Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor

SULAFA ZIDANI
University of Southern California, USA

This article examines a type of online content created by Arab youth that mixes local and foreign popular culture and politics. This content is examined in relation to the position of Arab youth within transnational power dynamics looking at how they build on longstanding meanings to define their own unique culture. These creations mixing Arabic and foreign (*arabi–ajnabi*) languages, music, images, and videos, result in content that is humorous specifically to those who are literate in both of the cultures being juxtaposed. Drawing on academic literature on humor, remix, and mash-up culture, this article looks into how this new content, labeled here as *reorienting humor*, becomes a way for doubly marginalized youth to be cultural agents for themselves and disrupt the direction of cultural flows in a way that creates a disturbance in the power relations and calls into question binaries such as local–global dominant–marginalized, and center–periphery.

Keywords: mash-up, remix, power, humor, transnational, Arab, Middle East

A music video released in October 2016 shows Japanese artist DJ Pikotaro dancing in an animal print outfit singing a repetitive electronic song called Pen Pineapple Apple Pen (PPAP). The images in Figure 1 are not from that video, but from an Arabic page on the social networking website Facebook called Tamt Altargama, which focuses on "translation of foreign arts." These edited images dress Arab celebrities such as Umm Kulthum, Amr Diab, and Fairouz with Pikotaro's iconic animal print scarf. The first line of the song's chorus, "I have a pen, I have an apple, ah, apple pen," is rewritten to match lyrics of the Arab celebrities' hits. Thus, the first line of Umm Kulthum's song *Alf Leila w Leila* (*A Thousand and One Nights*), where she sings "the night and its sky, its stars and its moon, you and I," is captioned as "I have a night and its sky, I have its stars and its moon, uhh, you and I." These images bring together Arabic and English language to mix Japanese, Arabic, contemporary, and classical music. This example is emblematic of the remix and mash-up content created and disseminated online by Arab youth that combine popular culture from all over the world—Arabic, Japanese, French, and others—mashed up into new content that sends an entirely different message where Arab youth are cultural agents for themselves.

Sulafa Zidani: zidani@usc.edu

I HAVE الليل وسماه
I HAVE نجومه وقمره
UHH وانت وانا

I عايش
I مش عايش
UHH عايش ومش عايش

I HAVE طاحون عنبع الماي
I HAVE ساحات مزروعة فيي
UHH سهر الليالى

Figure 1. Images from Tamt Altargama's page on Facebook (left to right: Umm Kulthum, Amr Diab, Fairouz).

Academic literature on global humor and remix culture (Bourriaud, 2002; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2016; Kramer, 2013; Kun, 2005, 2015; Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014; Sinnreich, 2010), and on dealing with Arabic humor and politics (Abd al-Hamid, 2003; Elsayed, 2016, 2018; Elsayed & Zidani, 2020; Wedeen, 2013) rarely converse with one another (Al-Ghazzi, 2018; Lyan, Zidani, & Shifman, 2015). Humor in online content employing Arab and global remixes and mash-ups has been given little attention. Examining this type of content sheds light on how the juxtaposition of cultures can be used in power struggles—that is, struggle over meaning, values, and ideologies. This article addresses this gap by building on the existing literature on mash-up and remix culture to examine contemporary creative mash-up content made by Arab youth. The content was chosen based on its combination of elements from different cultures in the form of memes and videos, and thus represents a model of the mash-ups and remixes that this article seeks to explore.

> Mashups are ubiquitous. They are the contemporary embodiment of remix culture. And while the remix can be understood as a type of general collage practice whose sources may not be readily identifiable, the same cannot be said of mashups in particular. A defining characteristic of the mashup, whether it is music, image, or software, is that its elements operate together but remain discrete. Indeed, part of the success of the mashup has to do with the thrill of being able to identify these elements as they take on new meanings in the process of their combination. (Harrison & Navas, 2018, p. 197)

Thus, remix and mash-up are both intertwined techniques for content manipulation that contribute to the erosion of the divide between production and consumption (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). The content I analyze in this article includes many memes, defined by Limor Shifman (2014) as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (p. 41). It is important to note that mash-ups, remixes, and memes are different from one another, but there are places

where they intersect. For example, mash-up and remix techniques can be used in videos as well as images, and a video can be labeled as a meme if many users create derivative versions of it.

I conduct an in-depth analysis of remix and mash-up content from online Arabic social media pages (such as content from the pages for Adeela,[1] Mawtoura,[2] Punny Pun Times,[3] Translation Is Done,[4] bel3arabeh,[5] Arabvines24,[6] and others).[7] Consistent with media convergence (Jenkins, 2006b), most of these pages exist on multiple leading social networking platforms at the time of writing this article; primarily Facebook and Instagram, but also Twitter. They combine creative, activist, and amateur content. Adeela and Mawtoura are worth singling out as the two pages referred to multiple times in this article, each of which have a fictional character as the main voice behind the posts. Adeela is a play on the personality of the English singer Adele, and Mawtoura ("distressed") is a character who regularly voices criticism about the culture and politics of Lebanon. The identities of the individual creators behind the pages examined are not the central concern of this article, and I decided not to reveal them to avoid putting any of them in an unwarranted precarious situation.

I follow Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) understanding of popular culture as a "contact zone," which Pratt defines as spaces where cultures meet, clash, or grapple with each other. The relations of power in a contact zone are often asymmetrical, and marginalized groups can enter the dominant circuits of print culture through "autoethnographic texts," where they describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made about them, as well as a selective incorporation of the dominant culture to construct a text that is often a parodic or oppositional representation of the conqueror's own speech (Pratt, 1991). I aim to identify the role of the interaction between content from different cultures, and what each of them serve in the mash-ups. Although the power dynamics of the circulation of this content are beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that this content's circulation on social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter means that grassroots creation and circulation is taking place on commercial platforms (two of which belong to the Facebook company, and all of which are based in the United States).

This content requires a level of literacy in the cultures and languages that it mixes to be able to understand, relate to, and laugh at it. Thus, it is seen as distinct content that is largely disconnected from the original. The English singer Adele, for example, has nothing to do with the personality based on her in the page Adeela (see Figure 2), where Adeela is a fictional character, an award-winning singer, the daughter of the Star of the East, Umm Kulthum, an activist, fashion police, and an important social figure in Lebanon.

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/adeelaofficial/

[2] https://www.facebook.com/mawtoura/

[3] https://www.facebook.com/punnypuntimes/

[4] https://www.facebook.com/tamttargama/?fref=ts

[5] https://www.instagram.com/bel3arabeh/

[6] https://www.instagram.com/arabvines24/

[7] Although these social media accounts and pages do not exclusively contain mash-up and remix content, they are a main source of this type of content, and this study selected mash-up and remix content from them, while setting other types of content aside.

This mashed-up fictional persona ties Adele, a contemporary English singer, together with Arabic history and art by making her the daughter of classical Arabic music and film icon Umm Kulthum (1898–1975), and with popular and political concerns of Arab youth like celebrity fashion and the government's handling of social issues. Adeela has pages on different social media platforms, and much of the content is humorous content combining the Arab world celebrity culture with that of other cultures.

Figure 2. Adeela, an image of Adele edited over an image of Um Kulthum.

Before a deeper analysis of the content and those producing, circulating, and consuming it, I start with a note on terminology. The content discussed in this study includes two categories: one is defined as Arabic content (i.e., content in Arabic language, or pertaining to Arab culture), and will be referred to here as *arabi* content. The term *arabi* can refer both to Arabic culture or language, a polysemy that is fitting in the case of this study as it examines culture and language mixing. Importantly, I want to acknowledge the cultural and linguistic variety that exists within Arabic identify. There is a vast cultural and vernacular difference that spans across what we term "Arab" in different places in the world. Still, there are elements that unite people under this ethnic and cultural category—a language common enough to converse, and a culture common enough to share political issues and humor across the variance.

The second content category is not as clearly defined; this content comes—although primarily, but not only—from "Western" (predominantly American) popular culture, it also includes content from India's Bollywood, Hallyu (the Korean Wave, mainly K-pop), and viral videos from Japan. The common thread

between these different types of content is that they are familiar and popular among this group of Arab youth. Although this content may seem like it is fit to be called global, the term "global" assumes specific hierarchies and values that put culture rooted in "the West" (United States and Europe) at the center, and assumes a unidirectionality of cultural transaction, whereby Western culture is the prominent culture permeating borders. Using this term would reinforce some of the very values that these mash-ups call to disrupt. Therefore, the second group of content will be referred to here as *ajnabi* (which, in Arabic, means foreign or non-Arab/ic) content. This is a term familiar to the group of people producing the mash-up content discussed in this article, and using it acts to disrupt the assumptions that stand behind the concept of globality and the idea of global culture, thereby encouraging people to think about cultural production, flows, and exchanges from nondominant perspectives.[8]

Behind the Mash-Ups: Arab Youth in the Midst of Transnational Power Dynamics

The *arabi–ajnabi* mash-up content discussed in this article is produced by a group of creative young Arabs who may share a similar positionality as other youth in the world when it comes to their marginalization in transnational power dynamics, although there is distinction in the details. The youth producing the content examined in this article are mostly from Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, but also include people from other Arabic-speaking countries, as well as Arab diaspora. In terms of class hierarchies, in the late 1990s, the earlier days of the Internet, it could be argued that having an Internet connection at home was reserved to the privileged classes of society; nowadays, having a smartphone with a connection to the Internet and accessibility to social media networks and content from all of the world is not reserved to the privileged classes alone. Data from The World Bank (n.d.) show that the percentage of individuals using the Internet in the Middle East and North Africa region has grown from 0.037% in 1995 to 65.145% in 2018. Social media websites have also experienced a growing number of users in the Middle East; the Arab Social Media Report states that the rate of Facebook accounts among the Arab population grew from 28% to 39% in just one year (Salem, 2017). Cowen's (2009) argument that cross-cultural trade brings more opportunities for individuals to pursue various cultural paths applies to Arab youth from different classes, who now have more choices in terms of content they can consume. Although, Cowan adds that this increase in choices locally is not met by a global heterogeneity, but rather that trade also homogenizes culture across borders as "it gives individuals, regardless of their country, a similarly rich set of consumption opportunities. It makes countries or societies 'commonly diverse,' as opposed to making them different from each other" (Cowen, 2009, p. 129). Because of this cross-cultural common diversity, Arab youth have a common language with those who share their interests and media consumption practices across borders.

The category of youth is a malleable and fluid one that is challenging to clearly demarcate by age (Ito et al., 2008; Ito & Okabe, 2005; Khalil, 2012). In this article, I apply the category of youth to the generations born roughly between 1985 and 2006. Because regional, social, economic, and other factors may influence the definition of this category (Khalil, 2012), this study aims for an expansive range. This broad definition of youth, which includes teenagers and young adults, is in line with the macrolevel of

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[8] The question of mixing cultures is a complex one that can be approached at different levels of granularity; from the hyperlocal to the regional and the international. I acknowledge that there is a collapse of variation in these concepts; however, it is necessary for this macrolevel of analysis.

analysis of this study. I acknowledge the diversity and nuance within this group while also recognizing the need for a definition to clarify the characteristics of the group discussed in this article. There are sociohistorical experiences that hold this group together under the category of Arab youth. Many of these youth grew up at a time when their countries were in an unstable political state; revolutions took place in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, and protests and unrests continue in Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries. At the same time, wars and increased violence continued in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Iraq. Although Arab youth do not all reside in the same country, what happens in other Arabic countries can be of concern to them as well. In many Arab countries, there is a tightening control on freedom of speech. Egypt, for example, has been ranked as "one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists" by Reporters Without Borders (n.d.). A judge sentencing Aljazeera journalists detained in Egypt said they were brought together "by the devil" ("Advocacy Group Demands," 2017). In Saudi Arabia, bloggers have faced imprisonment and death sentence threats (Lampert, 2016; "Saudi Arabia Sentences Man," 2017; Wendling, 2015). Control on freedom of speech is not unique to journalism and political dissent only, but also to satirical and humorous content (Iskandar, 2019). This puts Arab youth in general at a complex position in relation to place and culture, whereby those in the Middle East may be longing to leave, or desiring change, and those who leave are longing for the familiarity of home. This complex relationship will be further explored below to demonstrate how, regardless of their location of residence, the cultures they mix in the *arabi–ajnabi* content are both their own.

Media have historically played a crucial role in Arab experiences with Western modernity, starting from newspapers, to TV, and now, Internet content (Kraidy, 2010). As consumers of electronic media in a postmodern era, Arab youth are affected by traditions to which they did not necessarily have ancestral connections (Shohat & Stam, 2014). Prominent examples of foreign content Arab youth grew up with include MTV and VH1, and later YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, then Snapchat. As children in the 1990s, many Arab youth watched Japanese anime dubbed into Arabic. Many also grew up watching *Friends*, reading *Harry Potter*, and would rush to cinemas to see the latest Hollywood blockbusters. There are also Arab music channels on TV which broadcast foreign and Arabic music alongside each other (Meldoy Hits, or Mazzika), and reality TV shows based on Western formats (*Superstar*, *Arab Idol*, and others, analyzed in detail in Kraidy, 2010).

Media exposed Arab youth to a variety of *ajnabi* genres or formats and celebrity culture from around the world. Although predominantly from the United States, they also exposed them to content such as dubbed Spanish language telenovelas, Turkish soap operas, India's Bollywood movies (through Zee Aflam TV, for example), or Korea's *Hallyu* (especially K-pop music and soap operas). Coupled with the proliferation of new media technology and this generation's proficiency in using them, these have brought about remakes of Gangnam Style, and mash-ups of Bollywood songs with Arabic lyrics (see YRF Music, 2016). Importantly, in the words of Joe Khalil (2012), "Although new communication means may have increased their ubiquity, youth-generated media are not technologically determined but rather a reflection and a refraction of societal structures, political struggles, cultural tensions, economic uncertainties, and old and new media possibilities" (p. 341). This article premises that this group of youth grew up with both cultures (*arabi* and *ajnabi*) as their own and not necessarily separate cultures. But this relationship remains a complex one. In his book, "Revolution for Dummies: Laughing Through the Arab Spring," comedian Bassem Youssef (2017)—labeled the "Jon Stewart of Egypt"—discusses the complicated feelings Egyptians have toward America.

> Egyptian leftists hate America because it represents everything ugly about capitalism and world domination, while secular elitists hate America because it has empowered the extreme religious monarchies in the gulf region (who ironically sponsor the extreme religious scholars who tell the people that America is fighting Islam). And . . . the poor taxi driver hates America because he gets denied a visa to get away from all these crazy people. (p. 30)

This conflicted relationship is culminated in the irony, or what Youssef labels as hypocrisy, whereby the same people who hate America for these various reasons still "would kill" to get a visa, and keep up with the latest American cultural productions by illegally downloading the latest episodes of shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* (Youssef, 2017, p. 29).

Through this irony, we can begin to understand what some of the *ajnabi* content connotes to Arab youth. The terrain of global culture is an uneven and unequal terrain that puts the United States and Europe at the center of globality, and the main source that culture flows out of and into the rest of the world. Based on these dynamics of global network culture, Arab youth are expected to be on the receiving end, in the periphery. Moreover, much of the content they receive from the West shows how misunderstood or misrepresented they are. In Hollywood movies, for example, representations of Arab youth are either few, or stereotypically exotifying and villainous (Alsultany, 2012). Seeing themselves misrepresented in Western media (be it news media or entertainment media) results in an experience that Shohat and Stam (2014) labeled "spectatorial schizophrenia" (p. 347); the experience of the colonized Africans and Asians watching European and Hollywood films in European-owned theaters, as they internalize Europe as ideal ego on the one hand, and on the other hand withdraw from the film's pleasures at the sight of offensive or stereotypical representations (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Without being aware of these connotations, it is impossible to understand the meaning behind some parts of these mash-ups. Literacy, then, becomes an important factor for drawing the boundaries of who is included and excluded. Sanders (1995) argues that literacy serves to define and categorize. In the case of *arabi–ajnabi* mash-ups, literacy plays a role in categorizing people who are in/out of this community. There is a clear knowledge requirement for understanding these texts. To find something funny, one needs to know the languages included (usually Arabic and English) and to be familiar with celebrity culture as well as the politics of the Arab world, the United States and Europe, and music hits or viral content from other countries that reach the Arab world. One also needs to be up to date with current events happening locally as well as globally (mainly in countries which concern Arab youth). If the viewer does not have this literacy, they may experience what Shohat and Stam (2014) referred to as "abrupt dislocation" (p. 355), the feeling viewers get when they are reminded of the limits of their own knowledge and indirectly of their status as outsiders.

Ultimately, what happens to the *ajnabi* content, be it a celebrity figure or just a word in a different language, is that it moves from its original context to the newly created context, causing a partial disconnection with the original. For example, Adele may not understand most of the content on the Adeela page and, as stated by the creator of Adeela, nor does she need to (Hallal, 2016). Yet recognizing Adele is crucial to understanding the mashed-up content and for finding it funny. This literacy translates into a process of excluding people who do not understand the content, drawing a boundary, while simultaneously

acting as an inclusion for those who do understand it. This inclusion and exclusion are an exercise of cultural agency whereby Arab youth intervene in the direction in which content flows.

Importantly, many Arab youth producing this content express being mistreated or marginalized in their home countries. Two of the main blogs producing mash-up content, Adeela and Mawtoura, do not disclose their real identities. This is not only because of criticism from fans of artists they mash-up but also because of the complicated relationship with the state. In an interview with French language daily newspaper in Lebanon, *L'Orient-Le Jour* (Henoud, 2017), Mawtoura says, "This country depresses me" (para. 6). Mawtoura sees the state as often ineffective, seeking only more power and money. In another interview in Al-Taharri, Mawtoura explains that the blog is named Mawtoura ("distressed") because "everything around us as Lebanese people causes us stress, from political crises and conflicts between politicians, to traffic jams, and the garbage, and the deals and conspiracies that happen at our expense, while we cannot do anything about it." (Mawtoura, in an interview with Abou Yehya, 2016). Mawtoura feels that the government does not care about the concerns or the well-being of citizens (Abou Yehya, 2016). These sentiments are echoed by other Arab youth in other Arab countries and not only in Lebanon.

The result is that the act of creating, of mashing up these different worlds, their worlds, and laughing, to create a new piece of their own unique culture that only they can understand, brings youth together into a community that builds on its double-marginalization, and creates content which the two dominant cultures by which they are marginalized cannot understand. By drawing on the culture and politics that they know and relate to, and invoking the collective memories of the past that are attached to the different contexts from which they draw material (as per Kraidy, 2005), Arab youth continually construct and reconstruct their group identity through this kind of humor. In this way, these mash-ups also grant Arab youth agency to negotiate who they are and what their cultural identity is, rather than having that defined for them by someone else.

What's So Funny? From Ancient Syria to Post-Spring Egypt

A set of clay tablets inscribed sometime in the 14th century BC in the ancient city of Ugarit (today, Northern Syria) shows that laughter was mixed with weeping early on in history. These tablets (now called the Ras Shamra tablets) showed that tears of joy and sadness were both part of a ritual of the early Phoenician Canaanites, where people wept over the death of gods and shed tears of joy for their anticipated rebirth (Sanders, 1995). According to Sanders (1995), happiness and sadness, or laughter and weeping, have always been closely connected. Similarly, Mary Douglas (1975) argues that joking is not used merely to contrast with seriousness. In fact, joking and laughter are not necessarily congruent, as one can appreciate a joke without laughing at it (Douglas, 1975). The creator of the blog Mawtoura said in an interview, "If I could influence some people, talk about homophobia, human rights, while making people laugh, that would be good. Satire lets people get rid of their frustrations" (Henoud, 2017). Adeela echoes that sentiment saying that "people are attracted to this page because it has artistic joy" (Hallal, 2016).

Douglas (1968) explains that people laugh at unexpected juxtapositions of disparate elements. This is how humor challenges existing patterns of thought by presenting new ones. Douglas also emphasized the importance of context as a key element in analyzing humor. In Arabic literature, a traditional style of humor

called *ath-tharf* (الظرف) is defined as a form of laughter that requires knowledge and experience in daily life and relies on pointing out inconsistencies in daily situations (Abd al-Hamid, 2003; Tayeh, 2016). Lisa Wedeen (2013) looks into how, under oppressive conditions, humor can potentially be a disruptive force. The creator of Mawtoura says that juxtaposing *arabi* and *ajnabi* content aims to shed light on what "we" do wrong sometimes. Humor thus acts to belittle and challenge the dominant structure. Jokes expose the inadequacy of current structures and give access to other realities and imaginations (Douglas, 1975). Adeela emphasizes that the lack of seriousness is key for creating successful content: "If I took the subject seriously, the quality of the page will deteriorate" (Hallal, 2016). Indeed, in online social media content created in the Arab World post-Spring, humor and creativity are a way for youth to push past the structural and semiotic limitations, to deconstruct the sanctity of figures of authority and morality, and reimagine a space for freedom of expression and thought freed wherein they set the rules (Elsayed & Zidani, 2020). Humor and satire can serve as a safe place for Arab youth to express their opinions and subvert parental and political authorities (Elsayed, 2016, 2018). Especially when traditional means of expression are stunted, playfulness, according to Elsayed, serves a double purpose—on the one hand, disguising dissent from power and, on the other hand, facilitating a quasipolitical discussion across political differences (Elsayed, 2016).

By building on historical and cultural meanings, juxtaposing different cultures, and treating serious content in a nonserious way, Arab youth create content unique to them that negotiates power through laughter. Take, for example, one video on Adeela's (2016) Facebook page titled "Let's wrap up the weekend with our brother Khamees Jumaa who lit it up at Al-Atlal Plaza." The name Khamees Jumaa (which sounds like a real Arabic name) literally means Thursday Friday, and it is the name Adeela gives to Canadian music artist The Weeknd. The video is a recut version of the music clip for the song "I Can't Feel My Face," in which The Weeknd appears like he is singing an Egyptian '80s folk song (*sha'abi* شعبي) called "Light It Up" (ولعها شعللها). Watching this clip, including the title, the name Adeela chose for The Weeknd, the location of this imagined show, and the songs chosen, invokes specific cultural and historical meanings that link it to the Egyptian working class. Egyptian *sha'abi* music originated in traditional folk parties of Upper Egypt. The word *sha'abi* in Arabic, like the English word *folk*, refers to the lower class, or "common people," and invokes the authenticity of lower class culture. Khamees Jumaa, therefore, and the song that he sings, summons this history and the atmosphere of the "authentically lower class" Egyptian culture, as well as the Egyptian movies and TV shows involving this class. Placing these in the same space as The Weeknd and his hit song makes it inevitable to notice not only the differences and contradictions, but also the surprising commonalities. The video highlights the coincidental common themes in the artist's name, the element of fire that comes up in both songs, and the similarity of the stage in the original video to Egypt's cabarets where *sha'abi* music often plays. It brings together two worlds of content which Arab youth are fluent in, but which usually do not meet, and, without giving up on their disparateness, it is recut to make these two worlds sing to the same rhythm. In other words, this mash-up video, which brings together a Canadian artist who became famous in the American music industry with Egyptian *sha'abi* music at a Lebanese venue, highlights how the regional differences within the *arabi* category topped with the differences between the *arabi* and the *ajnabi* are all recognized by Arab youth, but these categories are not seen as contradictory and can in fact be joined in one complex piece.

Blurring the Lines to Redefine Agency

New technologies have brought about changes to the worlds of art and culture (Bourriaud, 2002; Sinnreich, 2010). Creatives like the DJ or the programmer blur the notions of originality, authorship, and creation as they select existing cultural objects and insert them into new contexts rather than approaching every creation with a blank slate. In this way, they disrupt traditional flows of production and blur cultural lines (Bourriaud, 2002; Kun 2005, 2015), and put modern social institutions and hegemonic structures in question (Sinnreich, 2010). Nicholas Bourriaud refers to mash-up and remix art as "postproduction," which he views as a challenge to traditional notions of originality, creation, and history. "These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 6). The different pieces pasted together from different contexts each carry along the history of the context from which they originate, and therefore, mixing them together is an act of putting their histories and contexts in relation with each other. In this way, art, in and of itself, becomes a challenge to passive culture as it generates behaviors and potential reuses, and makes its relationships to space and time material (Bourriaud, 2002).

Arabi–ajnabi mash-ups not only blur ideas of creation and originality, they also blur the lines between what is local and what is global, complicating notions of global culture and cultural flows. In exploring the sound makers (*sonideros*) in Mexico, Josh Kun (2015) finds that they use the crossfader to find points of convergence to mix the world of here with the there that we cannot see (*allá*) to engage with spatial politics in the age of asymmetrical economic globalization.

Blurring the lines between worlds and disrupting the existing cultural flows has made remix and mash-up culture controversial, much in the same way analog parodies functioned in the 20th century. For example, parody artist Mickey Katz received criticism on his work mixing English with Yiddish: "Katz made English share a space with Yiddish," not only linguistically but also culturally (Kun, 2005, p. 66). As in the Mickey Katz parodies, juxtaposing *arabi* and *ajnabi* together amplifies the similarities and differences between cultures. It puts the *arabi* and the *ajnabi* in the same space, because they are both part of the culture of this youth's consumption (and postproduction) practices. *Arabi–ajnabi* mash-ups have thus also received a backlash similar to Katz—a backlash that went as far as sending threatening messages or verbal abuse (Abou Yehya, 2016; Hallal, 2016). This is why the creators of *arabi–ajnabi* content often decide to remain anonymous, using a pseudonym or a made up personality (such as Adeela or Mawtoura), to protect themselves and maintain the freedom to not take things seriously. In situations of threat or limitation of freedom of speech (whether by law or by social pressure), anonymity and humor serve to protect some of this freedom. They continue a long tradition of parody and satire as subversive acts of cultural expression, whether through forms of humor, like *ath-tharf*, poetry, song, and performance (Abd al-Hamid, 2003; Elsayed, 2016; Tayeh, 2016; van Gelder, 1988). In fact, satire has been argued to be an essential feature in the development of the Arabic novel (Alkodimi, 2013). The intersection between satire, culture mixing, and politics is demonstrated in the story of Yaqub Sannu (1839–1912), referred to as the father of Egyptian theater. A Jewish Egyptian speaker of Arabic, Hebrew, English, Italian, and French, Sannu wrote and produced satirical plays inspired by books he read in these different languages aiming to attract people to theater (Badawi, 1988).

A better understanding of the power relations imbricated in remix culture helps explain the backlash that remix artists receive. By disrupting the directions of cultural flows and blurring the lines between cultures, remix artists—and creators of *arabi–ajnabi* content among them—put current configurations of power into question. The conception of agency becomes muddled when we consider the relationship between humor and globalization. Humor can be seen as an agent for globalization and Americanization (Shifman et al., 2014), thus facilitating a process of cultural imperialism. It can also be viewed through the lens of glocalization (Robertson, 1994), whereby consumers may take "global" content and make it their own by interpreting it through their "local" lens. Although the cultural imperialism approach sees agency as located primarily in the global structure of capitalism, the glocalization approach divides cultures into a dichotomy that, as this article demonstrates, is being called into question.

I follow a third approach for understanding agency in the context of globalization, that of critical transculturalism, which posits that social practice, acting translocally and intercontextually, is where agency is located (Kraidy, 2005). Kraidy (2005) proposes critical transculturalism as an international framework that, in analyzing culture, takes into account the historical, rhetorical, and empirical aspects. These mash-ups, then, are seen as an expression made by and for those who make them. *Arabi–ajnabi* content reorients the direction of cultural flows in a way that disrupts the power relations and local–global binary. Remixing Arabic content with *ajnabi* content is a practice that allows Arab youth to be cultural agents for themselves.

Reorienting Humor

In a video reimagining *The Avengers in Saudi Arabia* (Fe2afala, 2015), the superheroes face unexpected challenges when they try to fight crime. In this version, they even include Batman, despite him being part of DC Comics and not a character in the Marvel brand, which produces the Avengers comics. When Batman tries to drive, his black outfit and cape get him mistaken for a cross-dresser advocating for women's right to drive. Spider-Man complains that Saudi Arabia has the least jumpable buildings of any other country he has worked in before. When he tries to help save someone in distress, he, too, is misunderstood, as people around him mistake him for a lizard, and throw their shoes at him. In consistence with the rest of the *arabi–ajnabi* content discussed in this article, this video goes on to show that *arabi–ajnabi* content uses humor to dramatize certain elements from everyday life. This is in line with Wedeen's (2013) argument that humor can point out absurdities or push for detaching from certain cultural aspects.

A close examination of these mash-ups, then, demonstrates how production of popular culture content is not the end of meaning, but a new beginning, and that popular culture can be used as a building block for creating more content. Thus, beyond serving as comic relief, the mash-ups also serve the purpose of expressing the cultural values that Arab youth identify with, and those they wish to ridicule, or the contradictions they want to bring into light. For example, Mawtoura's page has an edited image showing Pennywise the Dancing Clown from the American horror film *It* (2017) luring a young girl to jump down a sewer drain by whispering, "I have a groom for you." The bottom part of the photo shows the girl jumping right in, no questions asked. In the movie, luring children into the sewer is part of the clown's plan to terrorize them, not to help them with matchmaking. As Pratt (1991) explains, autoethnographic texts often mirror back to the dominant culture an image of themselves that they have suppressed and will therefore surely recognize. In this way, the creator of this meme uses people's knowledge of the general plotline of

It (especially the drain scene, which was turned into a trending meme on its own) to invoke a phenomenon that is part of another dominant culture outside of that movie; the pressure on young Arab women to marry that brings them to jump into marriage before asking any questions. In this way, Arab youth engage in remixing and mash-ups as practices of cultural agency where they reorient the focus onto what is at stake for them and their future. They reorient the power balance in society from the dominant institutional structures to the values that they are calling for.

Likewise, if we examine the images in the opening of this article as a collection, they use dominant cultural figures from different Arab countries, like the famous pop singer Amr Diab, or two highly respected artists like Umm Kulthum and Fairouz, in juxtaposition with globally trending content (Pikotaro's hit song). They rethink the lyrics to fit the template of PPAP and redesign the outfits bringing together elements of different cultures they care about and reorienting the directions of global cultural flows.

Elsayed (2016) argues that through political humor, Arab youth are able to reconcile their hidden contradictions, and come to terms with an irreconcilable oppressive past. In the case of *arabi–ajnabi* mash-ups specifically, Arab youth bring forth the contradictions, as if celebrating them, and deal with an oppressive present where they are marginalized on multiple levels. The works do not silence the *ajnabi* content or the Arabic content. They provide a space for both to exist together, as they know them. Therefore, people in the same positionality are able to understand them, whereas people not familiar with the context are excluded. The exclusion and inclusion help define who is in/out of this community. They also create a conversation between these youths among themselves where they can bring forth the issues that matter to them.

While mixing the *arabi* with the *ajnabi* builds a barrier of who is included and excluded from the community, it simultaneously acts to dismantle barriers between dichotomies like Arab–foreign, local–global, dominant–marginalized, and center–periphery. This creates what I call reorienting humor that shifts the direction of cultural flows and allows a marginalized group to use the cultural means available to them creatively for their own communicative purposes. By dismantling certain boundaries and raising others, content creators put themselves at the center of their own work. Reorienting humor can be categorized as a tactic (as per de Certeau, 1984), invented by users who cannot escape the systems of power they live in, and so they "outwit them" (p. xxiii) and exercise agency through the appropriation of popular culture to their own interest.

In differentiating between cultural jamming and poaching, Henry Jenkins (2006a) writes that "jammers want to destroy media power while poachers want a share of it" (p. 150). Reorienting humor can be seen as a specific type of textual poaching where youth reappropriate transnational content and mash it up to switch the power balance around from the dominant cultures to their own. It destabilizes the power dynamics and interrupts the global flows of culture. Reorienting humor can thus have a subversive effect. By excluding the dominant groups that they are marginalized by, Arab youth use this content to give dominant groups a feeling of abrupt dislocation, which makes them share, for a moment, the experience of minoritarian or marginalized viewers. Shohat and Stam (2014) refer to this practice as "pedagogic jiujitsu" (p. 357). Reorienting humor can change course of media texts and privilege those who are not usually put at the center in cultural content. *Arabi–ajnabi* content is an example of reorienting humor which critiques dominant Arab culture and *ajnabi* culture simultaneously. For example, a remake (by Mawtoura, 2017) of the poster for the Hollywood movie *La La Land*

(2016) shows Lebanese politician Samir Geagea (known for repeating his words over and over) in place of the Hollywood stars Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone, with the text "La La La, akid akid akid" (Arabic for "no no no, sure sure sure"). This poster brings together the world of Hollywood movies and Arab politics. Arab youth are familiar with *La La Land* the movie, and they are familiar with Geagea's habit of repeating words. By combining the two together, the poster serves the purpose of ridiculing Geagea, all the while disrupting the balance of global culture, and reasserting group belonging for those who are laughing at it.

The subversion of reorienting humor also explains the backlash comments and messages this content receives. Both Adeela and Mawtoura reported receiving messages of complaints, criticism, and even threats of violence from fans of artists whose work or images they reappropriate, and in some cases, they even received complaints from the artists themselves ("Bil-Sura," 2016).

In sum, Arab youth juxtapose the popular culture content that they consume to create new content. This content can be labeled as reorienting humor, as it invites laughter and brings a group together by building a barrier keeping figures of authority and dominant culture out, and intervenes in culture by disrupting binaries of center–periphery, local–global, dominant–marginalized.

Concluding Remarks

Mashing up and remixing is an intentional act. Creators take the time to choose what to mash up with what, pairing different content, cutting, pasting, and editing. These are all practices that can take hours or days. They require thinking about a message, and developing a vision of how that message will come across. Making the right choices can determine whether or not the content will be found funny, and whether or not the message gets across (like pairing up *The Godfather* movie with the theme song of a sad Egyptian drama series in Spoof Man, 2013). In making these choices, creators of the *arabi–ajnabi* mash-ups emphasize what has meaning to them, or what they and their audience consider a part of their culture. Through building on historical and cultural meanings, juxtaposing different cultures, and treating serious content in a nonserious way, creative youth build reorienting humor that is brings attention to what is at stake for them, and which they can bond over in subversive laughter. The result is that the act of creating, of mashing up these different worlds, their worlds, reorient the direction of global cultural flows and destabilize the power dynamics in the global culture. The framework of critical transculturalism reveals the limits of this power destabilization, as it does not directly bring about structural or institutional change. Still, the cultural impacts, meaning the changes in the perception of certain values, ideologies, institutions, and especially of one's own agency, are not to be understated.

The phenomenon of culture and language mixing is not unique to Arab youth. There are countless examples of remix and mash-up content such as memes or videos in "Spanglish" and "Chinglish," among others. Remix and mash-up content is also turning toward commercialization through media outlets (like Kharabeesh and Stepfeed, for example), and to commodification through the work of individual designers and companies that create and sell items such as T-shirts, mugs, stickers, and the like that are based on this type of reorienting humor (for examples of *arabi–ajnabi* products, see Rock Paper Scissors Design

Studio,[9] Kanzi,[10] Jobedu,[11] Ashekman[12]). Including these in further research can help deepen the investigation of reorienting humor. As remix culture turns toward commodification, new questions arise about what happens to the system of signification of reorienting humor once it is transformed into a market commodity. Questions also arise about reorienting humor in different geocultural contexts in the world. More work needs to be done to explore the impact of reorienting humor in the Arabic speaking context and around the world.

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