara and Qaraoun— some six decades ago. Gradual and disparate, the electrification of Lebanon occurred in three phases, a process that reflected the unequal regional distribution of wealth and resources. From the turn of the century until the mid-1950s, only major urban centers and their neighbouring suburbs were electrified.[5] The first lights shone in Beirut around 1910, followed by Tripoli, Saida and Zahle in 1929. Around the same time, electricity also reached the region of Aley, a major summer resort for affluent families from Cairo, Haifa, Damascus, and Beirut. Apart from its use in the lighting of streets at night, the consumption of electricity was primarily domestic, particularly following the introduction of household appliances in the 1930s and air conditioning in the 1950s.[6]

In Beirut of the 1950s and the 1960s, the use of electricity emerged as a marker of a modern form of conspicuous consumption and a drive to exhibit social and cultural prestige — both characteristics of newly accumulated wealth (Veblen 2007). In 1966, in a talk he gave to the

[5] These included the capital Beirut, its summer resort villages in parts of nearby Mount Lebanon, Tripoli, and the industrial coastal line of Chekka, and the immediate centers of the cities of Saida, Sour, Zahle, and Baalbek.
[6] 1) Fouad Bizri, Notes sur l'électrification du Liban, *Commerce du Levant*, 15 February 1966; 2) Sanlaville, Paul. L'electricité au Liban, *Commerce du Levant*, 15 February 1966; and 3) Electricité Du Liban, *Kahrubat Luban, Tarikh Qarnen wa Nayyif*. Beirut: EdL, 1994.

graduates of one Beirut's most prestigious engineering schools, engineer and public functionary Fouad Bizri described how the advent of electricity was transforming urban life. "Le conditionnement d'air a pris à Beyrouth comme un feu de brousse", Bizri had told the engineering graduates who had gathered at L'École Supérieure d'Ingénieurie de Beyrouth (ESIB) that cold, clear February night to hear him talk about the electrification of Lebanon.[7, 8] All throughout Lebanon's 'Golden Age,' and in the absence of a developing industry, modernization was tethered to the consolidation of financial capital, lavish consumerist excess, and the emergence of more elaborate and more comfortable energy-intensive lifestyles in the capital.[9]

While Bizri's lecture served to underscore Beirut's arrival to electrical modernity, rural areas, like the West Bekaa, lagged. Bemoaning how the countryside had yet to catch up, geographer Paul Sanlaville vividly captured the stark contrast between the country's financial metropole and its rural peripheries: "Pour les campagnes restées à l'ère des lampes de pétrole, Beyrouth était vraiment ville-lumière".[10] Sanlaville's image of a national chiaroscuro spoke to a concern with regards to the wide chasm that separated the capital city from the countryside and the neglect from which the latter suffered. It was only from the mid-1960s onward that the Litani hydropower project, among other projects, allowed the Lebanese state to expand grid coverage. "The water flowed, the generator hummed, and the first supply of hydro-electric power emerged from the Litani River Basin Project. The date was January 22, 1962" wrote Sue B. Aderhold, the Point Four Mission secretary, in a report documenting the progress of the American technical assistance program in Lebanon.[11] With these words Aderhold appears to inaugurate the countryside's admittance into modernity. Conscripting nature in the making of modernity, the river's roaring water and the mechanical movement it prompted finally arrived to

[7] "Air conditioning spread like a wildfire in Beirut." During the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon witnessed tremendous economic growth which was primarily reaped by the banking sector. Safieddine (2020) notes that this growth was due in part to the flight of capital and diversion of trade from Palestine to Beirut after the 1948 Nakba, inflows of oil royalties from the Gulf, and the shift to nationally planned economies in nearby countries which facilitated the flight of capital to Lebanon.

[8] Equally extravagant was the consumption of electricity (per person/per year) in Lebanon at this time, especially when compared with that of neighbouring countries like Turkey, Syria, or Jordan. Geographer Paul Sanlaville reported that Lebanon consumed 300 kWh per person per year in comparison with 130 kWh consumed in Turkey, 100 kWh in Syria, and 61 kWh in Jordan.

[9] Sanlaville notes that in 1964, more than 60% of electric energy produced is consumed in households located in Beirut.

[10] "For the countryside, which lingered in the era of the oil lamps, Beirut was really the city of lights." Sanlaville, Paul. L'electricité au Liban, *Commerce du Levant*, 15 February 1966.

[11] Point Four refers to the fourth foreign policy objective of President Harry Truman's program for development. It was a program for technical assistance aimed at 'under-developed' countries. Aderhold, Sue B. "Tomorrow has arrived", in *Tomorrow becomes today: a progress report of the 10-year Point Four Program in Lebanon, 1952-1962.* A publication of United States Agency for International Development, 8-11. Beirut: 1962.

transform rural areas or, as in the tone of the report, chase away the pastoral inertia that plagued it. Describing how regions like the Bekaa and Akkar in North Lebanon were floodlit for the first time, "Tomorrow becomes today" implied that electrification rescued rural communities from idle relevance.[12] By 1968, most other regions of Lebanon had also been electrified or, more fittingly, enchanted by what Bizri described as *la fée electricité*, the spirit of electricity.[13]

If Bizri deployed the figure of the electric fairy to gesture towards the myriad ways the Lebanese countryside was enthralled, he was borrowing this expression from French artist Raoul Dufy who painted *la fée electricité* —a whimsical mural commissioned by the Parisian electricity company on the occasion of the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, held in Paris. Spread over 600 square metres, the fresco traces the history of electricity from Antiquity till modern times, blending gods and engineers, Olympian thunderstorms and electrical stations, machines, and mythology with history and the sciences. In Dufy's mural, the spirit of electricity herself is Iris, daughter of the Greek goddess Electra and messenger of the gods. Suspended above a playing orchestra, she is carried by the forces of music, on a journey towards cities worldwide, where she will deliver electricity to all mankind.

It is on those terms, with those promises, and in that magical mythical spirit, that hydropower from the Litani first reached Saghbine and the neighbouring villages. But as tomorrow did become today, the tight associations between electricity and urban centers — and all that they imply —began to be reversed. During fieldwork, the permanent blackout saw Beirut disenchanted and cast back in time, while villages in the West Bekaa remained somehow suspended in an illuminated present. This curious reversal, and its broader implications, swiftly became a key point of focus in my ethnographic inquiry.

Sociotechnical arrangements in the watershed

As I said, shortly after I moved to West Bekaa, I learned that residents of Ain Zebdeh, Saghbine, Aitanit, Machghara, Qaraoun and other villages in the region were getting *kahraba*

[12] *Tomorrow becomes today: a progress report of the 10-year Point Four Program in Lebanon, 1952-1962.* A publication of United States Agency for International Development, 8-11. Beirut: 1962.
[13] Except for the bordering regions of the Hermel in the North-East as well as parts of Jabal Amel and Bint Jbeil in the South, which had to wait until the mid 1970s.

from the Litani and not from the state *kahrabat al-dawleh* (generated by Electricité du Liban - EdL). Underpinning this inchoate national electrification was a series of sociotechnical assemblages, which included, among other things, the sharp distinctions people often traced between the different electric energy sources that they relied on. While the boundaries between the Litani River Authority (LRA) and Electricité du Liban (EdL) state power seemed neatly drawn in discourse, the situation differed in practice.

The LRA and the EdL —both public bodies— had long collaborated to produce and distribute power. From the Litani project's inception, the LRA had signed a contract with the EdL stipulating that the EdL would purchase all hydropower produced in the power plants, distribute it, and collect bills. The price per kwh of electricity was to be determined by decree and reviewed periodically.[14] While the Litani's plants produced electricity, EdL managed the transmission and distribution lines required to deliver the hydraulicly-generated electricity to households and other buildings.[15] In contemporary Lebanon, the three Litani power plants (Markaba, Awali, and Joun) continue to be connected to EdL's transmission networks as well as to its major power substations. The EdL nationwide transmission network consists of three types of high voltage power lines: 66, 15, and 220 kV. Located throughout the country, the EdL substations still convert the electricity produced in the Litani power plants from high voltage to medium voltage, thus enabling its distribution not just in the region surrounding the dams and the power plants but also anywhere in Lebanon.

While the Litani power plants are connected to the national grid, they are also linked to a local network: the 15 and 60 kV transmission lines connect the three power plants to their surrounding regions. From the 1960s onwards, these networks enabled a considerable number of sparsely populated and religiously diverse villages in the immediate vicinity of the dam to receive electricity directly from the power plants, without the prerequisite transfer through intermediary power substations. The fact that Saghbine and the other small villages I visited

[14] See for e.g., Staff Loan Committee – Memorandum from the Department of Operations Asia and Middle East (August 10, 1955 -- SLC/O/793), Litani Power and Irrigation Project - Lebanon - Loan 0129 - P005324 - Negotiations - Volume 2 (July 5, 1955 - August 29, 1955) Folder ID: 1859485, World Bank Group Archives, Washington, D.C., United States.

[15] In 1957, and prior to the construction of the dam and correlated power plants, the Lebanese government collaborated with the Technical Cooperation Assistance to design and implement the "Point Four Rural Power Transmission Project" —an electrical distribution system that would then be used to distribute electricity that was hydraulicly generated from the waters of the Litani. As Boyer (2015) notes, this electric grid could be understood not as state intervention itself but rather as the structure that enables any intervention of the state.

during fieldwork enjoyed uninterrupted electricity was due to these localized networks, the turbines of the power plants, waters of the Litani, as well as the blood, sweat, and tears of the LRA workers operating the plants.

In the countless conversations I had during my stay in West Bekaa, I recognized some of the other larger-scale, patterned dynamics that shaped and were shaped by the provision of public services — dynamics that were communal, sectarian, technical, environmental, and bureaucratic at once. These include electricity's elusive materiality, which also has significant implications over its interconnectedness with social infrastructures and political institutions (Abram, Winthereik, and Yarrow 2020). Chiefly relevant among its physical properties is the fact that electricity cannot be stored: its generation must be carefully synchronized with its distribution and consumption. The availability of electric energy is thus continually determined by the Litani's very ability to produce electricity —which, in turn, is dependent on water levels and annual precipitation. Apart from water flows and seasonal variations (the high water season runs May through September), the transmission and distribution networks' technical and physical characteristics also affect which villages can be serviced and how.[16] As one engineer working with the LRA explained, connecting Jeb Jennine, one of the Bekaa's largest and densest towns, to the Litani's network would tremendously pressure the grid, particularly in the low season.

The broad dynamics that influenced the distribution of electricity in the watershed depended not only on the physical properties of hydropower generation but also on changing local and national political groups and power polarizations. When the Israeli then the Syrian armies occupied the region during the 1980s and the 1990s respectively, they reorganized electricity distribution. When Bassam, the electrical engineer whose family had worked with the Litani for three generations, told me the story of the power plant and demarcation line near their village, he described how the two opposing parties —the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and allies on the one side and the South Lebanon Army (SLA) and Israeli forces on the other— maintained direct contacts with the LRA teams managing and protecting the power plant and its

[16] The low season is generally dedicated to the maintenance of the power plants and equipment.

workers.[17] When the Israeli army controlled the region south of the Litani, it imposed new regulations with regards to electricity — an illustration of how vital infrastructural arrangements are swiftly transformed to "facts on the ground" (Abu el Hajj 2001; Saglier 2021).

If these histories show how electricity, and techno-science more broadly, is conscripted in extraordinary territorializations of power, other anecdotes reveal the more mundane and less historically dispassionate characters of the politics of electricity in the watershed (Meiton 2019; Mitchell 2002; Salamanca 2014). When I visited the Markaba Power Plant in the spring of 2022, I was allowed inside the station's electrical control room. In this room's interior, designed in typical 1960s French aesthetics (its dominant colors black, white, and blue), operators worked in shifts and around the clock to coordinate power grid operations. They monitored the functioning capacities of the power plants and made the decisions needed to guarantee the flow of electricity to households. Based on available and centralized data (shared across all rooms connected to the EdL's nationwide grid), these operators could reduce electricity exports, open, or shut a power line, or switch distribution from one region in Lebanon to another. The background of their activities was the backwall of the control room, which functioned as a large electrical board that displayed EdL's transmission and distribution grid. On that wall, which was lined with copper wires, switches and breakers enabled the transfer of the hydropower generated in the power plant from one region in Lebanon to the another. When I asked the two operators who were also preparing their afternoon *argileh* on what basis they handled these switches, cutting electric supply off one region to give it to another, they retorted that they were mere public employees from *Majlis Al-Khidmah Al-Madaniya* (the Council of Civil Service).[18] "We receive instructions and have to execute them, no questions asked," they told me. Failing to do so, they asserted, would even result in their transfer to *Al-Majlis Al-Taʾdibi*, the service's disciplinary council. I recall staring at the switches, wires, circuits, and breakers on the wall and thinking that turning them on or off was as significant as it was banal, evoking Susan Leigh Star's (1999) assertion in her canonical ethnography of infrastructure that infrastructures are stiflingly boring things.

[17] I address this in Chapter 2.
[18] Hookah, shisha, or waterpipe.

The technocratic regulation of energy provision and distribution were not confined to the power plant's control room nor the Civil Service Council. In fact, political struggles over electricity were rooted in the far-reaches of public bureaucracy, mainly in the Ministry of Water and Energy, as well as the various departments of the EdL and the LRA. Right before I left Saghbine in the fall of 2022, the LRA issued a communiqué detailing new provisions in the distribution of hydropower that it had been contemplating. With this announcement, the LRA was responding to the pressures of various political groups in Beirut who had requested that the Litani give power to water pumping stations, municipalities throughout Lebanon, and the airport. The communiqué underscored the influence of the rivaling parties that controlled these different public bodies. From the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) to the Amal Movement, these parties extended electrically charged promises to their respective constituencies.

Among all my interlocutors' interpretations of the politics regulating power provision, there was also the recurrent question of sectarianism. Maintaining "a delicate sectarian balance" between Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shiʿi villages was seen as paramount to the distribution of hydropower from the Litani. Technical systems required for the provision of electricity interacted with numerous other networks of "people as infrastructure" embedded in bureaucracies, local social relations, and institutional politics (Simone 2004). All these forces concurred to produce a form of belonging that was made possible with, and through, infrastructural relations in addition to the social and political claims that underpinned them —what Nikhil Anand (2017) in his ethnography of water distribution in Mumbai terms "hydraulic citizenship."[19]

Of all the indicators of technological progress in the 20th century, energy production — particularly electrical energy — has proved central to the experience and representation of modernity and late modernity (Boyer 2015; Winther and Wilhite 2015). Electrification heralded the possibility of a technological remaking of the social and the political, the harnessing of nature, and a glimpse of the future in the present (Nye 1994).[20] In the American context, electrification was inherent to what David Nye (1994, xiii) called the "technological sublime," a popular affect that stood in for American society's "ideas about itself" and had explicit political

[19] Nikhil Anand's (2017) work on water supply and distribution in Mumbai —itself scarce and periodic— is useful to account for infrastructure's entwinement with questions of political mobilization.
[20] In the United States, Gretchen Bakke (2016) also contends that the grid itself can be considered an American artifact through which to study specific sociohistorical transformations, from accelerating industrialization to household consumption patterns.

effects on human bodies and material culture alike. The sublime blurred the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, inspired marvel and incomprehension, and reified technological change while concealing the social, political, and economic relations that structured it. All over Europe, the electric lamp (and switch!) had also enabled the rise of different technologies of lighting —for work, policing, celebration, consumption, pleasure— and the extension of the temporalities of socialization well into the night (Schivelbusch 1995). Lebanon's meandering electrification over time and space undercuts these narratives of radical transformation. While electricity's arrival made possible the conscious performance of Lebanese modern life, the country's fractured histories of electricity made more visible modernity's other constitutive forces.

If electricity in the northern hemisphere is limited only by its affordability, in countries of the South, it is its unequal provision that is also tangled up with various power structures, technical and economic constraints, political influences, and imaginations. While these sociotechnical arrangements that I have just listed are useful in understanding the management of electricity in the watershed, they were usually missing from people's stories about *kahraba*. I do not mean to say that these sociotechnical stories are not well-known to the residents of the region surrounding the dam and the power plants — on the contrary, I learned most of what I know about electricity in the watershed from them. However, these issues sprung up in other conversations entirely unrelated to the pressing topic of the country's electricity's crisis. While cognizant of these forces and patterned dynamics, the story that served to explain my interlocutors' electric privileges at that dark time of Lebanon's history seemed to foreground one lasting image illustrating electricity's entwinement with state and market forces: in their view, the continued provision of electricity from the Litani was, above all, the redeeming grace of a dispossession they collectively endured more than six decades ago.

Everyday uses of electricity

While the rest of the country plunged further into darkness, the three power stations of the Litani Project provided more than 22 hours of hydro-powered electricity per day to 109

towns connected to the local power networks, including the villages near and around Saghbine where I was living. That this remote rural area glimmered through the night had seemed almost outlandish to me —and would continue to seem so throughout my fieldwork. In the West Bekaa, the illumination was reminiscent of a peculiar hospitality practice that was still common among middle-class families in Lebanon who, in ritualistic manner, often honored guests they received in their homes after dark by turning all the lights on.[21] In Beirut, too, I was astonished to find businesses and gated communities, served by diesel generators, fully lit up for nights on end: to the rest of the city, it seemed an almost brutal display of both inequality and privilege. Enmeshed with different forms of human organization, infrastructures are —as Susan Leigh Star (1999) first pointed out— fundamentally mundane objects, endowed with a quality of invisibility. It is public drama and breakdowns that make them visible.

My return to Lebanon, as the severity of the electricity crisis was cresting into view, also made me more attentive to the everyday uses of electricity. It made me alert to the many ways daily life has become interwoven with, and dependent upon, steady sources of power, and the tendency to imagine electricity as a taken-for-granted, inexhaustible resource of modern life. In the context of Lebanon's ongoing financial crisis, the lack of access to electricity has been described as a form of multidimensional poverty and energy vulnerability (UN report 2021). From the perspective of global development, being deprived of electricity is generally framed as a human right violation (Abram, Winthereik, and Yarrow 2020; Winther 2010). While the UN SDG agenda advocates for "affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" by 2030 (SDG7), critical development studies have interpreted such claims as a form of contributing to the "colonialist normalization of Western priorities" (Abram, Winthereik, and Yarrow 2020, 11; Shove 2003). As I came to discover from my interlocutors, residents of the West Bekaa were jealously protective of their electrical privileges—their desire for electricity irreducible to what Gupta (2015, 566) describes as "an index of the colonization of their imaginations of the future" or a failure of more sustainable development paths.

[21] As David Nye (2018) notes in his study of early 20th century American Illuminations, lighting practices, in their rarity, served as markers of social distinction and guarantors of a delightful, almost sublime, experience. In the context of a nationwide blackout, the interrupted glow of villages, served by the Litani, appeared transgressive.

In the West Bekaa, I made note of the quotidian social and economic situations that the Litani hydropower created and sustained. At home, people consumed electricity for lighting, heating, charging electronic devices (from mobile phones to computers or internet routers), and for running household appliances, like washing machines, refrigerators, and air conditioning. Families who had moved to Beirut during the second half of the 20th century and who could not afford generator subscriptions made day trips to their villages to wash their clothes or charge their batteries. In the villages, electricity also facilitated the provision of public and bureaucratic services, the functioning of governmental buildings and institutions, public and private hospitals, clinics, dispensaries, and schools. It enabled the lighting of streets necessary for public safety, the powering of water treatment plants, the provision of telecom services, and the operating of vital small industries: dairy farms, wineries, ateliers that produced *mouneh* (local techniques for preserving food) or the region's famed goat milk ice cream, bakeries, mushroom farms, mechanic repair shops, smithy shops, small woodwork workshops, and local groceries. The few farmers who reared cattle or cultivated land near the riverbanks or on the surrounding hills used electricity to pump water. As the Litani was too polluted, these pumps drew water from underground wells or from the mountain's many water springs. Electricity insured a cold chain distribution and supply: the storage of produce (apples), medicine and vaccines in the region's pharmacy, and meats and other perishables at local grocery stores. It also allowed a modest service industry of restaurants, nail salons, and hairdressers to sustain itself.

While I was doing fieldwork in the watershed, electricity from the Litani, *Kahrabat al-Litani*, was practically distributed and consumed for free. Currency devaluation and fuel shortages meant that the collectors who were contracted by EdL (who, as I noted earlier, distributed electricity on behalf of the Litani) could no longer afford gas and had stopped collecting for bills since the summer of 2019. This was not an issue of EdL anyway —currency devaluation had accelerated to the point that any amount claimed in Lebanese Lira had become worthless. Unlike people who lived in Beirut, who were forced to rely on expensive sources of alternative power, the residents of villages served by the Litani formed a privileged community of few who enjoyed electricity without having to worry about pecuniary costs. In this emergent political economy of energy production and consumption, the distribution of electricity was

shaped by both market and non-market forces alike while new social and cultural spheres were being forged by crisis.

In places where electrical service is reliable, blackouts are experienced as a form of disruption, "carved out of the normal flow of time" (Nye 2010, 1). However, in the case of the illuminated villages in West Bekaa, it was the availability of electricity from the Litani that disrupted the flow of social time and brought into better focus local, social, and cultural histories of electricity. In the rest of Lebanon, where people struggled to recover a certain sense of normalcy in the wake of the 2019 October uprising, the national blackout had left many of those who had revolted with an overwhelming sense of incapacitation, contributing to the preservation of a dominant order they had hoped to topple.[22] At the same time, in the watershed, the presence of electric lighting from the Litani contributed, among other things, to the production of novel spaces and relations of influence striving to assume their distinctive forms. In other words, electricity powered my interlocutors' livelihoods whilst also shaping a certain political imagination.

The values of electricity

In West Bekaa, electricity mattered also because it was inseparable from the Litani's local histories and people's own involvements with the dam. The Litani structured a particular regime of value in which electricity, and the everyday life practices it enabled, was embedded. This valuation scheme —determining what matters to whom and how much— was inherent in the way that people claimed their rights to public services. This valuation scheme was also quite difficult to grasp. Energy's twin nature as "both a commodity and a fundamental aspect of being" (Nye 1997, 75) made it difficult to disentangle the technological and material from the social and political.

Since electricity itself is elusive and cannot be grasped as a thing in the world (Bakke 2020), it is in its concrete manifestations—from the spark of a light bulb or the humming of the

[22] The relation between lighting and insurrection is historically fraught. When revolutionaries passionately smashed lanterns during the Paris revolts of the 19th century, blackouts enveloped the insurrectional areas of the city in protective darkness (Schivelbusch 1995). For the enslaved, night was both the safest and the scariest time.

Litani water in the power plant— that its affective potencies as well as its impact on the creation of novel forms of consciousness and sociality can be better understood (Nye 1998, 2010, 2018, Schivelbusch 1995). As I have shown, how and where one sources electric energy, or when and why one might choose to switch from one source to another, are other questions that matter when assessing the value regimes of electricity. I have also pondered electricity's relationality and its elusive materiality to scrutinize how the reversal of electric fortunes between urban and rural centres, generates a temporal re-ordering and imparts new values. Here I am particularly interested in how residents —remembering how they had been collectively dispossessed from their agricultural lands to make way for the dam— establish a correlation between the values of land and electricity.

Seen from that angle, electricity can be understood an "unlikely commodity" that moves alongside money but also other objects, like land (Özden Schilling 2021). Embedded in relations and value regimes that cannot be reduced to the logic of state or market, it is part of a trajectory that bridges spatial and temporal distances (Marx 2004; Mauss 2002). As a socialized thing in each situation, always caught in cycles of exchange, use, and display, I want to reflect on the way that electricity in the West Bekaa is at once: a gift from the Litani traded for land, public good whose provision is regulated by the state, a commodity transacted with money, and a right given to deserving subjects (Appadurai 2013). I have found Arjun Appadurai's (2013, 3) proposition that "what creates the link between exchange and value is politics construed broadly" particularly generative to contend with the epistemic claims, subjective impulses, and broader forces of history structuring these different valuation schemes. This definition of politics really underscores the ways in which "one's desire for an object is fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object, which is the focus of desire of another" (Ibid). In other words, it allows me to place within the same frame of analysis people's relations to electricity provision, land dispossession, and the sociohistorical role assumed by the state.

The story relayed by Ammo Mouhib that I turn to next underscores how, in the context of a deepening disenfranchisement and impoverishment, electricity's striking exchangeability with land becomes one of its most socially relevant features. It also gestures towards the political implications of an exchange in which accessing electricity in the watershed becomes the worth

equivalent of losing land, highlighting the Litani's entanglement with the formation of specific bereaved subjectivities and collective forms of identification with loss, as well as with the consolidation of new meanings of ownership, alienability, and inalienability. Inherent to these values (and to the shift from forced dispossession to inevitable sacrifice) is the duty to reciprocate or repay. The politics of bereavement that emerges from this tale is one in which renunciation or loss is continually reaffirmed as a prerequisite for life under compounded conditions of crisis.

Ammo Mouhib *(Abou Elias)*

Elias loved his hometown and was very proud of its history. He was the first person I met in the village when I moved to Ghada's house in Saghbine. A water engineer and geologist by training, Elias had lived and worked in the Gulf for several years before he, and his wife Pascaline (a physics researcher and professor at the Lebanese University), decided to settle there before the 2019 October uprisings. When I told him about my research, he suggested I meet his father, Ammo Mouhib (also known as Abou Elias —father of Elias) because "he was around when the dam changed life in the village." Having worked for *Al-Mashrouʿ Al-Akhdar*, The Green Project, a state-run initiative for agricultural modernization and technology transfers, Ammo Mouhib was well-acquainted with all sorts of agricultural practices, from intensive farming to the careful preservation of precious local heirloom seeds. And so together with Elias, I agreed I would come to their home for coffee.

The family house was located on the side of a quiet road, in a neighborhood perched high on the mountain, closer to the Barouk forests of the Chouf than to the valley of the Litani. A concrete three-story building with marble flooring and ornate wrought iron windows, the house was first built in the 1960s, when the dam was completed, and recently refurbished. Abou Elias, his wife Umm Elias, and Livia their youngest daughter, who taught English to young Syrian refugees in a school nearby, lived on the first floor. Elias, Pascaline and their toddler son, Marco, lived on the second floor while the third floor was used for storage. Every season, Ammo Mouhib reclaimed the building's rooftop to cure the region's famed heirloom *Salamouni* onions and

prepare various foodstuff for the *mouneh,* together with Umm Elias. By choosing to live in Saghbine, Elias had given up on completing his doctoral studies in Europe and Pascaline, whose monthly salary had devalued to $200, had postponed her plans to immigrate to France. However, both appreciated their life in the village because it allowed their son Marco to spend time with his grandparents. They told me how the year before, Ammo Mouhib had dried *fassoulia* beans in their pods and brought them to Marco, who was still learning how to walk, to tread on the brittle pods, crushing them to release the beans.

When I finally got to their garden, it was a balmy afternoon in April. Umm Elias had prepared the hot coffee pot and pulled a tray filled with sugary confections, bonbons, and the notorious *succès au chocolat* —known to other residents of the Mediterranean as the chocolate salami— a cylindrical homemade cookie prepared with Marie biscuits, condensed milk, and powdered cacao. It was not yet warm enough for the Qaraoun lake's cyanobacteria blooms to release their toxic stench. While the polluted Litani streamed before our eyes in the valley, the fragrance of *wezzal* (broom) plants drenched the air. Each year in spring, their bright yellow flowers covered the surrounding hills. In the atmospheric plenitude of the Mediterranean shrublands, we sat and talked. Ammo Mouhib told me about his childhood and his parents. With the help of his older brothers, his father and mother worked the lands they owned, planted irrigated crops by the riverbanks and *baal* (rainfed) wheat on the terraced hills that encircled the valley. He vividly described the different kinds of agricultural labour they would all perform as a family. Elias had mentioned that his father was an engineer. Narrating his youth, Ammo Mouhib explained how, during the 1960s and 1970s, he had purposefully chosen to move away from the hardships of farming to work as an educated agricultural technician in the Bekaa.

Like Bassam, Bou Falah, Ghada, everyone else I had met, Ammo Mouhib also used the term Litani indiscriminately to designate the Litani as river, public institution, and hydroelectric dam all at once, reflecting the social, technological, and territorial transformations that the construction of the dam had prompted. It materialized in language nature's figuration as infrastructure (Carse 2014), blurring the technological and the natural, and vice-versa. It also embodied what philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich (1985) calls the historicity of matter, gesturing towards water's differing materiality and potentials or, what in more contemporary

anthropological parlance one might also call its multiple ontologies. Illich (1985) saw the running water of rivers as always different from the water that flowed through pipes and canals. Recognizing water's maldistribution, pollution, commoditization, and extraction as crucial issues, he was interested in the kind of water — "needed for dreaming the city as a dwelling place" (1985, 11).

It was not long before our conversation shifted, and Ammo Mouhib began recounting how his family was dispossessed of their lands. They became "displaced-in-place" (Nixon 2011) when the "*Litani came,*" *lamma ʾeja al-Litani*:

> You know, a couple of years ago, I opposed the Marj Bisri project because I had witnessed first-hand what projects like these did to the people of this region.[23] Those lands we owned by the river were the most fertile. I can still hear the murmur of the river, the whirring of the *nawaʿeer* (waterwheels) and the rattling of the water that we drew to irrigate our crops down there. Every square metre of land yielded 1 kg of dried *fassoulia* beans every season! Back in the 1950s, we used to sell each kilo of *fassoulia* for 30 piasters each whereas the Litani, when it took our land, it compensated us by paying us 30 piasters for every square metre of land they took from us. You do the calculations! Do you understand now how much we lost to the Litani? Close to 3,000 *Dunum*. We also lost pastures for our sheep and goats. Do you know what it means to be a farmer without a land to till?

Ammo Mouhib continued to enumerate how the lives of farmers in West Bekaa changed drastically after the Litani expropriated their lands and submerged them under the Qaraoun lake. He explained that while some had land left on the eastern riverbank, there were no bridges to get there. Landless farmers were forced to walk for hours toward the dam in Qaraoun so that they could cross the Litani to the other side. Others worked in lands that were not theirs, "*bel hossa aw bel daman*" he clarified. Leasing or sharecropping. "But everyone was so impoverished,

[23] Bisri dam is an infrastructural scheme, which was initially planned during the 1950s (part of the broader Litani Hydropower and Irrigation Project) to provide drinking water to the capital city of Beirut. It was revived and then dropped in 2019 due to popular mobilization during the uprising in Lebanon.

all this forced people to leave the village. Hundreds of families left for Beirut, Australia, Canada, or America," he added. Most of those who stayed maintained apple orchards until the war, worked in the region's small service industry, or pleaded their case with Iskandar Ghanem, who was the Lebanese army's Commander-in-Chief and who, according to the residents of Saghbine, always found people jobs with the government. Years later, his son the late Robert Iskandar Ghanem, long-time deputy in parliament and member of the Hariri-led Future Movement, would do the same.

As Ammo Mouhib recalled the land and past ways of life that had been lost to the Litani, I found myself thinking about the present—about how the dam had produced an uncanny reversal of riches that allowed the West Bekaa a sustained provision of electric power during a national crisis. "But what about gaining electricity from the dam," I asked. "These days it's very important! In Beirut, we don't get it at all!" I added, noting that Mouhib, Amalia and Elias seemed bothered by my question. Ammo Mouhib firmly explained to me how this was all part of the bargain with the Litani. "We had given them not only our land, but also the crops that we were going to harvest for countless years to come and in exchange the Litani gave us electricity," he said. It was then Elias's turn to shed further light on the matter:

> The deal was that the villages that gave up large swathes of land to the lake, like Saghbine, Qaraoun, Mashghara and Bab Mareh, would get electricity for free for generations to come. The *kahraba* was supposed to stop in Saghbine but Robert Ghanem a few years ago, broke the deal. To get re-elected, he extended the reach of the grid and allowed nearby villages that had given little to nothing to receive electricity from the Litani. This is already putting way too much pressure on the grid and causing us problems and *taʾnin*, rationing. With everything that is happening now, who knows if the deal will be broken again, and electricity taken away from us once more.

In the course of fieldwork, I would hear, time and again, the same story repeated, of a deal, an *ʾitifaq* (agreement) that bonded the Litani together with the residents of villages adjacent to the Qaraoun lake. Even people whose families had not lost land to the dam

reiterated the same claims. When, a few weeks following my visit to Elias' family home, I visited the Litani Project facilities with Bou Falah, he showed me the quarry that provided the stones and rocks with which the dam was built. "The hills of Machghara offered the rocks to build the dam, the sons of Machghara toiled to extract them, and in return the Litani agreed to give us electricity for as long as the power plants remained functional," he had told me. In Qaraoun, interlocutors and friends recounted a similar story. I began to understand how claims around electricity resembled a kind of regional competition of valour and sacrifice. People I met in the villages of Ain Zebdeh, Saghbine, Aitanit, Machghara, and Qaraoun each told me that it was *their* village, *their* families who had lost most to the Litani.

Joud from Qaraoun even recalled Sheikh Kassem Qarʿaoui mobilizing the village community during the 1990s and organizing an important protest. As the Syrian armed forces stationed in the region had restructured the local distribution of electricity, Sheikh Qarʿaoui and the villagers marched to ask that Qaraoun be reconnected to the Litani grid. Led by the charismatic and well-respected Sheikh, hundreds walked across the plain of Machghara to the power plant. Carrying sticks and canes, they angrily demanded the restoration of what, in their view, were their rights, justly acquired, snatched almost, some 40 years before. To Joud, what remained a spoken arrangement, or oral contract, had done the people of the region disservice. "People did not have the consciousness required to request a decree or a written contract of sorts," he lamented. Mira, another friend from Saghbine, told me it was an ʿ*urf* — an unwritten, customary law. Part of the stone grain mill that her parents used by the river to grind wheat served as a beautiful table in their courtyard. The bottom part is drowned under the river.

Back in the garden, and in a hesitant voice that betrayed her discomfort speaking in the presence of the men of her family, Amalia interjected:

> You know when the Litani distributed money to compensate people for taking their land, people were also happy. It was more money than they had ever earned or knew how to spend. A large sum, that they received all at once that is. Some people bought new furniture and appliances, for example. My parents used this money to build a modern toilet! Our extended family used it to rebuild their homes, which had been destroyed by

> the [1956] earthquake. Instead of the mud houses, they rebuilt new homes with concrete![24]

Ammo Mouhib interrupted his wife. While he agreed that villagers had indeed used the money to build concrete homes, he thought that they had failed to use it wisely, with a keen eye for the future:

> You know my friend Mikhael Safian, who was a contractor, very well known in this region, he used to look down on all these people asking after him to build their new homes. '*Bahayim*, all these people are *Bahayim'* (pack animals or four-legged beasts) he used to tell me. 'Look at them spending all their money. Me, I saved my money and with every 36 Lebanese Lira I bought a *Lira Dahab,'* (gold coin lira) he'd proudly say. People should have known; they should have invested their money.

Mikhael Safian's story echoed another familiar trope, that of a social distinction between the cunning of the entrepreneur who knew how and where to place their money on one hand, and the naiveté of simpler people living only in the present on the other.[25] Amalia, Mouhib and Elias thoroughly explained how the lives and worlds of farming families irreversibly changed in the villages around the Qaraoun dam but said nothing about whether local communities had opposed the project in any way. I also knew that farming families on the eastern bank of the river, who claimed ownership over land but had failed to provide the adequate documentation, still considered they had not been fairly compensated for what they lost.[26] For years, these farmers worked the land of deceased family members or relatives who had chosen to immigrate to Australia or to Americas, cutting all ties and connections to their home countries and villages.

[24] Amalia is referring to the 1956 Chhim earthquake whose epicenter was in the Chouf district and that resulted in the death of 140 people and the destruction of 6,000 homes. See for e.g., Khouri, Stephanie. "'That Night' in 1956: The Year the Lebanese Ground Spoke." L'Orient Today, February 9, 2023. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1327662/that-night-in-1956-the-year-the-lebanese-ground-spoke.html.

[25] Diana Allan (2013) notes a similar contrast in the refugee camp of Shatila that set Palestinians from Jaffa apart from rural Palestinians. Structured along class lines and an urban-rural distinction, this divide highlighted the diverse ways people thought about, and planned, for the future.

[26] I am grateful to historian Zouhair Hawary for pointing out the land tenure problems on the eastern riverbank. Hawary also highlighted how there were small landowner in the region, unlike other parts of the Bekaa where a handful of individuals were large landowners. Elias Abboud also makes note of these distinctions in his journalistic report on the Litani published in 1974 in *Assafir*.

When the Litani took these lands away from them, they became destitute. Overall, I was curious about the critiques that sometimes come in hindsight, particularly considering the river's pollution now, and the revisionist narratives bound up with questions of responsibility. I wondered whether farmers —who were left with no land to till and who, in light of the contemporary financial collapse, feared the worst— were only now asking themselves why they had agreed back then to sell their land.

The river of the one million poor

I had read various journalistic interviews with Judge Abdallah Nasser who headed the expropriation committee in the 1960s and oversaw the process of reclamation and compensation for the Litani project. In these interviews, Judge Abdallah recounted the messy and complicated tasks he had taken on following the failure of an initial committee. Formed under President Camille Chamoun on the eve of the short-lived civil war of 1958, the judge described how this first committee hastily initiated the process of expropriation just as the construction was supposed to start.[27] The committee faced significant resistance from farmers who refused to hand over their lands to the state. Local parliamentarians who supported the farmers in their claims, proposed a new law in parliament to abrogate the committee and its prerogatives. During a visit to the Bekaa, several members of the committee were even beaten and chased away by angry crowds. After Camille Chamoun resigned and the insurrection of 1958 ended, another committee was formed under the guise of the newly elected President of the Republic, Fouad Chehab. Negotiating with local representatives from each village, this committee, headed by Judge Abdallah, was able to advocate for the passing of a decree determining the amounts allocated as compensation for expropriation and complete its reclamation work in 1962-1963.

A few years later, in April 1974, the left-leaning newspaper *Assafir* published, in several installments, a special dossier on the Litani and its peoples titled "The river of the one million

[27] I am grateful to Owain Lawson for pointing out that the Lebanese constitution expressly limited expropriations. The LRA at that time was granted extraconstitutional power to expropriate land needed for the construction of the Qaraoun dam.

poor." Prepared by Elias Abboud, a communist from Qaraoun, with the help of researcher Wafaa Daaboul and photographer Hakim Hamra, the report makes specific note of the areas expropriated and the amounts allocated in return:

> In Qaraoun, the dam consumed close to 7,000 dunums from the *fellahin* (farmers) and the rest did not receive as little as a drop of water to irrigate their lands. In return, the LRA paid less than it would pay for radishes: 30 piasters per square metre of land whereas a kilo of radishes now costs 50 piasters.

The report goes on with details of other damning statistics. In Qaraoun, the dam drowned 6 springs and close to two thirds of the most fertile arable land leaving villagers in dire poverty.[28] It also took 7,000 dunum from the nearby villages of Aitanit, Ain Al-Jaouzeh, Saghbine, and Bab Mareh. According to the report, the LRA disbursed between 20 to 60 piasters per square metre, paid over 3 installments, an amount 4 times cheaper that what every square metre of irrigated land could yield each crop cycle. To that end, the LRA also compensated farmers for their orchards and vineyards: 5 to 10 liras for every vine, 1 to 2 liras for each poplar, and 25 to 40 liras for every apple tree. The remainder of all arable land was left without irrigation, and no canal was built. In the words of villagers interviewed by both Abboud and Daaboul, the Litani was diverted to quench the lands of feudal lords like Nicolas and Youssef Salem in areas like Jezzine, on the other side of the mountain. Following the implementation of the hydropower project, the villages were then cursed with the construction of a sugar beet extraction factory that began to pollute the river. More than half of villagers left, Abboud and Daaboul assert, having moved to Beirut, or immigrated.

Sheikh Qarʿaoui, whom the report quoted extensively, thoroughly described how state led development projects effectively targeted the area:

> The state treats the people of this region as if they were second class citizens. Those benefitting from the projects implemented by the state are not the farmers but rather

[28] These lands are most fertile because of siltation processes.

> the men of political feudalism. (…) In the past, malaria wreaked havoc throughout these plains because of the swamps and the contamination of drinking water to the point that the valley became known as the "valley of malaria." The Litani had been nothing but the originator of catastrophes for the people of this region. And now that the state is implementing projects targeting its waters, it is not the people of the region who are benefitting from that.

Overall, the report spoke to a concern with regards to the tensions and inequalities that the dam project materialized, describing how "insidiously plundered by the sea, the feudal landlords, and the agrarian capitalists, the Litani is also *mountahab* (stolen from) by those who are strangers to it (…)." This discourse of rightful owners, stewardship, and responsibility allotted only to those who know the river's currents and land in a different way reminded me once again of Ivan Illich's distinction between different kind of waters and the reveries they inspired. The rural poor suffered from the Litani of the urban capitalists.

* * *

Back in the garden with Elias and his parents, I wanted to know whether Abou Elias remembered how farmers had expressed their objection to a form of state intervention in a region that was otherwise "*mahmouleh, matroukeh, wa mahroumeh*" —neglected, abandoned, and deprived. He replied:

> I remember that people formed a committee and protested in the streets of Aitanit, Saghbine, Bab Mareh, Machghara and Qaraoun twice. They closed off the only road that led here, twice. But to no avail. The committee eventually requested an appointment with the President [of the Republic] and when they finally met him and voiced their concerns, President Camille Chamoun solemnly told them: 'don't you come here to tell me all about *Ard Bajaa* and *Fawwar Ain al Bardeh* [respectively 'land of pelican,' a riverbank peninsula and a stopover for migratory birds; and 'abundant cold-water spring',

> now both drowned under the Litani]. I know *Ard Bajaa* and *Fawwar Ain al Bardeh* just as good as you. I used to hunt only in *Ard Bajaa* and to catch fish with my bare hands in *Fawwar Ain al Bardeh*. But you must know that this is a civilizing project that I am putting in place, *mashrouʿ hadareh*, and I am not doing it for you. I am doing it for your children's children so that they may live in a region that has known pioneering projects and the most modern innovations that the human mind can fathom.'

My encounter with Ammo Mouhib revealed many facets of local political claims concerning the hydropower produced by the Litani, which become embedded in a specific exchange cycle. As a quintessence of modern living, electricity —which guarantees the right to enter modern times— becomes commensurable with land given more than six decades ago. However, in this account of the local committees' meeting with the president of the republic, it is also said that land should be gifted, and a sacrifice ought to be made for the sake of the future.

One way to read the land-electricity exchange is as an expression of a moral economy that binds together people from villages that have been maimed by the construction of the dam (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971, 1991; Edelman 2005). A moral economy is defined as the means by which to determine certain collective entitlements to a necessity throughout a time of crisis —in this case electricity but also the broader civilizational project it was seen to carry forth. James Scott (1976) held peasant moral economies to be deeply rooted beliefs of an ethical nature and saw that impersonal market forces, unlike with the state or local lords, played minor role in shaping these understandings of justice. In contrast, claims to electricity formulated here are contingent upon the region's specific history with the dam as well as Lebanon's contemporary socioeconomic collapse. These socioeconomic and political dynamics deprived farmers of the right to live from the land, incorporated their futures in different economic structures, and left them to face the detrimental effects of market forces in the present. Whenever I asked about electricity from the Litani, I heard my interlocutors saying that it was only fair that they'd be the ones getting it.

However, interlocutors in the watershed described their families' loss of land as both dispossession and something given consensually with an expectation to entering modernity in

return. "We had given them our land (…) and in exchange the Litani gave us electricity," Ammo Mouhib and other friends in the watershed had told me, repeatedly. Instead of mere dispossession, the loss of land and the crops that were going to be harvested "for countless years" to come —in other words the withering away of agrarian ways of life— are presented as a prerequisite for the building of a better and different future. The march towards the future is also depicted as both inexorable and ordinary. In the words of my interlocutors, the Litani did not take the land, it just came. *Lamma eja al-Litani* as Ammo Mouhib put it, when the Litani came.

Reframing dispossession as a form of sacrifice or gift converts a hierarchical and unequal economic exchange into a social and a moral obligation that emphasizes the duty to repay. The tradeoff between electricity and land, mediated through the state, draws not only the contours of a contentious moral economy, but also sets a precedent that benefits the elite. What might the epistemic, political, and ethical repercussions of such a precedent be, particularly in Lebanon's conjuncture of national debt, theft, and collapse?

The gift of electricity

One night during the summer of 2022, residents from Jeb Jennine, a village without electricity, had furtively crossed the bridge over the Litani to the western bank. Like Gavroche at war with streetlamps in *Les Misérables*, sabotaged the transformers that enabled the distribution of power to villages like Saghbine. Shots were heard in the dead of night. I saw in the smashing of the transformers an insurgent and unruly act against the unequal status quo. I couldn't help but think that the light cast outward, from one side of the valley onto the other, also worked as a technology of surveillance, where, as Gaston Bachelard (1961) put it, anyone in the dark who saw a light in the distance felt they were being observed.

I saw in the disparity in power the expression of two more contradictory impulses: it reinforced individual processes of identification through light; and, as public lighting was a pledge of morality and security usually guaranteed by the state, it reassured those the villagers who basked in it (Schivelbusch 1995). Following the incident, the municipality considered turning

off the streetlights at night. This proposition was perhaps meant as a gesture of consideration and respect for neighbours on the other side of the valley who spent their evenings in the dark, staring at the bright lights of Saghbine, Ain Zebdeh, Aitanit, and Machghara. Elias in any case was infuriated. "Why should we turn off the lights?" he told me angrily. "We have *earned* this light by giving our land."

In the context of Lebanon's intensifying socioeconomic crisis, I am unable to fully grasp the value regimes within which electricity from the Litani circulates. In other words, I am uncertain about how and why *kahraba* from the Litani becomes allocated to one village and not another; to parts of the countryside, but not part of Beirut; to private households but not public hospitals; around the clock in the area surrounding the dam but not at all in other rural regions. The logic remains inscrutable. However, for Elias, his extended family, and others who derive electric power from the Litani, there is no doubt about how and why *kahraba* must be distributed to their communities, and their communities alone. Since resident families gave their land to the Litani, it was obligated to reciprocate with the gift of electricity.

Electricity —the provision of public services broadly construed— emerges here as part and parcel of a gift exchange (Mauss 2002). I use the word 'gift' in the Maussian sense not to dismiss land theft and extraction but as a term that expresses the moral, social, and subjective dimensions of an exchange presented as equal. In the conversations I had, land came up as an inalienable possession from which its owners could not possibly be severed. Because it also stands in for a way of life, the gift of land bears the traces of not only the individuals who owned it, but also of those who gave up doing agriculture so that they could enter a world in which electricity was readily available. In fact, many people who told me the same story (that the Litani was obliged to reciprocate the gift of land with electricity) did not actually own land. As their families' lives had also been transformed in the wake of the construction of the dam, they saw that the land-hydropower exchange concerned them too and on equal terms.

The Maussian gift exchange is a public drama that engages collective and not merely individual representations, entails prestations and counter-prestations, and is at once contract and sacrifice. Underscoring how social and economic life is organized, the logic of the gift is structured around three obligations: to give, receive and reciprocate. The agreement that

agrarian ways of life might be traded for consumerist modernity endowed land and electricity with equal value and made sacrifice commensurable with gain. What I have tried to reveal through the frame of a moral economy is that, amid scarcity and in the thick of the financial crisis, such a claim, which emphasizes giving or sacrifice over dispossession, helps explain why certain villages are collectively owed electricity. It likewise helps justify why other villages ought to remain excluded. As they offered nothing, the duty of reciprocation did not concern them. That land and electricity are valued reciprocally is additionally an expression of a desired solidarity—where dispossession is neither fruitless nor without reward, and where the duty of reciprocity is imagined as a force for justice.

Infrastructural projects of development materialize objective historical forces, like dispossession or state building, and simultaneously hold sway over the very possibility of collective political practices and claims. The land electricity tradeoff suggests that farmers understand themselves as always already part of the land. This makes the giving of land (rather than having it taken away) somehow more powerful, particularly since it ensures that people will always be owed —and reciprocated with— electricity as long as the land has been sacrificed. Likewise, framing land dispossession as a gift means, too, that villagers are forging their collective subjectivities as active agents in the exchange, rather than its passive victims both dispossessed from their land (by the dam) and robbed from their modern future (by the contemporary economic crisis). This illustrates how a politics of bereavement is thus actualized: land is lost yet simultaneously given and taken away.

Framing the land-electricity swap as a form of gift giving is not without other implications. It highlights how inalienability —that farming families have given something of themselves to obtain electricity— is actualized in, and not a precondition of, the exchange itself. Such realization is concretely connected to the operations of capitalist dispossession (Moumtaz 2023, 157). In other words, land becomes inalienable, and dispossession becomes narrated as a form of personal sacrifice that has been imposed upon poorer rural communities, specifically in relation to Lebanon's deepening conjuncture of crisis. In the way this story gets told, there is an emphasis continuously placed on the threats, weights, and consequences of returning to an even earlier dispossession, six decades ago, 'when the Litani came' as Ammo Mouhib put it.

As a form of justice or redress, the land-electricity exchange also evokes the persistence of the dominant and authorized ideals of modernizing projects. My interlocutors' ongoing support of the politics of development embodied in the Litani dam unsettles more prevalent resistance narratives, in which rural communities oppose the very conditions that have alienated them from their land and their ways of life (Larkin 2013). While they recognize themselves as victims of injustice, they continue to nurture a relation to the Litani dam. It is by embracing, rather than opposing, the ways of life that the development of the Litani has handed them that people are able to maintain an inalienable relation to the land. Engaging the Litani, in its indebtedness, thus offers a way for their loss to be continually recognized as well as registered in the longer term. Their narratives thus offer a second, barely perceptible, history of what it means to embrace an electrical modernity, which is being perpetually deferred. In the imaginative ways that they make sense of their contemporary condition, they are not unlike the fishermen in Kinshasa whose invisible stories the anthropologist Filip De Boeck and the photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart (2005) attempt to capture. While these fishermen's homes had been brutally razed to the ground to make way for a development scheme, they still looked to the new project in admiration and pride (Ibid, Larkin 2013).

The claim that the Litani's hydropower is embedded in a form of gift exchange carries a clear endorsement of interested and intimately personal exchanges, even if unequal. Whether the logic of the gift is an adequate way to designate this moral economy is of course debatable. Part of what I am also getting at is that this story of sacrifice is unsettling because it reframes what might be understood in more extractive terms, or more baldly, as theft. But what I am trying to show is that understanding a hierarchical exchange as being reciprocal or equal has explicit political effects in the context of a broader conjuncture of national debt accumulation and social and financial collapse, where ruling parties, the state, and local banks dispossessed people not only from their earnings and savings, but also from their future.

There is yet another potential unsettling implication of this value regime, which frames electricity as a gift that is due and as a service that is owed in exchange of something else. Underpinning the fraught gift of electricity, in an otherwise context of inchoate electrification, is the duty to repay. This works to absolve government of its responsibilities to provide basic

services to all citizens, regardless of what they might have given, or not. As David Graeber (2011) reminds us, financial crises are a fertile ground for the propagation of moral and legal discourses that also circle around the duty of repayment. In emphasizing people's responsibility to fulfill their obligations towards one another, even if unequal, discourses of social debt often-times serve to authorize and make more palatable a wide range of neoliberal measures like austerity that benefit only the elite (Graeber 2011; Vaccaro, Hirsch, and Sabaté 2020).

I came to this outlandish realization one autumn night in Beirut, as I was readying myself to travel back to Montreal. I was re-reading my notes, thinking about my conversations with Elias and Pascaline about how difficult and expensive living in Lebanon had become for their family. I was also listening to one of the country's most watched political talk show. The host, a famous journalist, and his guests were talking over each other, competing in their advocacy for a bail-in solution for the country's private banks that had lent money to the state. The bail-in, they explained, had to be coupled with far-reaching structural reforms targeting the "corrupt institutions of the state" adding that "the banks had given money to the state and now the state must repay."

* * *

I keep returning to Ammo Mouhib's arithmetical equation that connects past and present. At its inception, the LRA had approximately paid farmers 30 piasters for each square metre of land —the equivalent of one kilogram of *fassoulia*— taking not only their land but of the futures it promised them. Though diminished, I had found, in Saghbine, other renewed forms of connections with the past, exemplified in both Ammo Mouhib's continued dedication to planting, Elias and Pascaline's decision to stay in the village, and Marco's little feet breaking *fassoulia* pods on the roof. More present however was the looming threat of the gift exchange cycle breaking in a fraught and strained socioeconomic situation, which would deprive residents of electricity owed and of the local economies it sustains. Though I never asked Ammo Mouhib directly about this, it felt to me that such a rupture —in which residents would no longer receive electricity from the Litani— would provoke a kind of foldback in time.

In the string of villages around the dam, farmers had been forced to acquiesce giving up their way of life in the name of an imperative of progress. What they accepted in exchange, what Ammo Mouhib described as Chamoun's civilizational project, remained a dream deferred with Lebanon's failing system of electricity standing as a synecdoche for the faltering of its modern aspirations (Ferguson 1999; Winther 2008). But Ammo Mouhib was also a committed member of *Hizb Al-Wataniyyin Al-Ahrar*, the party of the free nationalists, known in English as the National Liberal Party, founded by Camille Chamoun himself in the wake of the 1958 short-lived civil war. Ammo Mouhib loved and respected Chamoun.

Our conversation about the farmers who visited Chamoun to object to the expropriation of land had both evoked the memory of Lebanon's former president and the prevailing spirit of his time: the polarizing context of the Cold War, the modernizing and state-led development plans, and the grand civilizing schemes that accompanied it. Implicit in Ammo Mouhib's account of that meeting was the fact that the project moved forward, *somehow*, because farmers had also acquiesced to a kind of agreement, which carried the definite mark of Chamoun's civilizational benevolence. If they were to lose electricity today, what residents of Saghbine, Aitanit, Qaraoun and the other villages connected to the Litani would also have to face is a kind of double dispossession —a more total kind of loss than any of them might even want to contemplate. For at stake too will be the definite shattering of a political consensus that had even outlived Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990). What I mean by that is a broken relation to power — the double loss of electrical power and its delight, as well as people's faith in their political parties.

A few days after my visit to Ammo Mouhib, I went for a walk in what remained of *Ard Bajaa*, the riverbank peninsula so dear to Camille Chamoun. Part of the peninsula had been submerged by the lake while the other part had become the property of a former municipal leader and turned into a vineyard and winery. I could not stay long because the stench of the winds blowing over the water made it unbearable, even in the coolness of spring. On the shores I saw piles of refuse and the brown water marks on the sand left by the lake's flood currents. As the sun set, I made my way back to the village. I could hear, rising from the valley, the howling of wolves and from the village the low humming of fans cooling hundreds of computer servers.

Fleeing Beirut's crumbling infrastructure, cryptomining startup companies recently begun moving to rural villages in and around the watershed of the Litani where electricity was abundant and cheap, free even. The minting of digital currencies consumed enormous amounts of energy and pressured the Litani grid to an extent that caused outages. While some villagers rented their homes to these entrepreneurs, receiving valuable *fresh* dollars in return, others saw them as profiteering parasites to be snubbed.[29] These whirring fans, which consumed hydropower, the scarce and prized resource of both land and water, represented but the latest stage of Lebanon's extractive development, only now in late capitalist form.

[29] Since cryptomining is considered an illegal practice in Lebanon, the LRA, with the help of the police, raided several homes housing these servers. See for e.g., Russell, Jacob, Adam Hasan, Daniela Dib, Viola Zhou, and Jack Brook and Nimol Seoung. "Crypto Miners and Crumbling Power Plants." Rest of World, December 7, 2022. https://restofworld.org/2022/lebanons-crypto-miners/.

Chapter 4: Absorption

When he learned that farmers were still occasionally drawing water from the Litani to irrigate their crops, Mahmoud, a teacher at the Bar Elias UNRWA school in Central Bekaa, refused to eat *tabbouleh* and began to grow parsley on his balcony. Near Olleik, where the Litani's source waters slowly rose up from below the ground, Fatima described how children in her village developed terrifying skin afflictions, red patches and itchy sores, from swimming in the river. In Hosh al-Rafqa and Temnin in Northern Bekaa, the *mukhtars* swore that the Litani left almost every family in those two villages bereft and mourning the loss of loved ones to cancer.[1] They maintained that everyone who lived there continued to incur a great risk of growing a tumour in their body. My friend Halim, an activist from Baalbek, insisted that the Litani River Authority (LRA) and its staff were nowhere to be found near Baalbek. If they visited occasionally to draw water samples or check that small factories, dairy farms, and gas stations were not dumping untreated wastewater directly into the river, they were not *that* interested in the plight of the farmers and the ill. Between the Litani's source in Olleik, located close to Baalbek, and the dam, farmers devised new ways to irrigate their crops and overcome the LRA's decision to ban water use from the river. They bought water transported in trucks (the famed *citernes*); drew H_2O from unlawful wells or from nearby springs; or secretly pumped the blue gold, either directly from the sewerage, or the polluted river itself. "I'm not sure about these diseases, no one knows for sure if it's the Litani. Maybe it's something else," Halim confessed. "They [the LRA] don't care to find out. They only care about the publicity, not the people."

In the West Bekaa where I conducted fieldwork, the LRA maintained some kind of presence, namely in the infrastructures of the power plants and dam. Many workers there were afflicted with infections and allergies that they too imputed to the Litani, albeit inconclusively, with few able to afford the costly treatments.[2] Though other villagers in and around Saghbine, where I stayed for my fieldwork, were coping with cancer and several other ailments, I found myself largely unable to speak to them about these issues. I respected my interlocutors' refusal

[1] Mukhtar means literally selected; used to refer to local officials since Ottoman time.
[2] I address the pollution's indeterminacy in Chapter 2.

to talk about certain illness experiences, particularly cancer, and often went along with whatever conversation concerned everyone the most. While the topic of pollution occasionally came up, it was never directly addressed. Unlike the nationwide electricity outage on everybody's minds and lips, I was almost never able to address the topic of pollution in the watershed without people swiftly *changing the subject*. When they would speak about living with the pollution of the Litani, they inferred that this primarily involved acclimating to the river's stench, categorically asserting that "the river was dead." Most of times, they would talk about how, in their view, Syrian families who worked in construction, agriculture, and menial service jobs polluted the river. "*Shufeh al-nazheen as-suriyiin henneh yalleh bilawtho al-nahr*", they would tell me, "See the Syrian displaced, they're the ones polluting the river".

Overall, Lebanese farmers, villagers, experts, and state functionaries nevertheless agreed that the Litani infrastructural project had prompted a kind of "metabolic rift" that threatened dominant socioecological relations (Foster Bellamy 2010). Instigated when the infrastructure was built, this ecological rupture occurred when the dam was transformed into a trench flooded with sewage, industrial and agricultural discards, fertilizers, and pesticides, and untreated domestic wastewater. It wasn't just interlocutors in the valley prefiguring the Litani's geophysical and biosocial death while blaming Syrian refugees for it. These ideas circulated in Beirut as well, including at the LRA headquarters where many bureaucrats spoke at length about working to save the river from its own demise through the implementation of all sorts of programs and plans targeting both Lebanese villages and Syrian camps and settlements.

On the other hand, there was a stark dissonance between the discourse on pollution in Beirut and the experience of living in, and with, pollution in the West Bekaa. As I showed in Chapter 1, in the capital, the LRA's official position on pollution mimicked broader shifts in global development practice and theory towards greater interest in environmental sustainability. In such paradigm, each crisis presented as opportunity and ecological constraint offered new prospects for expansion, profit, and accumulation. With its stated aim to "lift pollution off the river,", the LRA evolved its institutional goals and devised new plans to "strengthen the watershed's ecological governance." I soon learned to adopt the technical terms from my friend Wissal, who worked in the newly founded unit for water governance and repeated this

catchphrase at each conference and talk she gave about the LRA's plans to address the environmental disrepair.

The more I thought about the LRA's shift from a strategy of development focused on hydropower to one centered on sustainability, the more curious I became about the way these institutional transformations were refracted in the lived experience of interlocutors in the watershed.[3] Beginning with the recognition of pollution as an ecological and social relation, I turn to examine, in what follows, how the river's ecological "rift" serves to reproduce the unequal development politics that the infrastructure has embodied since its construction in the past century. This necessarily entails addressing the river's loss of ecological integrity, but also the way the infrastructural project, itself, precipitated a certain devaluation of agricultural work and debasement of rural life, promoting energy-intensive, urban, and consumerist lifestyles instead.

In this chapter, I am particularly interested in examining how pollution is *abstracted* in, and from, the watershed but also how it shapes subjectivities. This is tantamount to posing two different, yet interrelated, questions: on the one hand, asking how the pollution problem is dealt with in daily life and, on the other hand, reflecting on how it is bound up with different material and symbolic value systems. By thinking with pollution, I show how the varying processes aimed at abstracting pollution from the Litani —what I call the 'absorption of pollution', from its potential marketization to its symbolic metabolization—work to continuously *change the subject of pollution*, rather than tackling it head on (Lohmann 2011). I am interested in the double meaning of 'changing the subject' and its effects: as a practice that shifts the locus of conversation or that transforms people's agentive capacities and sense of self. With the latter, I critically reflect on the way that pollution becomes synonymous with uncleanness, and how abjection, the avoidance of dirt, and the desire to do away with it reveal the contours of order and power, whilst also shaping subjectivities (Douglas 2002). I thus trace, ethnographically, how categories of a symbolic order of pollution are remade, embodied, and how they become a generative lens through which to posit the 'absorption of pollution' as a modern theory for political assimilation in the watershed.

[3] I describe this shift in Chapter 1.

The wetland

From Beirut to the Bekaa valley, visitors making their way along Tareeq Al-Sham – the main Damascus Road – are subjected to the maelstrom of honking, reckless van drivers, taxis, hasty border-crossing trucks filled with goods and livestock sideswiping each other, people crossing, sheep, *express* shops selling bitter cheap coffee on the two sides of the highway, and the cotton candy clown-man, who has stood near the Bhamdoun exit for the last forty years. It is only after the Internal Security Forces' checkpoint, located in Dahr Al-Baydar at an altitude of around 1500 metres, that the visitor's gradual descent from the mountain towards the valley begins—a descent both topographical and affective. There, cars that have been swallowed by the mist enveloping the mountain, even during summer, suddenly resurface. As the cacophony diminishes, the valley reveals itself to the feasting eyes: a geometrical patchwork of agricultural parcels and flat lands, Jabal Al-Sheikh in the distance, and behind it Palestine and the Golan. The road then bifurcates at Chtaura, with one road leading to Baalbek and the other to Bar Elias and Masnaa', the North and Central Bekaa, respectively. In both cases, the road ends in Syria.

To get to West Bekaa, I make a right turn right before Chtaura, and then again, before passing the town of Kab Elias and an informal Syrian refugee camp where agricultural workers live, mostly women and children. With the windows rolled down, my ears are ringing with the roaring sounds around me —of water sprinklers, tractors, gusting wind, and the deep thudding of the rotating blades of a solitary wind turbine. The turbine strikes me as a quixotical windmill standing guard over the camp, as it also supplies it with electricity. As the swishing of the blades recedes, I find myself in a beautiful corridor, thick with tall poplar trees that bend in the strong winds to form an arch. The ceremonious sentinels accompany me until the Lebanese army checkpoint in Jib Jennine, where they make way for a neat and modest avenue of *zaaʿrour* (hawthorn) bordering both sides of the road. These thorny trees were planted to deter humans and animals from venturing into the adjacent domain of one of Lebanon's largest wineries. Coalescing military strategy, history, and landscape, the checkpoint is located at a crossroads linking Beirut, the mountains, South Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and anywhere else in the Bekaa. I memorize the names of the villages that I pass through on my way to Saghbine — Kab Elias,

Ammiq, Aana, Kherbeh, Ain Zebdeh, with Saghbine located at the end of the avenue of *zaaʿrour* hedges.

* * *

"Drive down the road to Ammiq. When you get to the Lebanese army checkpoint near Jib Jennine, turn left if coming from Beirut, right if from Saghbine, the research center is located behind the winery of Château Kefraya", Hassib had told me on the phone. He had arranged for me to meet colleagues at the LRA research centre and visit its "constructed Litani wetland". When I arrived, the research centre was teeming with representatives from American private development companies who seemed to know their way around the place. In addition to the wetland, I noted that the centre included two buildings: a laboratory for water testing and a barely operational facility dedicated to agricultural extension programs in the area. Hassib had instructed me to check in with Asseel, who worked in the laboratory, and to make sure that I meet Mostafa, one of the wetland's maintenance technicians. When I arrived, I found Asseel busy with some American guests. Since I could not join their meeting, one of her colleagues phoned Mostafa who asked me to meet him on the other side of the laboratory's parking lot. "Hello," Mostafa said, waving me towards him. Like many LRA staff that I met in West Bekaa, Mostafa was a local hire, from one of the villages around the dam. While he had studied law, he landed a technician job at the LRA through local connections and found himself working at the research centre. Mostafa indicated the short path to reach the wetland. I followed.

The wetland itself was completed a decade or so ago and rehabilitated during the summer of 2020 as part of a more comprehensive USAID-funded scheme focused on Lebanon's waters. Wedged between Château Kefraya and the water treatment plant of the nearby village of Jib Jennine, this pilot project was conceived of as "a new and natural water technology", in Mostafa's words, and was built to serve several objectives. Most important among them was to treat the polluted Litani waters and help remove the physical, chemical, and organic matters contaminating the river, which followed from the excessive and uncontrolled dumping of wastewater and other effluents. As we walked around the constructed wetland, Mostafa

outlined its functioning principles, which "were technically intricate and very simple at the same time." Pointing to the tall reed grass ahead of us, he indicated each of the pilot project's three sections — a pumping station powered by solar panels that thrusts polluted water from the river into the wetland, followed by an ordered sequence of deep and shallow ponds, repeated three times, and finally an open channel that discharges cleaned water back into the riverbed. Behind the reed grass, snow-covered Mount Lebanon hovered above us. In the shallow basins in front of us were turtles resting and frogs leaping between the reed grasses. The air reeked of sulfur. I recognized the disagreeable smell of sewage and mentioned it Mostafa. Pointing to the adjacent conventional water treatment plant, one of the largest in the Bekaa, he explained that Jib Jennine, through which the Litani flowed, was too crowded. Since the country's economic crisis began to deepen in the winter of 2020, the nationwide power outage that followed had put the conventional water treatment plant out of service.

Returning his gaze towards the reed grass, Mostafa went on describing the process and challenges of water purification:

> Now, of course, the pumping station cannot absorb all the river's waters — only a certain percentage, which depends on the season and the water levels. How it works, I told you, is very simple: the water is diverted from the river into a deep pond and from there it slowly seeps through a shallow basin where the experts decided to plant this special *qasab* (reed grass). It is special because we transplanted it from *Ammiq* [a nearby freshwater wetland, the largest remaining in Lebanon and an important stop in the migratory route for birds]. This sequence is repeated twice. It takes water around 5 days, sometimes more when the weather is hot and dry, to get from point A, which is the pumping station, to point B, where the discharge channel is. At the end of this journey, the water is much cleaner. You can see it; you can smell the difference. You can also hear all this wildlife that has returned to this place. Hear that? The *qasab* is from here. Its combination with *daphnae*, a very important family of bacteria, is what allows the wetland to purify the water and, through natural filtration and absorption by the *qasab*,

to remove sewage as well as the harmful *maʿaden thaqila* (heavy metals). You can say that here we have a natural water treatment plant that operates on its own.

Mostafa continued to detail how, and apart from treating the polluted waters of the Litani, the wetland also contributed to the creation of a vibrant microcosmic habitat to which all sorts of species "had returned" — from good bacteria to frogs, birds, shrubs, and reed grass. These returning species, as Mostafa kept emphasizing, helped promote local and healthier ecologies while soon, *inshallah*, it would be possible to create a small leisure area for activities such as organized walks or picnics.

Wetlands in the Litani valley signify myriad objects and relations. Made and refashioned, both discursively and materially (Scaramelli 2018), they vividly illustrate how a landscape is also an infrastructure (Carse 2014). In the West Bekaa, many villagers recall the Litani from when it was 'the saddest river'.[4] They remember the danger of the marshes and swamps that the Litani helped form when it swelled, flooding their best, most fertile agricultural lands during the winter and spring seasons, and threatening them with the scourge of malaria during the summer. In Khalil Hawi's poem, *The Bridge*, put to music by Marcel Khalifeh, the swamps are a vessel for disease and backwardness and a challenge not only to modernizing projects but to liberation altogether.[5] In the modern state's imagination, wetlands more generally figure as an unruly terrain for muddied politics (Scaramelli 2018; Taussig 2018). Recently in the watershed, they were being highlighted as essential to protecting biodiversity and rehabilitating the polluted Litani, with an eye to developing community based eco-tourism. I later came to learn that the USAID, along with private development companies (like Development Alternatives International —DAI) and the LRA, regarded this wetland as a pilot project, which might eventually be implemented at other locations throughout the river basin to address the Litani's pollution more effectively and demonstrate its environmental responsibility.

[4] Abboud Elias, Wafaa Daaboul and Hakim Hamra, "The river of the one million poor". Feature dossier. April-May 1974, *Assafir Newspaper*. Beirut, Lebanon.

[5] I am specifically thinking here of the stanza that was put to music by Marcel Khalifeh: "they cross the bridge furtively at dawn, my ribs are stretched out as a sturdy bridge for them, from the caves of the East, from the swamps of the East to the new East." The bridge can be understood to refer to the Allenby bridge and to the poet's desire for an Arab enfranchisement that can only be accomplished through modernization and a sociopolitical and cultural Nahda (awakening). Equally poignant is the poet's sacrificing of his ribs — an intimate part of his body and a symbol for giving life. Hawi, who was a professor at the American University of Beirut, killed himself the day the Israel Army commenced their invasion of Lebanon in June 1982.

In contrast with the wetland, many interlocutors and friends in the watershed considered the conventional water treatment plants around the river basin as controversial projects and were generally skeptical about their efficiency. Run by the regional water establishments or by local municipalities, these plants had been the recipients of funding, grants, and donation programs since the end of the Lebanese civil war in the early 1990s but had rarely been in continuous operation.[6] In contrast with the conventional Jib Jennine water treatment plant behind it, the wetland's functioning was not hindered by Lebanon's compounded crises of power shortages, financial collapse, and political instability. Prior to my visit to the LRA research centre, I had not imagined that a wetland could be constructed or conceived of as a system that not only delivers water treatment services but also essentially maintains itself. In Mostafa's descriptions of the Litani's pilot project for water purification, the constructed wetland emerges as precisely that —a replicable, efficient, manageable, coherent, and functional unit that serves a particular purpose.

After I returned to Montreal from fieldwork, I spent some time reading reports that I had gathered and that addressed this pilot project.[7] In the recommendations of experts on how best to move forward, I encountered a familiar insistence on the need to quantify and qualify the wetland's water purification capacity —calculations that are often at the heart of improvement schemes (Li 2007). These exercises in the quantification and abstraction of pollution are indispensable to ascribing it and the water of the river with new and different forms of value, even making possible the selling, buying, and trading of the wetland's cleansing capacities (Lohmann 2011; Robertson 2012). Like carbon markets and credit systems, the constructed wetland could be understood as a "commodity solution" for the Litani's pollution problem — itself a product of the dam, which had morphed into a basin that collects the sewage and agricultural, industrial, and domestic wastewater dumped into the river. As Larry Lohmann (2011, 112) a critic of carbon credits reminds us, "commodity solutions always reinterpret and transform the social and environmental challenges that they confront." Reproducing the very processes that they aim to address, Lohmann contends that the ''internalization of

[6] As I note in the Introduction, The Lebanese civil war began in 1975 and ended in 1990.
[7] For e.g., the "Lebanon Water Project" reports prepared by DAI for USAID (2016-2021) as well as the "Water Sanitation and Conservation" (2021-2023).

environmental externalities'' associated with market environmentalism is better conceived not as a (successful or failed) attempt at ''environmental problem-solving'' but rather as a continuous changing of the subject" (Ibid).

As a pilot project for the treatment of wastewater, the LRA's constructed wetland thus serves as a demonstrative infrastructure, one that shows how 'nature' itself can and must offer measurable benefits. Indeed, in the final report of the "Lebanon Water Project," a water governance scheme launched by USAID in 2015, the constructed wetland is described as a "demonstration area approach" made of "closed systems with comprehensive activities where investments would be targeted and measurable" (USAID and DAI 2021, 7). In the view of the authors of the report, the constructed wetland allows the stakeholders who are involved, such as the LRA or regional water establishments, to "accurately assess improvements to the water service, measure the exact water quantities being billed, and demonstrate to citizens the benefits of investments and encourage payment for service" (Ibid.). Here, the "will to improve" in the watershed can be understood as a "practice of government" bound up with the naming of problems, in this case pollution, that can be rendered amenable to a technical intervention (Li 2007). It is precisely that move of problematizing, diagnosing, and proposing technical solutions that leaves political economic questions unaddressed, enabling the reproduction of social and ecological inequality.[8]

The constructed marsh was also more than just a low-maintenance water filtration technique that required little electricity and could lend itself to future commodification and financialization. Its acoustics and aesthetics composed a pleasant sensorial landscape, underscoring the different kinds of capital and services that 'nature as infrastructure' as well as the constant marketization of environmental frontiers could provide (Carse 2014). Its absorptive faculties transmogrified the Litani's pollution problem into a far-reaching mechanism that produced new material worth, sensory experiences, and aesthetic views of nature. Like the LRA's official discourse on pollution in Beirut, the changing of the subject in the constructed wetland also reflected a concrete shift away from the development ethos of the past century —with its

[8] I am thinking here with Tania Li's definition of political economic questions as "questions about control over the means of production, and the structures of law and force that support systemic inequalities" under capitalism (Li 2007, 11).

promotion of limitless economic growth, expansion, and the immediate extraction of natural resources— towards the sustainability paradigm. In short, the stagnant wetland actualized a politics whose imaginative force prioritized a kind of equilibrium: where a threshold of acceptable pollution and a mode of sufficient rehabilitation might allow capital accumulation to continue unfettered, not just despite ecological destruction but actually because of it.

As Susan Leigh Star reminds us, infrastructures are "built on an installed base" (Leigh Star 1999, 382). In that sense, a constructed wetland reveals at its roots the market forces and supporting technocracies upon which it was built. In commodifying pollution, its design prioritizes economic valuation, even as it is enmeshed with other value systems (Schroter et al. 2014). The wetland also instrumentalizes nature-culture relations in two respects: by endowing nature with positive features that are beneficial within the marketplace and by reconfirming capitalism's extractive relation to human and non-human worlds alike. As a demonstrative infrastructure, the constructed wetland thus rehearses a logic of capitalist progress, linking sustainable initiatives with earlier forms of developmentalist modernity that they are, in a sense, also tasked with improving. What if this homeopathic logic also structured a "sense of absolute because experienced reality" where a problem is best addressed within the very frame that caused it (Williams 2020, 38)?

I am suggesting that the wetland is also a demonstration of a dominant, central, and effective set of practices, meanings, and values. Such governing of socioecological damage, which proposes technical solutions, does more than merely depoliticize pollution. Bringing what is considered ungovernable under sharper distinction, it opens the possibility for another politics to emerge —albeit one that unsettles institutional and expert discourses of sustainability, conservation, and leisure and pleasure surrounding the Litani. In the following section, I show how the agendas for conservation often do not anticipate this politics and how they are unable to contain it. Dealing with the Litani's pollution problem, people thus bring forth, in practice or in discourse, their own critical perspectives on how to contend with what they perceive as pollution and polluting.

Pollution as human waste

A strong-minded man and an active member of one of the country's prominent political parties, Antoine didn't shy away from speaking his mind, even if it meant disagreeing with what most around him said and thought. A *semsar*, real estate broker, who lived and worked in Jounieh —the seaside city north of the capital where many people from his village had moved when the dam was built— Antoine also ran a small fish farm in the West Bekaa, for fun. One early Saturday evening, we were standing on the balcony of his house (and farm) in the village, scrutinizing the lake's horizon and talking about the pollution problem. I was asking Antoine and his friend why they thought the watershed's ecological degradation continued to be so difficult to tackle, despite the countless institutions involved and despite all the funds poured into lifting the pollution off the Litani. "It is endless, with no solution in sight," sighed his friend. Antoine disagreed. When I asked for clarification, he explained that the pollution problem revolved primarily around the dumping of untreated sewage and organic matters, not heavy metals. "Lebanon has practically no industry. The pollution is not that big of a deal, it can be solved like that!" he told me, snapping his fingers swiftly across his face, that of his friend, and mine. "During the summer, when it gets too hot, that's all you smell, fermented shit," he added with a smirk.

As the sun began set over the West Bekaa and the air started to cool down, Antoine and his friend turned to talking about what in their view had brought on the pollution. The major precipitating factor, they contended, was one of the many legacies of the Lebanese civil war. "Things were better, the Litani was not polluted like that," Antoine had even asserted. During the 1990s and following the chaotic, wartime urban sprawl, a sewerage system gradually replaced septic tanks and huge pipes began to drain the wastewater straight from toilets and sinks into rivers and sea. The evening ended with Antoine and his friend discussing the influence of post-war demographic changes, which they said had also exacerbated the Litani's ecological degradation. This was a widely held view, shared by many other people I had spoken to in the watershed. Indeed, many of my interlocutors objected to *kethret al-sekkan bl hawd al ʾaʿla lal nahr*, the density of population upstream, and contended that it was a demographic explosion of

people living in the villages near Baalbek and, more recently, in informal tented settlements and refugee gatherings near Bar Elias and Jib Jennine that contributed directly to the Litani's pollution problem.

Prior to the current economic crisis, people evoked Lebanon's long sixties as its golden age and bewailed the war as a distressing time of great social anomie and violence.[9] *Tenzekir w ma tenʿad*, remembered but never repeated, was another oft-repeated phrase about the war. But that evening on his balcony, Antoine had wistfully brought up the topic of the civil war. In fact, while I was conducting fieldwork, my interlocutors often remembered the civil war as, paradoxically, a gentler time easier on their livelihoods than the wretchedness they were enduring as the country slid deeper into the contemporary crisis. They were nostalgic for the post-war era too. Led by former prime minister Rafic Hariri, this time of drastic structural reforms had violently altered people's public and private lives alike. "With the crisis, we are now witnessing the end of the Hariri era. It was also good while it lasted", Antoine and other friends would also tell me.[10] While I both expected and understood the repositioning of such nostalgic longing, now shifted to encompass the horrible period of the civil strife itself, I still found it odd: there was no atonement after the war, no revisionist history, only general amnesty, and a handful of publicly issued apologies that served those who were, and remained, in power. The Hariri era of 'reconstruction' had also consolidated a political economic and social order that benefited an oligarchic elite at the expense of most of the people living in Lebanon. It was around that time, too, that the sewerage system began to grow, expand, and aggravate the Litani's pollution problem.

Each time Antoine and other interlocutors in the watershed remembered the war or the reconstruction era fondly, I understood their recollections as also articulating an unspeakable bereavement. They were somehow lamenting the losses that they had incurred throughout. Mostly, they grieved finding themselves in a situation now that reminded them of the tragedies they had lived and known when and after the war ended. Their assertions pointed to the ways

[9] Paradoxically, between the 1950s and the 1970s, Lebanon's economic growth was also the source of rapidly intensifying social inequalities divided along sectarian and regional lines.
[10] Hariri era refers to the time, following the end of the civil war, when Rafik Hariri was Prime Minister of Lebanon (1992-1998; 2000-2004). As I describe in the Introduction, much of this time is known as the era of the 'Reconstruction', which included a set of neoliberal political economic reforms aimed at drastically restructuring both state and society.

that the current financial and ecological crisis was likewise violently restructuring society and state. If the war gave the Lebanese state and society an enduring political economic order, it also bequeathed them with new ways of knowing and dealing with human fallibility and wasted lives.

* * *

It wasn't just, as Antoine affirmed, sewage contributing to the Litani's pollution. There are diverse elements and complex social, ecological, and political forces violating the watershed's environmental integrity. The river's ecological degradation is well documented by the LRA, other public bodies, various non-governmental and scientific organizations, and academic researchers who contend that it is due to a combination of factors. These include a population increase from the influx of Syrian refugees since 201; a prolonged dry period and unprecedented drought; excessive and direct discharge of untreated wastewater and sewage; unsustainable agricultural practices that entail the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides; as well as the dumping of solid household and small-industry waste on riverbanks (Darwish et al. 2023). At first, I wondered whether Antoine's individual positionality, as a fish farmer, led him to minimize the role of these industrial and chemical pollutants. I later realized that his comment, which linked pollution to excrements, together with the conversation that ensued on his balcony opened the possibility for me to think about pollution symbolically.

My point here is not so much to deconstruct Antoine's assertion that the Litani's main pollution problem is sewage, as I said, nor to interrogate directly how successive crises and a shift from septic tanks to sewerage explicitly transformed people's understanding of bodies, selves, and others.[11] Rather, I am drawn to the way that pollution, construed in Antoine and many of my interlocutors' comments as a problem of human waste and demographic explosion, contributes to the construction of a certain difference —teased out between those who do not contaminate and others, like refugees, who do. I want to thus suggest that pollution in the watershed might be attended to, in a classical anthropological sense, as a form of meaning-

[11] It has been argued that the Lebanese civil war did transform people's sense of self and their relations with others in particular ways. See for e.g., Traboulsi (2016).

making and as a danger that risks exposing the social and ecological order, premised on maintaining inequalities and privileging certain peoples and places at the expense of others.[12]

More specifically, I want to scrutinize how pollution is abstracted from the watershed in two interrelated instances: when bodily margins and social and economic difference cannot be thought of as separate; and when human waste and fallibility, physical failing or decline, illness, death, or perceived debility, become construed as an outside peril and threat to identity (Douglas 2002; Kristeva 1982).[13] The latter boundary (from without) is constituted precisely by difference —as psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982, 71) put it in her study of abjection, with "the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death." In other words, I am asking whether interlocutors in the watershed, who come to adopt a pollution narrative as related to Syrian refugees, do not also feel their own social and economic precarity and are therefore threatened by the outside, their lives by death. The following sections explore how pollution, understood as human fallibility, is symbolically removed and how its absorption becomes an outlet for new meanings and values to emerge. The anecdotes that I turn to illustrate what happens when not only sewage, but also other leaky things are dealt with as a form of abject dirt. The "history of shit" is also a history of subjectivity where the subject's commitment toward cleanliness and hygiene can be revelatory (Berger 1989; Laporte 2000). These stories thus highlight what it means to abstract pollution by changing the subject. I emphasize here the dual meaning of the phrase, as diversion and as the transformation of subjectivities, people's agentive capacities, and ways of being in the world.

Ingestion

I met Mitri the day I accompanied my friend Ghada (with whom I've been staying in Saghbine) to visit the two almond orchards that her late father had planted some seven decades ago and to pick some *Umm Qulaybani*, green hummus, from an adjacent parcel that she had also

[12] I describe these dominant politics of development in Chapter 1.
[13] I draw on the work of Megan Warin (2009) and Imogen Tyler (2013) to expand my understanding of Kristeva's discussion of the abject and Douglas' (2002) conceptualization of pollution and taboo. Their work sheds light on the way uncleanness operates socially (Warin focusses on eating disorders while Tyler examines social revolt). It also allows me to understand the abject and abjection as relational, political, material, and psychic at once.

inherited from him. Mitri, who recently retired from working in the Gulf, was watering the onions, hummus, and corn he helped Ghada grow in her plot. Mitri, I later learned, was the youngest child of a large family of farmers —ten siblings in total. During the summer, his parents leased a parcel of land by the river from a prominent druze Sheikh from the *Jabal* (the mountain) and would plant cucumbers and tomatoes. During the winter, his mother and father would work in the *dekkeneh* (small convenience store) they owned in the village and that Mitri's wife, Joyce, took over after their passing. The *dekkeneh* was the busiest shop in the village because Syrian refugee families in the West Bekaa could redeem their food assistance e-cards there. A while back, Mitri and Joyce were able to negotiate a contract with the UNHCR and the WFP who ran the program and this had transformed the little *dekkeneh* into a profitable business.[14] At a time when Lebanese families could barely afford to put food on the table and stopped going to the grocer, Syrians used their cards from the *umam* to purchase food from Joyce, who in turn made good money, in "fresh USD, a rare and much coveted currency," as a friend in Saghbine pointed out.[15]

As a ten-year-old, Mitri had worked with his parents and siblings on the land they leased by the Litani and slept there throughout the summer season. "I was only this big when my father would ask me to carry the wooden boxes filled with tomatoes all the way up to the village," he told me, gesturing with his hands. He already knew then that he did not want to be a farmer like his parents and siblings. In his words, he had experienced firsthand what it meant to live in abject poverty:

> I remember how the day after the season was over, the *damman*, the lessor would show up at our house. He'd do the maths and ask my father to pay him an additional 500 liras because his share of the tomatoes and cucumbers we'd sold throughout the summer was not enough to cover the cost of renting the land. One time, I was old enough to understand what was happening, I was so furious that I started screaming and kicking

[14] United Nations Higher Refugee Council and World Food Program.
[15] Umam is short for al-umam al-mutahhida (the United Nations).

and yelling at the lessor –the sheikh– to leave us alone and climb back to the mountain that he came from.

Mitri hailed from a family who did not receive compensation from the Litani but who still lost a substantial portion of their livelihoods when parts of the riverbanks, where they leased land from the sheikh, were drowned under the waters of the dam. His father was barely able to put his children through school. Over the years, he had been able to save just enough money to buy a plot of land in the mountains. Located farther away from the river, more difficult to irrigate, and less fertile, these parcels were less valuable than the lands by the Litani. One of Mitri's older brothers, Mourad, inherited this land from his father and continued to cultivate it. Unlike his sibling, Mitri regarded agricultural work as a kind of unpaid forced labour and a humiliation. As a young teenager, he left the village, worked in Beirut for a while, and with the help of an acquaintance traveled to the Gulf just as the oil boom was beginning. Mitri had a long career in the food and hospitality industry: he worked at a restaurant and a club before managing his own in an Emirati hotel. "Yes, I dealt with tourists but more importantly, I had sheikhs come and visit me and I made sure they were well received, if you know what I mean," he confirmed.

While living in the Gulf, Mitri had purchased another plot of land in his village because "it is important that each person has a place to stand." I'd heard many in the villages pose the same rhetorical question, asserting the importance of ownership as a way to stand your ground and belong: "*ʾeza ma ʿendon ʾard ma fi mahal yuʾafo. Wayn b yuʾafo?*" If they don't own land there's no place to stand (their ground), where do they stand? In Mitri's view, this was the worst dispossession that the Litani caused—not the passing of a certain rural way of life, but rather a severing of ties to the land, which once allowed people to face any situation bravely. Mitri also considered that the Litani project ought to be primarily geared towards tourism and encourage the development of resorts and hotels in the area. "It would give jobs to thousands of people from around here," he asserted. But he also knew that the pollution "hurt the economy" and prevented any hospitality boom from ever happening: "Politicians! they don't want to fix it on purpose so that people in the region continue to suffer and are forced to rely on politicians just to get by."

Rife with abandonment and the loss of land, livelihood, and belonging, Mitri's narrative about his life details a peculiar transition into capitalist modernity, not in the least because it establishes a link between the construction of the dam and the rise of the petro-regimes in the Gulf. Once part of a community whose modes of subsistence relied on farming, Mitri moved to living in the "cities of salt" where the discovery of oil by American companies, combined with complacency of local rulers, gradually transformed the desert into a consumerist society, characterized by great wealth and even greater inequalities and policed by a heavily securitized bureaucracy (Munif 1987). What I find most gripping in his narrative is that it highlights how the painful severing of ties to the land paradoxically granted a handful of people, who migrated to places like the Gulf, higher social and economic status. Now retired, Mitri, like Ghada, cultivated the land he owned recreationally. He had gone back to planting for the first time since he was a young teenager and left the village. When I visited his land, his potatoes were overburdened with nitrogen-based fertilizers — the leafy tops had grown too much and given very little tubers. Next to his potatoes, his brother Mourad had left his own peach trees untouched, and they were bearing the most beautiful fruits.

The next time I visited, as we harvested peaches from his brother's orchard, Mitri told me how a few days earlier he had caught fish in *Fawwar Ain al Bardeh*, an abundant cold-water spring that was drowned under the Litani when the dam was built. Mitri was driving his pick-up truck in the valley when his friend hailed him to stop. It had snowed so much the past winter that the fresh water from the drowned *Fawwar*, the underwater source, was bursting through the river's surface and, with it, thousands of fish swimming against the current to lay their eggs. He stopped his vehicle and followed his friend to where the source used to be. His face lit up while he described how they had proceeded to fish:

> We did it the old way, we plunged our arms into the freezing water and began to fish with our bare hands, with our palms. We would sturdily catch the fish between our two hands and then in a swift movement of the shoulders, arms extended, immediately throw them into the back of the pick-up truck, which was stationed nearby. It wasn't mine though. The lake is very polluted, and they say that the fish are sick and

> contaminated by heavy metals that can cause cancer and all sorts of dangerous ailments. Oh no, we weren't fishing so that we could eat ourselves. We were throwing the fish in the back of the truck of a young Syrian man who lives near Qaraoun. He is the one who sells freshwater fish here and in Beirut. Ask anyone, only Syrians around here eat the polluted fish from the Litani.

This was not the first time that I'd been told that it was only Syrian refugees who ate the polluted fish. Indeed, I had frequently heard this story retold across the different villages in the watershed. Because of the river's pollution, the LRA and the Ministry of Agriculture had prohibited fishing activities in and around the dam and along the Litani's course. But many fishermen continued to go out in their little boats at night. "We don't buy or eat them," Wafa told me, insisting that her husband, who works as a fisherman, only sold his fish to Syrians. Similarly, in 2021, when more than 50 tonnes of dead carp washed up on the Qaraoun shores, many villagers insisted that the fish—apparently infected by a dangerous and highly contagious virus—had then been amassed only to be sold in the *shaabi* Souk Sabra, located in the namesake Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut.[16] When I later reminded Mourad, Mitri's brother, of the dead fish floating on the lake's surface, he said he was convinced that someone had deliberately poisoned the fish overnight by dumping something in the Qaraoun lake.

Mourad, Mitri, and Antoine each reacted differently to the effects of pollution —an index of their respective entwinements with different types of social relations, power structures, and existential anxieties. While Mitri considered that politicians intentionally did nothing to mitigate pollution to maintain their constituents' dependency upon them and thereby their relevance, in Mourad's story someone had intentionally dumped toxins in the river intending to kill all the fish. Both stories structured a narrative plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end that sought to explain the unfortunate events taking place across the watershed and identify, or insinuate, the culprits and causes. These plots —much like conspiracy theories, witchcraft, gossips, mysteries, and rumours, which tend to be treated as unworthy of serious consideration— carried an excess

[16] See for e.g., Suzanne Baaklini, "Hecatomb of carp in Lake Qaraoun: Multiple scenarios, but no clear explanation." *L'Orient Today*. 5 May 2021, 21:15. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1260763/hecatomb-of-carp-in-lake-qaraoun-multiple-scenarios-but-no-clear-explanation.html

of signs and meaning attributed to both the practice of government in the watershed and the factors precipitating the river's loss of ecological integrity (Fassin 2021). If these narratives do not always offer a clear explanation, they involve accusatory or reproachful schemes, enabling "a potential rupture in the usual interpretation of the state of the world" (Fassin 2021, 131).

In the second half of Mitri's story, he suggests that it is only Syrian refugees — marginalized labourers living along the river— who eat the polluted fish. As I said, many in the watershed and even in Beirut upheld these views. What might it mean that such a story circulates so easily? Rather than dismissing or discounting these views, I want to take this story of suspicion seriously, at its word. Following Didier Fassin's (2021) reflections on the work that conspiracy theories do, I am suggesting that these damning tales of cause and effect are always revelatory of something else and something more, of a struggle waged over meaning. In Fassin's words (2021, 136), they require a particular heuristic where "instead of decrying or mocking them, we need to examine them from a dual perspective: for what they are and for what they tell us about our world in general and about specific situations in a given national or local context".

Mitri's anecdote about the polluted fish produces two interrelated categories of meaning. For one thing, it reflects a certain social difference between those who could afford to buy uncontaminated food and those who are food insecure. For another, by treating fish from the Litani as abject dirt, as a threat to bodily integrity, it establishes a food prohibition. This prohibition further distinguishes Lebanese citizens from Syrian refugees. In refusing to eat fish from the Litani, Lebanese residents of the watershed aim to maintain a clean body, protecting it from contamination. This gestures towards the possibility of a cleansing, not only of individual bodies, but also the larger body politics of foreign bodies, contaminated through their ingestion of poisoned food. The food prohibition reinforces, and is structured by, the repulsion felt towards non-citizens and manual labourers, who are defiled by the consumption of abject food that they could afford (Douglas 2002; Kristeva 1982).

That only certain people ate polluted food and not others was more than the mere reflection of a social order that triaged the sacred from the profane, Lebanese from Syrians, citizens from non-citizens, successful entrepreneurs from menial wage earners, and middle-class

from the vulnerable poor. The food prohibition is furthermore a "fantasy of incorporation", which means that it allows citizens to transcend the threat of living in pollution, not merely by avoiding it but also by feeding it to, and infecting, someone else (Kristeva 1982, 39). That non-citizens and the poor ate the polluted fish thus features as a "technology of presence" that produces two types of subjects (Lester 2019). Selves thus become "real in ways that are locally recognized as mattering" while others are sacrificed (Lester 2019, 65). Its mouth filled with the abject, the other cannot speak (Kristeva 1982).

Excretion

It was Friday evening and many villagers had returned from Beirut to spend the weekend in their family homes. I was happy to run into Hassib in the village square, and we agreed to have dinner and catch up. An engineer, whom I only saw occasionally during his days off work, Hassib was involved in several consultancy projects with international NGOs that were concerned with the Litani's pollution problem. We walked together towards the only *snack* (the equivalent of a deli) in the area, a small family-run shop that served grilled meat and chicken sandwiches, fried potatoes, and a local version of coleslaw. Famished and with little time to spare, Hassib was quick to order food for the both of us. When our sandwiches were ready, we picked up two sodas from the refrigerator, and sat down at a small plastic table that overlooked the tiny square. I do not recall how or why we started talking about pollution or the region's water treatment plants, but I remember *when* — I was mid-bite, a pickle sliding, stealthily, out of my chicken *taouk* sandwich, with a little of the *toum* dressing dripping down my chin.

Enumerating the different public and private institutions that had been conscripted to deal with the Litani, Hassib talked at length about how difficult it was to coordinate between all the different stakeholders involved in water governance in the watershed—the Council for Development and Reconstruction, the Litani River Authority, the Ministries of Water, Environment, Public Works, and Agriculture, the regional Water Establishments, international NGOs, funding agencies, municipalities, local NGOs, and private initiatives. The list was seemingly endless. There were technical difficulties too, and Hassib went on to reiterate the distinction

engineers often made between their practice as experts, working with civil society, and the work of politicians. I recognized in his speech the familiar trope of technopolitics —the rationality of development and discourses of expertise stabilizing unruly practices like water's ungovernability, whilst constantly re-negotiating the gaps and tensions between policy design and its implementation (Mitchell 2002; Mosse 2006).

At one point, the conversation shifted, and I was startled by Hassib's reflections:

> But then it's not just technical, dealing with the pollution. Do you know what many of the local engineers and the people around here say? That it's the Syrians [refugees] who are polluting the Litani. When the treatment plant in Jib Jennine was still working, they say that the quantity of O2 [oxygen] needed to treat the sewage from the Syrian refugee camps was five, sometimes six times higher than what was needed to treat the wastewater coming in from Lebanese villages.

"What do you mean?" I retorted. Did it have to do with the fact that refugee camps were only equipped with dry toilets and no running water, which increased the concentration of organic matters in a given volume of water? Hassib's reply was equally unsettling, "No, no, it's not that. The engineers concur that it's not just because of the dry toilets." His assertions reminded me of our first conversation, months before. We had arrived at a sort of tacit understanding that a budding friendship—ours—was already in the making. We had a lot in common: Hassib loved Montreal and at some point, wanted to make it his home. He had also lived in Greece for a while, where he learned winemaking and the cultivation of olive groves and vines. But that night, I was saddened by the differences that set us apart. I asked again, more assertively, even if I was whispering. "Hassib, please tell me what you mean? That the *shit* of Lebanese people is different from that of Syrians?" Although he hedged himself from it, his response was matter-of-fact: "Look I don't know, no, yes, maybe? I am not making that up. That's just what I heard; this is how people talk. They say it's what Syrians eat and how they digest food that makes it different, their digestive system, too, maybe is different."

What did it mean to suggest that Syrian refugees not only ate the pollution but also excreted it as well? Like Mitri's story about the refugees who ate bad fish, Hassib's narrative connects the pollution of the Litani with the defilement of leaky and foreign bodies. In his words, Syrian bodies, figuring as a source of impurity at the level of matter and symbol, are not only fed pollution but excrete it through a particularly polluting kind of sewage too. This sewage, in turn, overwhelms a leaky, crumbling, and neglected infrastructure. I note that both Hassib and Mitri authorize their narratives through a claim to expertise, resorting to official reports and scientific statements to corroborate the suspicion. In Mitri's story, the LRA confirmed the toxicity found in the freshwater fish when it prohibited fishing from the lake. In Hassib's account, engineers measured the quantities of oxygen needed to de-pollute the wastewater pouring out of Syrian refugee camps. Attributing a scientific materialism to their claims helps rationalize other understandings of uncleanliness and dirt —what Mary Douglas (2002, 30), commenting on the inclination to explain religious rituals by providing a hygienic justification, calls "secular defilement". It also reminds us that producing abject objects —the transgressive pollution in its myriad forms—requires certain authorizing processes. How the abject is experienced and dealt with is thus inseparable from power, in as much as it serves to reconfirm sovereignty and claims to control (Arya 2014, Tyler 2013).

Both Mitri and Hassib's accounts appear as an expression of a symbolic system of cleanliness and contamination, where "pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (Douglas 2002, 37). What I am trying to argue here is that the stories about the bodies of Syrian refugees and defilement illustrate another way of understanding pollution in the watershed — as a violation of an ordered set of rules and relations. The distinction that is made between Lebanese and Syrian communities is thus an abstraction of pollution in two ways, as the symbolic removal of the pollution and as the production of meaning that continues to consider certain peoples and places as expendable.

As a public matter, pollution is not merely untreated sewage or toxins dumped into the Litani, but also "uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in" (Douglas 2002, 38). Hassib, Mitri, and Antoine's accounts reveal many of these uncomfortable facts and the politics that

undergirds them. I am thinking here of the river's ecological degradation, the Litani's pronounced death, but also of wider perceived dangers and other felt threats polluting the Lebanese political body. The latter includes people's own livelihoods at a time of crisis, and how social difference is construed and instrumentalized. Reflective of particular "structures of assumptions" (Douglas 2002, 37), how people react to pollution offers insights into how the broader social system sanctions behaviors, discrimination, and inequalities. As Mary Douglas observes, "processes of ingestion portray political absorption. Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolise an ideal theocracy" (2002, 4). In this context, politics, how the most vulnerable live and the ways by which they die, emerges as a site where the abject is confronted and experienced. As this distinction follows the order of citizenship, it also serves to reassert a belonging to a nation (Lebanon), which has failed on its promise to offer its citizens a shelter. The ordering of dirt, bodies, and belonging produces a particular citizen subject, who does not pollute and is not profane. The symbolic work that pollution performs establishes the boundaries of social and political belonging, whilst also serving to legitimate the exclusion of non-citizens, the poor, and the refugees.

The stories about Syrian bodies, ingesting and excreting pollution also because they are fed it, are unsettling. In both Mitri and Hassib's accounts, the "uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in" include the construction of an abject otherness and the denial of a "relatedness" that suffuses both social life and embodied experience (Warin 2009). As if to say that since we do not eat the same things, we are then different. The consumption or prohibition of certain foods and the referencing of metabolic functions are indispensable to the mode of governing the abject: they are also ways for people "of constituting and traversing, in carefully controlled ways, the boundaries between themselves and others" (Lester 2019, 23; Warin 2009). Both Megan Warin and Rebecca Lester's work on food, anorexia and abject bodily relations is generative here to make sense of the way that the polluted fish and sewage contribute to these modes of identification and presence. As Warin and Lester observe, food prohibitions and excretions work to prevent a contamination that has the potential of transforming a body into its unwanted other. In turn, the regulation of boundaries between selves and others effectively excludes what

is considered abject: now the river's pollution and perhaps later the foreign bodies who have become polluted and are, too, polluting.

When Hassib told me about the oxygen in the water treatment plant, I remember thinking that his story seemed to reflect a broader collective inability to cope, exclude, and do away with not just pollution but a more general disrepair permeating all aspects of life in Lebanon at the time. This impasse, coupled with the necessity of dealing with the abject, seemed to demand an even greater act of exclusion, which George Bataille sees as indispensable for "the foundations of collective existence" (Kristeva 1982, 56). In this instance, abjection is both material—the flow of human feces, the river's pollution, the country's broader ecological degradation—and existential, arising from the felt humiliations of social inequality and environmental ruination. When Syrian refugees become the excluded Other, they assume a multiplicity of positions that are social, economic, political, and psychic all at once. The existential loss is somehow averted because transferred, and the "foundations of collective existence" are reconfirmed to delineate a Lebanese community living an un-polluted and un-polluting life. Paradoxically, the relations to the abject, pollution, and uncleanliness are never completely severed (Arya 2014). I am thinking here of the way Mitri and his friend still reached for the fish in the cold and effervescent blue water. I find myself imagining how it must have felt like —sensations of delight as the arms plunged in the splattering fresh source? If Mitri and his friend stopped themselves short of eating the fish, they couldn't help touching it.

Listening to Hassib talk about excrements while we were eating on the small terrace of Ammo Saad's snack evoked in me all kinds of visceral reactions —from the smell of decomposition and slow decay to the guttural dismay expressed at the vulnerabilities of the human body and its functions (Berger 1989). The turn our conversation took revealed two orders of knowledge embedded in both Hassib and Mitri's words: the first was analytical and learned, focused on drawing epistemic links between the river's pollution and its contamination potential, while the other was experienced and lived, underscoring bodily functions and perception (Allan 2019). The more I focused on my own embodied reaction, the more I thought about the two processes of ingestion and excretion of pollution as one familiar metabolic ritual, and a daily routine, through which human bodies emptied their own content. The desire to control and

loathe an Other, by feeding it contaminated food for example, shields a desire to control and loathe oneself and one's polluted environments, taking at its heart the body's own potential to communicate experience (Tyler 2013).

Establishing boundaries between selves, others, and the world serves to address the threatening leakiness and safeguard subjectivities (Kristeva 1982). Without these boundaries, the distinction between order and disorder, self and other, and life and death collapses (Arya 2014). Not unlike the functioning of the constructed wetland that absorbs the pollution and spits out a different kind of water, I saw in the compulsive repetition of ingestion and excretion of pollution a kind of mimesis (Taussig 1993). Such a metabolic process emerges as an ideal form that allows the "hollowing out of anguish in the face of nothing" (Kristeva 1982, 43). At stake are existential questions about life and the subjective transformations needed to numb the pain that comes with what it means to be human and confront mortality. The images of foreign bodies who eat and secrete pollution did more than merely delineate two distinct epistemic communities in the watershed while absolving one at the expense of the other. They performed a regulatory work that expressed the "non-narrativizable" and "the traumatic" (Butler 2011, 140). In producing an even greater distinction between bodies that were vulnerable, mortal and that produced polluting sewage on one hand, and bodies that were not on the other, these images stand as a reminder of the kinds of violent and dangerous abstractions needed for maintaining punctured selves in a wounded world that was being destroyed. The subjective death at the heart of an emancipatory politics of rupture or revolt is thus perpetually deferred. This is where the uncomfortable politics of bereavement, which I have been trying to develop throughout the dissertation, is also located.

Of milk and cows

During fieldwork, I met several Syrian families, though was only able to connect with one —Mohammad, Suad, and their twelve children—who lived in one of the land parcels that Ghada inherited from her family. A construction worker, Mohammad also cultivated the land while Suad sometimes worked for Ghada as an occasional cook and cleaner. While I enquired about

the children, their progress at school, their health, and their plans for the future, a more enduring relationship with this family was precluded by the fact that I was renting a room in Ghada's house and spending most of my time with Lebanese villagers. In hindsight, I realize that it would have also required a *dépassement* of sorts, one occasionally afforded through embodied experience, and that would have allowed me to tread over the social and cultural context of the community I come from—the Lebanese community— to be welcomed into theirs. In the meantime, I continued to listen to my interlocutors' stories, which sought to draw distinctions between citizens and refugees.

On one occasion, Zeina, who ran one of the village creameries with the help of her daughter and granddaughter, confided that she had the hardest time hiring workers, *ʿamilat* — women workers whose naked hairless arms would get lost in the milk as they transformed it to curds and cheeses:[17]

> Lebanese women don't like it when their arms smell like sour milk, so I must hire Syrian women now. I don't have a choice. Don't Lebanese women know that they can just shower, and their bodies will be cleansed, and the smell will go away? They can go to bed clean and wake up in the morning and still be clean and smell nice. That's what we all did, that's what we do.

Zeina's comment on an ideal type of femininity and sexuality reminded me once more of the way relations between communities, labour, and love were negotiated through bodily experience. It offered a glimpse into a world of women split between the Syrian workers —who, no doubt, were paid less to labour more— and the Lebanese women who refused to defile their bodies with the debasing smell of work. Zeina described not only the latter's fear of smelling the sour milk on their bodies but also of having their husbands smell it in the marital bed. I wondered if Lebanese women's fear of contamination from the milk is not unlike the fear of contamination from the polluted fish. Contained in both sensory restrictions is the impulse to maintain a clean

[17] ʿ*amilat* also means factory girls, an enduring social category, in contradistinction with the peasantry, which emerges in the Lebanese countryside with the rise of sericulture during the 18th and the 19th century.

body while protecting it against perceived threats. But there also seems to be a strict gendered difference. Though both perspectives were far from viewing labour as a life-sustaining endeavor, Mitri embraced the sensorial immersion that fishing required, while Zeina's acquaintances had to reject the smell, taste, and touch that accompanied the cheesemaking.

Later that day, while noting down this encounter in my fieldnotes, I also wondered whether these women weren't repulsed by the smell of sweat and labour of their husbands. I also noted how attentive I had personally been to the sharp milk odour I smelled the first time I entered Zeina's dairy farm. Sensory acuity — mine was different from Zeina's— informs the way we make sense of the world and underscores the many ways that the perceptual is also political, mediated through the "socio-historical horizon, positionalities, and attachments" that produce embodied experience (Al-Saji 2014, 147).

For some reason, Zeina's brief commentary that linked the sense of smell to haptic experiences and the desire to touch reminded me of Michael Ondaatje's poem *The cinnamon peeler's wife*. The story of the women who did not want their skin soiled with the sour smell of milk seemed to depict a reversal of roles —gendered, aesthetic, and sensory—than those threaded through the poem. Unlike Zeina's protagonists, the cinnamon peeler's wife wants her lover-fiancé-husband to smell her. Claiming his smell as constitutive of her own, she makes a demand: "I am the cinnamon peeler's wife, smell me." The fragrance comes from within and without, from the work her lover performs with his hands, peeling the bark of the cinnamon tree, and from the labour of love, caressing her body. Both lovers dwell together in a way that prompts a radical breakdown of the boundaries between selves, where olfactory experience opens the possibility of the remaking of power relations.

By contrast, Zeina's Lebanese dairymaids do not want their husbands to smell the tart perfume of milk on them, which bears a family resemblance to the smell of sweat, an index of defilement. Perhaps it is that they do not wish to engage in any kind of dwelling —an exchange of bodily fluids— that will impart a trace on their lovers. They more closely resembled the other female characters in the poem, the grasscutter's wife, the lime burner's daughter, who

left with no trace

as if not spoken to in an act of love

as if wounded without the pleasure of scar.

In the course of several conversations I had at Zeina's dairy farm, Syrian women emerged as a voracious counterpoint to the demure restraint of Lebanese village women — what Fatima Mernissi calls the omnisexual woman, or woman-as-body, whose psychological, economic, and engendering features are erased (Mernissi 2011). Faten, Zeina's daughter, who unlike her mother often complained that there were too many refugees in the watershed, spoke about the many other distinctions separating Syrian and Lebanese women:

> If I have children to care for, I will not even look at my husband. Whereas for her [the Syrian woman] if she has children, the minute her husband returns home from work, she will kick her children out of the house, even the little ones, the smallest ones, and she will dress up for him, prepare the best meal, and even dance for her husband before spending several hours alone together with him.

Faten's objection to the behaviours she had been describing delineated a sexual difference between Lebanese and Syrian women. That she considered these behaviors as abject spoke to a concern with regards to what a feminine body might look like or do, as well as to the meanings of womanhood and motherhood. Underlying Faten's portrait of Syrian couples is an image of the ideal Lebanese woman and how she should behave — as a woman who privileges work over leisure, obligation over pleasure, and politics over the erotic. Her account assumes and reflects a stark division between sex and power, where sexual activity is conceived of as regulatory realm that must conform to social and economic division, and where varying types of inequalities are maintained (Butler 2011; Mernissi 2011).[18] In other words, Faten's assertions highlight how dominant understandings of womanhood and motherhood regulate this sexual difference.

I was a bit surprised by what Faten recounted to me that day and it did not occur to me to ask questions. In fact, throughout fieldwork, I realized that I would be so absorbed by what my

[18] I am thinking here along the lines of Judith Butler's (2011) argument that sex is a normative category. Shaped by sociohistorical and cultural forces, the category of sex values certain bodies while producing others as abject. It reveals how power operates, not as an external imposition, but rather as an internal constraint that fashions and molds subjectivities from within.

interlocutors would tell me that the drive to satisfy my own intellectual curiosity rarely, if ever, manifested itself. In hindsight, I understand my attentive effort at listening without questioning not as self-censorship but as a concerted attempt at productive hesitation (Al-Saji 2014) and as a "personally and politically motivated ethnographic timidity" (Bourgois 2003, 13). In this instance, perhaps I should have asked Faten what it meant to say that a woman had "duties," and that these obligations were to her children, more than to her husband? However, I did not want any of my questions to be construed as a moral objection to my interlocutors' comments (they were not); or as indicative of my own political predispositions.

While it felt like I had to either betray my interlocutors' trust or compromise my own political commitments, I now realize that my position is revelatory of the broader fraught ethical, political, and analytical tensions that animate the ethnographic research process and its relational epistemologies (Bourgois 2003; Mosse 2006). After I returned to Montreal, the seeming separation of desk and field, writing and research, analysis and the building of ethnographic relations in the field allowed me to reclaim the space of possibility. Paradoxically, I am also aware that the neat distinction drawn between these domains is also a result of stabilizing discourses that seek to reassert the desk's separateness from the field. In truth, I find ethnography and life to be more messily intertwined. To borrow Philip Bourgois's words (2003, 13), such is the "contradictory collaborative nature of my research strategy."

Reflecting further on my conversation with Faten, I now wish I could have asked her what womanhood and motherhood meant to her, if she considered that Syrian women sought to assert themselves as maternal beings or as subjects who love, and whether she viewed these positions as incommensurable or different. Or did she condemn Syrian women's desire to win their husband's love by declaring themselves submissive to their husband's own desires? I wondered too about Syrian women's economic dependence, broader reliance on extended family networks, and the various childbearing duties they performed. In all cases, Faten's account reminded me of Mitri's and Hassib's. Her depictions of Syrian women's behaviors and the lack of control over sexual desire rehearsed the logic of the discourse of leaky and polluting bodies. Much like food, the olfactory and the haptic are complex conceptual systems that are both learned and experienced. The unpleasant smell of sour milk, the stench of the Litani as

sewage, or the deep and biting fragrance of the Sri Lankan cinnamon are both mediated by, and structure, different lifeworlds. In turn, the stories of my interlocutors underscore the role that bodily fluids and the functions of absorption, excretion, and decay play, too, in the shaping of social relations.

* * *

It wasn't just the milk's smell that villagers no longer tolerated. Zeina was also among the first to bring up the story of the disappearing cows —a story I assembled from fragments heard here and there. No one seemed to remember the full story, or perhaps they just did not want to narrate it from beginning to end. It spoke to the way people in the village gradually grew distanced from their animals until one day they disappeared, and they forgot them altogether. Before the cows in the valley disappeared, they lived with their owners in the *baykeh*, a section of the family home dedicated to livestock. When the civil war ended, there were more cows to feed, less green meadows for them to graze on, greater interest in maximizing milk yields, and new feedstuff. Cows were no longer permitted to live among humans because the fodder they were fed made them smell differently. "Before the war, when they still grazed, they smelled nicer," Zeina explained, as I bought breakfast from her creamery one morning:

> *We* did not change, the cows did. The fodder made their smell unbearable. The stench meant that they could no longer linger around humans. Cows nowadays are expected to produce at least some 10kg of milk daily, back then they would only give us 3 to 5 kg maximum. That's why fodder is important!

When I asked whether they fed the cows something special while they were still on pasture, Zeina began to deplore how people stopped caring for their animals altogether. No one spent time with their cows anymore. "*Ma baʾa hada yekhdom baʾrato*", she lamented, "No one served their cows anymore." I have long loved this word used to describe the kind of dedication needed to tend to one's animals and also heard it used to refer to the way people cared for their orchards "*b yekhdom shajrato*, "he serves his trees.*"* That people no longer used the word 'to

serve' when talking about animals, trees, and crops was indicative of the way language intersected with power to ascertain the bodies that mattered.

Over the weeks that followed, my friends Amalia and Ghada volunteered additional details about the cows that left the village. After the war ended, the cows left their owners' homes. They were rounded up in the village square and, one by one, were made to walk down to the valley where, on occasions, villagers continued to feed them. Soon after, a prominent businessman and local politician from the village received seed money from two or maybe three international development agencies to create a cow cooperative. With the money, he built a barn in the valley, close to the riverbanks, and bought some expensive, state-of-the-art equipment to milk the cows. He then approached all the cow owning families to pitch in and join the co-op. He convinced them that it would be more profitable for everyone to pool resources, that no duty would be required of anyone (he would hire workers), and that each family would receive a share proportional to their financial contribution — not in kind, but cash money from the sale of the cows' milk. Later, when I asked my friends Elias and Hassib about how the story ended, both concurred that it came to an abrupt and rather mysterious end. Almost every family from the village paid their contribution and there was even an official inauguration of the barn and its equipment. But as months passed and the families received nothing, they finally went down to the valley one afternoon only to find that the cows had vanished. When I went down to the valley to see the famed barn for myself, it was an eerie sight. Peeking through its narrow windows, I saw dusty and brand-new milking equipment but no cows. "I don't understand," I later told Amalia, "where did the cows go?" She just shrugged her shoulders with an air of resignation as if to say that she didn't know and that it would be too difficult to find out, before turning to talk about the plans she'd made for her daughter's imminent visit.

* * *

When I returned to the village a year later, I found that Mitri, with the help of Mohammad, had convinced Ghada to cut her father's almond trees and clear the orchard to make way for a more efficient type of agriculture. A few hours into my visit to Saghbine, as the

sun rose higher in the sky and the weather grew hotter and drier, I caught a whiff of the waters' odours. The smell of sewage grew stronger the deeper I ventured into the valley and the closer I got to the riverbanks. Before I drove back to Beirut, I dropped by another creamery, the one the *mukhtar* ran, to buy *shanklish* (fermented cheese), and *labneh meʿzeh* (strained goat yogurt). The smell of milk, which filled my nostrils, lingered, reminding me once more of the way olfactory perception maps the reality of lived experience differently from the visual or the auditive, establishing another kind of sensory relation to place.

Talking about whiffing and sniffing and smell, I now gather that the constructed wetland presented me with a kind of modern pollution theory, structured around absorption (or perhaps metabolism?) that was also a theory of assimilation. By absorption, I do not only mean being absorbed by something to the point of being completely taken in.[19] The wetland's language of operation revealed the logics of elimination, which sought to remove pollutants from the watershed.[20] It also evoked, in minor register, the language of carbon offsetting, filtering, removal, capture, and sequestration. Centered on the dynamics of absorption, where the grass reeds absorbed organic elements and heavy metals and transformed them into different compounds, it offered a vocabulary for a different kind of cleaning–-one imagined in more political terms. Echoing the discourse of greenwashing, absorption, as a local theory for pollution, constitutes a world in which it is possible to imagine how unwanted elements in a given landscape or society could be managed —from refugees, racialized migrants, and the disenfranchised poor, to other leaky subjects, likewise marginalized by dominant power structures and ideologies.

Absorption indexes both a "commodity solution" — a venue for further capital accumulation that instrumentalizes its own constraints— as well as a kind of symbolization that enables the depoliticization, re-politicization, and transfer of the costs of social and ecological devastation onto bodies that become cast as foreign. Abstracting pollution in the watershed means that the metabolic rift can also be woven through the body. In other words, the abject conditions resulting from a politics of development, which treated certain people and places as

[19] The anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2020) theorizes absorption in relation to religious experience. Luhrmann expands our understanding of 'absorption' to highlight how certain forms of presence become real through a repeated practice of inner sensory experiences or what she refers to as sense cultivation.
[20] I am grateful to Darin Barney for pointing this out.

expendable, can also be located in the body and absorbed by it too. Both scales, ecological and social, prompt a constant deferral of death. If the river can be saved, the constant changing of the subject means that subjective death can also be avoided. In their discussion of plastic pollution and the logics of scientific inquiry, Max Liboiron (2021) contends that environmentalism enables the reproduction of colonialism. They also note that pollution is always defined in relation to a threshold that is calculated and beyond which the presence of a component amounts to causing certain harm. Liboiron's assertion helps me to imagine that there must be a threshold beyond which these absorptive processes are no longer tenable, can no longer be maintained. New bodies will bear the brunt of toxicity when the absorptive limit is saturated (Jue and Ruiz 2021). At what point will another rift occur and what forms of death will it prefigure next?

Conclusion

When I met Sami, Mira's husband, he had already long retired from his job with the Litani River Authority (LRA). One of the first things he told me when I asked him about his work was that he'd spent more than four decades serving the Litani. "Not only that," he added, "but my father was also a technician who worked with the Americans of *al-nuʾta al-rabiʿah* – Point Four," the United States' technical assistance program, initiated in the wake of the Second World War. I was sitting in their living room holding three large and fragrant bunches of *baʾdunis baladi*, homegrown parsley that Mira had picked for me from her garden. Mira and Sami were talking over each other, and so was their son. Wafic, who is my age, perhaps a bit older, was complaining about the hardships of agricultural labour, and describing how expensive it had become to purchase water for irrigation after the LRA decided to shut down the Litani's Canal 900 a few years ago. Mira was remembering her grandmother who was born in Aley sometime in the early 1920s, while Sami was recounting his father's stories about Astaldi, one of the international engineering companies that built the dam during the 1960s. At one point, the cacophony gave way to silence as Sami recalled the exact day that Point Four experts first came to the West Bekaa:

> I remember that day well because my father was there with them, and I was just a boy. *Lamma ʾejit al-nuʾta al-rabiʿah*, when Point Four came, they picked up silkworms from the mulberry trees and took them to Beirut. There, they left them in their labs to observe how fast they were going to grow. Then when the silkworms produced cocoons, Point Four returned to the West Bekaa and found that none of the mulberry trees there had cocoons. They decided to move on and, with the help of my father and others from the villages around here, began to scout for a location to build the dam.

When I asked Sami what it meant for him that Point Four had shown little interest in the silkworms and their cocoons, he told me they must have been looking for a way forward, a project to develop, and so chose to build the dam instead. After the Litani project was finished, it

became clear to him that "'*akassu al-aya,*" they had read the verse backwards, adding that "they neglected production while supporting only consumerism." What I took away from our conversation was that instead of developing Lebanon and empowering its people to better produce their lives, "they" introduced a way of life that drained these communities. It was unclear who was meant by "they" — I took it to mean the "trustees," the local and international experts, technocrats, politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, and financiers in positions of power entrusted with the country's affairs and with the task of bettering people's conditions (Li 2007). Most striking in Sami's story, however, were the links it established between the passing of sericulture, the implementation of the Litani infrastructural project, and the present.[1] What if the tableau that he paints, of Point Four experts checking out mulberry trees, can also be understood as recalling something else, only disguised?

Seamlessly blending different moments of sociohistorical ruptures and bereavement, his reminiscence, which is as collective as it is personal, seemed to register the affective atmosphere of Lebanon's contemporary conjuncture. His story evoked what Sigmund Freud calls a screen memory — a recollection that represents not necessarily itself, but the affects, impressions, and feelings associated with it; not "its own content" but "the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed" (Freud 1989, 126). I was astounded that Sami had screened that image, of silk and mulberry trees, from his memory. I was so struck by his intriguing story that I immediately transcribed it in my notebook when he narrated it, not because I worried about producing a verbatim record of what he had said, but rather to capture, on the page, my own felt response to it. I understood his story not merely for its manifest content but also for the wealth of meaning it concealed. Indeed, Sami was borrowing from the region's collective past, describing one of its most painful, most tumultuous sociohistorical moments, to portray Lebanon's contemporary situation.

Sami's account associated the downfall of sericulture together with the rise of the Litani dam infrastructure — two conjunctures of broad social, political economic, and ecological forces, which had integrated, each in its own different way, this part of rural Lebanon into a global,

[1] For more on sericulture and its social, political, economic, and cultural consequences in what would later become Greater Lebanon, see Firro (1990), Khater (2001), Pitts (2020), and Traboulsi (2012).

western-led, capitalist economy. In the months that followed that evening at Sami and Mira's place, I was able to piece together chronology and meaning: the mulberry trees had momentarily made way for the apple trees, which were then drowned by the dam. At first glance, Sami's story appeared to be a commentary on output and efficiency in agricultural production. It seemed to suggest that when Point Four technicians realized that the silkworms morphed faster into cocoons in the warmth of their Beirut laboratories, they understood that there would be no point in enhancing silkworm production in the West Bekaa. But Sami's story also pointed up the changes in the West Bekaa's dominant modes of production —from the collapse of sericulture, once a locus for early capitalist expansion and attrition, to the rise of the infrastructural development in the 1950s and the 1960s. [2]

Both conjunctures led to the emergence and subsequent ruin of new social groups counterpoising workers and middle classes to peasants. Political forces and environmental change both prompted massive waves of migration away from rural areas to Beirut, and from there to Australia or the Americas. In *fin-de-siècle* Lebanon, the rise and subsequent fall of sericulture, having radically transformed the countryside, was a precipitating factor of the terrifying social crises that followed, up until the Great War. As I have shown in the dissertation's different chapters, the implementation of the Litani dam likewise crystallized a politics of capitalist development that enabled the reproduction of compounded forms of social inequalities in the watershed. Converting farmers into power plant workers or migrants, it was associated with the passing of a certain rural way of life and the emptying of the countryside. This state developmentalism was further shattered when the Lebanese civil war began.

At the turn of the 20th century, the monoculture of silk had already put the ecologies of Mount Lebanon as well as parts of the South and the Bekaa at the service of European, primarily French, capital and had transformed Beirut into a booming port city. Sericulture, which also changed young village girls and women into workers, developed at the expense of other activities that had been vital to rural livelihoods, notably the cultivation of staple grain cereals. More than a third of the residents of Mount Lebanon and various parts of the Bekaa who suddenly found themselves unemployed chose to immigrate, including hundreds of thousands of

[2] The sericulture production in Mount Lebanon and parts of the Bekaa collapsed in the 1930s, never to recover (Traboulsi 2012).

men who went peddling in North and Latin American cities (Khater 1996; Traboulsi 2012). During the Great War, a compounded blockade and the locusts' invasion of Lebanon that decimated remaining food crops meant that those who stayed struggled to find food. In collective living memory, the collapse of sericulture has become inseparable from the Great Famine (1914-1918), massive migration, the experience of abject poverty and sickness, the passing of the Ottoman Empire, and the beginning of the mandate of French occupation. Sami's thought-image of the cocoons that didn't form on the mulberry trees in the West Bekaa condensed a series of sociohistorical changes of great magnitude that remain difficult to put into words, while also presaging the end of a way of life. His point perhaps was not so much to remember how hard life had been, but rather to communicate the heaviness that pervades the present and the angst with which people anticipate what is to come.

* * *

Attending to stories like Sami's, I have attempted, throughout this dissertation's different chapters, to sketch what I have been calling a politics of bereavement —the set of everyday life discourses and practices with which people seek to mitigate further material and psychic loss. I did this by theorizing with, or rather alongside, the discourses of my interlocutors in the Litani watershed. Elevating my interlocutors' phrases to the level of concepts, I have aimed not for representational redress but to foreground the need for another kind of epistemic, political, and ethical response. As I show in Chapter 1, this realization first dawned on me when I understood that I picked up my interlocutors' habit of using the word 'Litani' indiscriminately to refer to the river, the dam, and the bureaucratic apparatus that managed and controlled it. Building on Kregg Hetherington's (2020) analysis of the polysemy of soy monocrops in Paraguay opened the possibility for me to consider the Litani as a 'character of the Anthropocene.' Contemplating its indexical excess, I have thus argued that the Litani (as nature, infrastructure, and state) not only condensed Lebanon's unequal politics of development, but also underscored how capitalist modernity and its projects could transform history into nature. Warranting closer ethnographic

attention, this latter claim is helpful to attend to the social and ecological challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

Similarly, Bassam, the LRA engineer, gave me much to reflect on when he described his family and his village's own *tarabot maslahi* with the Litani — the symbiotic forms of living together with the river that could, at times, be harmful too. In turn, *tarabot maslahi* allowed me to reconceptualize certain ways of contending with power in the watershed. In Chapter 2, I have thus shown how the familiar charges of corruption, nepotism, or clientelism for example do not really hold when power plant workers and technicians like Bou Falah or Roger deploy personal connections, family and village ties, and connections within their respective political parties to access healthcare and jobs. Highlighting how certain material and discursive practices depart from institutional predispositions and norms, these narratives of corruption posit an apparent dissonance between the ethical and the political economic. In challenging more widespread understandings of the way marginalized residents of the West Bekaa confront the "general degradation of existence," my goal has been to politicize the everyday ethics of care they have forged from their own social locations (Moumtaz 2021; Polanyi 2001, 139). I have also endeavored to point at the limits of an anti-corruption politics that continues to be aggressively promoted in Lebanon.[3] As a structure that is both contingent and fixed, *tarabot maslahi* is a local theory that exemplifies the tangled workings of power. It is precisely its untranslatability that carries its contested meaning, as a force that is continually remaking the relation between wellbeing and harm, inside and outside, and sacrifice and loss.

Approaching the history of the Litani contrapuntally, at its outset and in contemporary Lebanon, has allowed me to examine how people remember the past and how they devise new ways to contend with human fallibility in the face of ecological degradation and social duress. In Chapter 3, I described how Lebanon's fraught electrification undergirds a particular repertoire of political and ethical claims that interlocutors in the West Bekaa articulate in order to access scarce and inadequate public services. Their claims to electricity from the Litani hydropower plants illustrates how the politics of bereavement works in practice. Recasting dispossession as a form of gift or sacrifice, it is a politics that makes it possible for farmers to contend not only with

[3] I am inspired here by Tania Li's (2014) approach to politics in her conjunctural ethnography of the Lauje Highlands.

the loss of land that the construction of the dam required, but also the loss of a way of life. In Chapter 4, I suggested that the shift from developmentalism to conservation, which continues to treat particular people and places as expendable, structures a local theory for dealing with pollution. For one, I described how the LRA's constructed wetland enlists 'nature as infrastructure' to absorb the sewage and heavy metals contaminating the river (Carse 2014; Scaramelli 2021). If the wetland system presents as a low-maintenance filtration technique, it also hints at the ways in which the Litani's water could lend itself to future commoditization and financialization. For another, I showed how Lebanese citizens, who blame Syrian refugees for the river's raw sewage pollution, imagine them as eating the pollution (in the form of contaminated fish) and as discharging it in the river in return. This diptych theory, which I term 'absorption' after the processes it describes, is helpful to understand how unwanted elements in a given landscape or society could be managed —from humans' understanding of their own fallibility to other leaky subjects.

I have sought to remain faithful to the stories people have entrusted me with. I have also sought to make my own commitments and interventions transparent —whether in my thinking about the Litani as a structuring force that bears on people's relations to each other, their environments, and their sense of self, or when turning Bassam's delicate expression of *tarabot maslahi* into a conceptual framework through which to make sense of how people experience and exercise power. In attending to how economic crisis appear to be reconfiguring relations between people and their material and social worlds in the Litani watershed —manifested in Abou Elias's recasting of land dispossession as sacrifice, or the way Syrian refugees are blamed for polluting the river— it becomes clear that duress and the threat of obliteration force people to calculate certain moral and material equivalences.

I find that I am still pondering the form and significance of these hierarchical exchanges, which connect economic behavior with moral obligations. What does it mean, for instance, that my interlocutors in the watershed frame a relation to public service provision as a Maussian gift exchange premised on the duty to reciprocate? Does it structure a political relation along the lines of an infinite debt that can never be fulfilled? Or does it recast a relation of power so that it comes to resemble the responsibility one would hold towards one's kin? Both imply a debt that

can never be repaid and hence a resilient bond. The latter is also a relation that fixes and reifies both parties. I wonder if and how a bond this resilient can be severed. My research seems to introduce more questions than answers; it invites me to reflect on the evolving uncertainties set in motion by the arc of infrastructural development and decline. These questions return me to the beginning and to my assertion that my interlocutors practice a politics of bereavement. In the face of the ongoing challenges of daily life and in the absence of any expectation that things can get better, theirs is a politics invested in a creative recuperation of loss.

* * *

Reflecting on the discourses and images that take as their subjects the people, places, and recursive crises of the Middle East, Lebanese Canadian filmmaker Jayce Salloum (2005, 27) asks:

> How do you represent the unrepresentable? How do you represent what has been drained of meaning, misrepresented to the point of oversaturation, yet under-appreciated and neglected to the point of absurdity? Is it even futile to attempt such an endeavour ... maybe, is it advisable? Perhaps not.

In light of Israel's ongoing genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza and its renewed aggression against Lebanon, particularly south of the Litani, these questions haunt me. From 1978 to 2000, Israel invaded and occupied South Lebanon up to the Litani river. For many Lebanese, the Litani remains the symbolic marker separating the South from the rest of Lebanon, and the line that also brings vividly to mind a history of Israeli occupation. While conducting fieldwork in the West Bekaa, people recalled Israeli soldiers swimming in the Litani and talked about Israel's ambition to, one day, control the Litani's waters. As I write, the threat of a war that will engulf not just Lebanon, south of the Litani, but the entire region is imminent once more. In such moments the limits of what anthropological theorizing can and cannot do become acutely apparent. What kind of anthropology is possible or even desirable when lived experience defies our capacity to

represent it, or find meaning in it? In many ways, this thesis reflects on how to think and write against a background of recursive crises. In that spirit, I cannot help but wonder how these recent seismic shifts will inform my own ethnographic engagements. Attending to my interlocutors' narratives woven through and about the Litani, I find myself returning to one of Salloum's earlier works for answers, a 1993 film he co-directed with Walid Raad.

Talʿeen ʿal Janub (Up to the South) chronicles Israel's long occupation of South Lebanon and people's resistance. It opens with a peculiar dialogue between a young woman and the cameraman. Though recorded more than 30 years ago, the conversation could not feel timelier. The woman is wearing a bright red shirt, which contrasts with the dark hair framing her face. Maybe she is a militant? She is beautiful. Looking squarely at us, she asserts: "If I simply wanted to refuse, I would not be doing this interview. But if I don't do this interview, I cannot express this refusal. You put me in an uncomfortable position, because even this refusal you will use to your advantage." A cut. The woman then continues: "Excuse me, but your question is arrogant. This arrogance is consistent with the West's relations with the Arab World." Another cut. She interjects: "Your question is actually an accusation. You are demanding that I behave well. I reject this demand." A third and final cut is followed by another declaration: "Your question relegates me to either terrorist or hero. Why do you simplify these issues?"

It is only after the young woman's preamble, that the film seems to begin. Watching it now, as Israel intensifies its aggressions against Lebanon, I engage the film as a living archive that grapples with the meaning of attachments to the Litani river and the land stretching south of it. What does it mean to build a relation to this landscape and to its people when one is not from there? Here I am referring both to the people of Lebanon who do not have to bear the direct brunt of Israel's attacks, and those watching and listening from positions of comfort around the world. The film's temporal rhythm structures our own: the time of the occupation is long; its grip is tight. Halfway through the film, I start losing interest but come back to myself. The film partly implies that those who do not live in the South will inevitably find themselves drifting away.[4] Many scenes are of landscapes shot from the window of a moving car. I am on an endless drive

[4] A temporal and spatial dislocation that is also reflected in art and literary productions, see for e.g. Khayyat (2023).

by the Litani and the Qaraoun lake. We are all *talʿeen ʿal janub*, literally going up to the South. Watching, I feel I am both lost and getting lost, south of the Litani.

I do not know if the woman's opening monologue is scripted or if the words she utters in between the cuts and breaks are entirely hers. But like Salloum's questions about representing the unrepresentable, her words haunt me. Her proposition suggests that certain forms of knowledge or epistemic positions can be weaponized to the extent that they might become part of "an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war" (Said 1994, xv). The young woman is refusing to participate. Her words rehearse refusal as a practice that amplifies resistance, as two ways of contending with power and domination (Simpson 2014). I do not know who she is, that is I do not know her name. In the film's credits she is listed as Zahra Badran. I am under the impression that the filmmakers are also refusing. They refuse to situate their interlocutors. They are telling us that their interlocutors are not informants and that their documentary film is not information either. I become aware of the fact that I do not know the names of the many militants who, facing the camera, describe life under the occupation and torture at the hands of the warden-collaborators of the South. But something stirs in me when I recognize some of the speakers —a warlord's powerful wife, a theatre director, a former university professor who retired to his village of Qaraoun, two prominent religious figures, a former member of parliament, the sister of Imam Sadr, and Lola Abboud's mother. I become part of a community who *knows*, distinct from other viewers who will, perhaps, be touched by the images in a different way. The work gathers its own parallel audience who, in turn, access, experience, and infer different layers of meaning.

The film ends like it started, with Zahra Badran. "By talking to you, by explaining my situation, I am not automatically refusing this position," she asserts, before adding, "I am not after improving my world image." Zahra seems to be telling us that to be recognized in your singularity is but one way to refuse obliteration. But how or what authorizes such recognition? From my position as onlooker, participant, estranged Lebanese, insider, outsider, and engaged ethnographer, neither there nor here, I look for ways to understand my involvement in the worlds of the Litani and its people. If *Talʿeen ʿal Janub* offers an incisive commentary on the way resistance to Israel has been both represented and understood, it also illustrates how mediation,

like filmmaking or ethnography, explicitly becomes a very political act.[5] The film insists that it is not only what stories are told but also how they are told that is significant. It is in that space of hesitation, between refusal and recognition, resistance and acquiescence, showing and telling, and knowing and feeling that things occur and that the building of ethical and political relations become possible.

[5] Such mediation, since it intervenes in a public sphere, can be understood as always already political. I am thinking here of Edward Said's commentary on the roles of intellectuals: "As the great twentieth-century writer Jean Genet once said, the moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political do not write essays or speak out" (Said 1996, 110).

Glossary

ahali al diyaʿ: village residents.

al-ahdath: literally, the incidents; colloquial term used to refer to the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990.

al-ʾajhizah al-amniyyah: the state security apparatuses.

ʿamilat: women workers.

ammo: paternal uncle; also a title of respect to address older male acquaintances.

arguileh: hookah, shisha, or waterpipe.

ʿassabiya: communal consciousness and solidarity; popularized as a concept by Ibn Khaldun.

bahayim: pack animals or four-legged beasts.

bahra: small sea or water fountain.

baykeh: a section of the family home dedicated to livestock.

buhayra: lake.

darakeh: a gendarme.

al-Dawleh: the State.

dekkeneh: depanneur or small grocery store.

Estaz: professor or educator. It used here as a form of address that is meant to express respect.

fassad: corruption.

fassoulia: beans.

fellahin: farmers.

harb al-santayn: the two-year war; refers to a period of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1976).

hawd al ʾaʿla: upper (river) basin.

injazaat: achievements.

ʾitifaq: agreement.

labneh meʿzeh: strained goat yogurt.

al-Majlis Al-Khidma Al-Madaniya: the Council of Civil Service.

al-Majlis Al-Taʾdibi: the Disciplinary Council.

maslaha: the (Litani) authority.

maʿaden thaqila: heavy metals.

moteur: generator; used to refer to privately owned diesel generators that produce electricity

moudir: boss, superior, or manager.

mouneh: local techniques for preserving food; also used to refer to food preserves and stores.

mukhtar: literally 'the selected one'; used to refer to local officials since Ottoman times.

al-munshaʾat: the infrastructures.

al-nawaʿeer: waterwheels.

al-nuʾta al-rabiʿah: Point Four; used in reference to the American Point Four Mission for technical assistance during the Cold War.

qasab: reed grass.

Salamouni: heirloom onions in the region of Saghbine.

semsar: real estate broker.

shaʿbi: popular and lay.

shanklish: a type of fermented cheese, prepared with dried herbs and spices and eaten with onions, tomatoes, and olive oil.

taʾifiya: sectarianism.

taouk: marinated grilled chicken.

tarabot maslahi: symbiotic form of living together.

taʾnin: rationing.

toum: a kind of aioli dressing.

Umam: short for *al-Umam al-Mutahhida* —the United Nations.

Umm qulaybani: green hummus.

ʿurf: unwritten, customary law.

wasta: intermediary or mediation; commonly used as a shorthand for favors, a kind of remedy arrangement enacted through social ties and informal avenues.

wezzal: broom (shrub).

zabaʾiniya: clientelism.

zaaʿrour: hawthorn.

zuʿama: chieftains or leaders; used to refer to communal leaders.

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