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Closeness and disappointment in Jordanian friendships

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Western folk models of friendship assume that friends like one another, implying mutually positive feelings. However, accounts of friendship from across times and places suggest that disappointment goes along with friendship as often as mutual affection. Anthropologists have noted the problem of disappointment in friendship, considering friendship's relationship with the rise of market societies and its role in resisting, or reinforcing, class status. It has yet to theorize disappointment in friendship itself. This article argues that disappointment is part of the processual maintenance of friendship, and that people negotiate it in a way that reflects broader social dynamics, including political economy. To illustrate this, it draws on ethnographic work in Jordan, where women navigate norms opposing polite insincerity (*mujamileh*) with the intimate register of admonishment (*muatibeh*). This dynamic generates myriad opportunities for disappointment, and women interpret disappointment in light of ongoing social changes that create new expectations and aspirations for women's friendships.

Introduction

Scholarship on friendship, including in anthropology, pays considerable attention to evaluating the role of self-interest (Jackson 2023). Much of this scholarship, recent and otherwise, interrogates how the (impossible) ideal of disinterest influences actual friendships. That is, people judge their friendships by the standard of pure affection, even if they do not experience it. Often, a friendship tainted by either party's self-interest creates a blend of self-criticism and disappointment with others that leaves one both unhappy and unable to address the cause of their unhappiness. Some scholars blame contemporary subjectivities for this difficulty, searching among phenomena like individualism (Carrier 1999; Pitt-Rivers 2016), the normalization of 'psy-' concepts in structuring interpersonal relationships (Eramian & Mallory 2020; Eramian, Mallory & Herbert 2024; Rose 1998), or even the advent of the commercial sphere (Silver 1990) to explain disappointment in friendship.

The problem with blaming political economy for friendship's unhappy moments is that ugly feelings and unattainable ideals appear alongside all kinds of subjectivities,

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not just capitalist ones (Derrida 2020; Lindholm 1982). This article proposes a way out of this conundrum by focusing on friendship as a process encompassing constant negotiation between the relationship between two people and the larger political-economic context where they are situated, with disappointment as a feature of this process. To do so, it examines the opposing speech genres of *mujamileh* (polite flattery), often reserved for acquaintances, and *muatibeh* (admonishment), a mark of intimacy, in women's friendships in Amman, Jordan.

Ideal friendships and capitalist subjects

The experience of disappointment in friendship is compelling, and confusing, for those experiencing it as well as for its analysts. It appears in Derrida's lengthy meditation on friendship and in contemporary journalism on 'medium friends' (Miller 2024) and 'toxic friends' (Lahad & van Hooff 2023). Some anthropologists have puzzled over the connection between disappointment in friendship and the political economies where the disappointments unfold (Carrier 1999; Eramian & Mallory 2020; Pitt-Rivers 2016). This thinking draws on a broad consensus that the self-possessed individual, who sets their own goals, takes an interest in their own interiority (Bondi 2005; Illouz 2008; Rose 1998), reflectively cultivates their ways of being in the world (Clarke 2012; Foucault 2000; Laidlaw 2014; Mahmood 2005) and tailors their body and appearances accordingly (Featherstone 1991; Gill 2008; Morris 1995), is a persistent and problematic illusion. Sustained by neoliberal economic pressures, this illusion warps people's ideas of how the world should work. Anthropologists face a dilemma when arguing that capitalism and its interventions in subjectivity are problematic for friendship. While this view often reflects emic interpretations (MacDougall 2019; Neumark 2017; Throop 2014) and perhaps our own folk models of social life (Pitt-Rivers 2016), it is at odds with accounts of friendship from other times, places, and economies, which show that disappointment in friendship is an enduring and cross-culturally evident theme (Buchberger 2014; Carey 2017; Den Uyl & Griswold 1996; Jerrome 1983; Lebner 2021; Lindholm 1982; MacDougall 2019; Sheffield 2011; Winkler-Reid 2015).

An alternative view on friendship in anthropology rejects the impulse to link everything to capitalism and emphasizes ethnographic particularity and the unique meaning of relationships between two socially embedded individuals. An insistence on ethnographic specificity makes definitions of friendship difficult. In the words of Desai and Killick, 'the study of friendship is haunted by the problem of definition' (Desai & Killick 2013: 1). They warn (and I think rightly so) against imposing criteria like autonomy or sentiment on friendship, arguing that this framing smuggles in assumptions about subjectivity that are characteristic of market societies (Silver 1990) and not universally applicable. In the absence of the admittedly problematic framing furnished by the general conception of a 'market society', we are left to start anew with each particular context. It appears we are quite stuck with this dilemma: if we adopt a theoretical framing of friendship that relies on the notion of two people choosing to be friends with people based on liking each other, we are enshrining ideas of the individual that are not cross-culturally valid. But if we insist that friendship is always particular and contextual, then it is difficult to say very much about friendship and its relationship with other social phenomena, like economic change.

More contextualized approaches to friendship do attend to the way friendship allows people, often marginalized people, to navigate their circumstances. It may help them ward off loneliness (Jerrome 1983), critique their striving peers (Willis 1977), grow as

individuals (MacDougall 2022), expand their networks (Mallory, Carlson & Eramian 2021), and learn to be productive in locally appropriate ways (Dyson 2010). In the right circumstances it can underpin activism (Glaser 2020) or transcend differences of class, race, and lived experience (Lugones & Spelman 1983). This literature is helpful in showing how friendship represents a way to respond to one's environment, in ways that both resist and reinscribe norms. Heaphy and Davies (2012), as well as Dyson (2010), have warned against being overly sanguine about friendship's social utility, underlining how friendship is beset with the same dark sides afflicting other social relationships and is not necessarily politically radical. Perhaps because these studies are so focused on friendship as a means to some other social good, they are less interested in considering disappointment as a feature of friendship.

Keeping disappointment and its continuous copresence with friendship front and centre, as I do in this piece, allows for a much more productive engagement with this social phenomenon. By emphasizing friendship's fundamentally unstable nature as lived and experienced, rather than attempting to fix its parameters, we can see more clearly how friendships are built around and in dialogue with broader social realities and how disappointment can be an affordance (Keane 2014) to think through these realities. A more fluid conception of friendship as a relationship that requires continued maintenance and reaffirmation normalizes the appearance of disappointment and avoids the conclusion that disappointment represents a society-wide problem, making room for local, ethnographically driven interpretations of where the disappointment comes from.

I develop this argument by drawing on ethnographic research on women's everyday ethical lives in a working-class neighbourhood of Amman, Jordan, where their continual use of discernment in friendship directed my attention to the unstable and fluid nature of their relationships with one another. I draw on the narrative detail of their relationships with each other, as well as contributions from Middle East anthropology that draw attention to the value-laden etiquette of everyday social life. Scholars have documented the creative ways people make requests of one another (Beeman 1976), greet each other (Caton 1986; Farghal & Al-Khatib 2001), negotiate conflict (Gilsenan 1996; Joseph 1994), and express love and sorrow (Abu-Lughod 1986) across the broad (and contested!) region that constitutes the Middle East in ways that deftly weave together individual agendas, social expectations, and the particular dynamics of a relationship between two people. However, this literature has not considered friendship in as great length (with exceptions; see Obeid 2013; Spadola 2011). This consideration of Jordanian women's social relations builds on established contributions from the regional literature and applies them to friendship.[1]

Ethnographic context

What I offer here is a set of vignettes that show friendships in changing economic conditions in Jordan from 2011 to 2015. In this period, many features of capitalist subjectivity were present, but their normative value was unstable. Navigating everyday life meant treating others both as self-contained people with their own, unstated, agendas, and disregarding these agendas in the name of other, competing goods, like moral rights and wrongs, continued reciprocity, or another person's competing agenda.

Jordan is a small, desert state with a monarchy, installed when Britain declared it a protectorate in 1921. The monarchy, the Hashemites, now represented by King Abdullah II, has survived Jordan's independence in 1946, weathered the massive

displacements of Palestinians into Jordan in 1948 and 1967, an armed conflict with the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1970, and the regionally destabilizing Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990. Later wars, including the Gulf war in 1990, the Iraq war in 2003, the Arab Spring wave of regional uprisings in 2010 and the Syrian civil war that followed, each precipitated the migration of hundreds of thousands of people into Jordan. The latest census, conducted in 2015, counted the entire population at 9.1 million people (Obeidat 2016). The Hashemites' resilience through these events, and their ability to keep together what is by most accounts an ambivalent national community (Hasso 2005; Massad 2001; Shryock 1997) with people who trace their roots to the Hejaz, historical Palestine, and more recently Iraq and Syria in greater numbers than so-called East Bank Jordanians is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Jordanian politics. Of course, different groups relate to this history in different ways and those politics are always in flux (Massad 2001; Shryock 1997; 2000); the fault lines between East Bank Jordanians and Palestinians is one notable avenue for these distinctions, but by no means the only one.

The monarchy has crafted for themselves a centrist identity, and this is also reflected in economic policy. In the beginning of the twentieth century, they championed a certain kind of capitalist politics that endorses an entrepreneurial subjectivity, while making use of free trade policies to strengthen important geopolitical alliances (prominently with the United States, and including a peace treaty with Israel) and enrich a small group of elites locally (Ababneh 2018; Nazzal 2005; Parker 2009). It is possible to read Jordanian capitalist subjectivities as somehow engaging with the monarchy's agendas, in implicit and explicit ways (Adely 2012; Hughes 2021; Martinez 2018; Tobin 2016; Yom 2013).

Amman itself, where four million of the country's nine million inhabitants were residing in 2015, visually exemplifies Jordan's uneven development. Parker (2009) has described Amman itself as a 'neoliberal assemblage' of expensive projects intended to attract investment and roads built to shuttle investors between them, with the most populous residential areas marginalized from municipal services and insulated from the wealth that these projects generate (Abu-Hamdi 2016; Daher 2013; Khirfan & Momani 2013). In the 2010s, small enclaves of trendy bars, a refurbished airport, and investment opportunities testified to the way this development served a small group of elites located in West Amman. Those outside of this circle were encouraged to address their own lack of development through training and aspiration. A curated image of Queen Rania projected a sleek, moderate, and moral model for womanhood (Sukarieh 2015). Residents and citizens encountered discourses of choice, accountability, and participation in schools (Hantzopoulos & Shirazi 2014) and educational training programmes. Nongovernmental organizations trained Palestinian refugees in the habits of 'the neoliberal subject: the entrepreneurial (train for microcredits), individualistic (think of yourself) self who believes in the free market (focus on aims and goals)' (Sukarieh 2016). In short, a strong Jordanian state articulated a vision for a certain kind of entrepreneurial, ambitious capitalist subject. At the same time, they implemented economic policies that made life more expensive and more competitive for Jordanians. To read this through its most cruel lens, the monarchy implemented economic policies that would make more Jordanians poorer while disseminating a narrative of subjectivity that would encourage them to blame themselves for their poverty.

Alongside these economic changes, during my fieldwork women's role in Jordanian society was the subject of national hand-wringing from various quarters. A progress-

oriented camp, voiced by myriad elite actors including the Jordanian National Commission for Women (Khader 2011), the United Nations (Adely 2009; United Nations Development Programme 2005), and Queen Rania (Queen Rania of Jordan 2014; Sukarieh 2015), advocated for women's education and inclusion in all aspects of public life, most notably work. An opposing group, often voiced by pious actors, offered a conflicting view of women's natural thriving, more concerned about careless adoption of Western norms than the constricting nature of tradition (Hughes 2017). These positions were enacted in much more nuanced and contradictory ways in everyday life, with most people borrowing the logics of both camps in the quantities best adapted to their personal circumstances. And rhetorical endorsement of women entering the workforce did not translate into widespread adoption; Jordan's female workforce participation remained low during the period of my fieldwork and continues to be discussed as a 'lost investment' on the part of the government (Adely 2009; 2024).

Scholarship on Jordan has captured the rich array of ways that relationships shifted during this period. Girls' education reflected the paradoxical demands being placed on women (Adely 2012). Parents of neurodivergent children sought to incorporate strategies for making their children independent in a context where kinship networks are the primary source for care throughout the life course (Sargent 2021). Young men articulated new ideas about marriage and companionship in light of the increasing expense of establishing their own households (Hughes 2021). In short, economic conditions and gendered expectations were in flux.

My ethnographic perspective on Jordan at this time emerges from extended fieldwork in an East Amman neighbourhood I pseudonymise as Tal al-Zahra, carried out for about thirty months between 2011 and 2015. During that period, I researched women's everyday domestic lives, prompted by a curiosity about the link between state-centric discourses of progress and women's lived experiences inhabiting gendered subjectivities. My method was community immersion: I visited a small network of four women almost daily, and through that visiting network was in regular contact with a larger group of twenty-four women and met about twice that number. This approach enabled a broad familiarity with the format of women's social lives and the genre of visiting that accompanied it. It also showed the thematic consistency of the women's concerns. While individual events and stories shared within the visiting settings varied widely, the avenues of judgement and analysis that women engaged were quite consistent. The vignettes here are both specific narratives in themselves and reflect these consistent avenues of judgement and analysis. A vivid facet of this format, manifest in its frequent mention in group conversations, was women's concern about selfishness and self-interest in social relationships (MacDougall 2019).

The neighbourhood of Tal al-Zahra was one of East Amman's 'central districts' (Ababsa 2013), where population density averaged 20,000 people per square kilometre; the packed-together urban geography meant a density of relations. The homes were mostly apartment buildings or freestanding houses with separate apartments on each floor; owner-occupied buildings often housed multiple generations of the same family, with, for example, a father on the ground floor and his two married sons on the first and second floors. More common, though, were apartment buildings shared by tenants who did not know each other before becoming neighbours. In this tightly-packed space, neighbours were involved in one another's lives – often more than anyone wanted them to be. The environment demanded social closeness, *tarabut ijtimai*: neighbours needed to work together to keep entrance hallways clean and guard against unscrupulous

landlords. The shadow side of this *tarabut ijtimai* was *takhalluf*, or backwardness; when closeness went too far, women called it backward. A woman whose neighbours gossiped about her for wearing trousers would lament their backwardness. These same neighbours would be welcomed and appreciated when they refused to leave her alone after she lost a family member or suffered an injury. Closeness could easily slip into backwardness, but backwardness could be redeemed through closeness as well. The concepts of *muatibeh*, or admonishment, and *mujamileh*, politeness, were essential to navigating these boundaries. A woman would navigate both situations with skilled invocations of *muatibeh* and *mujamileh*; if friends failed to visit her in her grief or ill health, they would be heartily admonished (*muatibeh*). And if she passed these gossiping neighbours in the stairwell, she could launch a charm offensive by inviting them in for coffee, repeating the invitation until they had no choice but to accept (*mujamileh*). Both behaviours, however, would fall into the category of social closeness (*tarabut ijtimai*). The registers of *muatibeh* and *mujamileh* were essential for navigating this boundary, and these registers themselves also were the subject of often-hearty criticism. Invoking these registers properly required careful attention to context in all its layers.

Muatibeh and layers of disappointment

Jafra, a teacher and mother of two teenagers who was expert in *muatibeh*, used it constantly, including when she helped me to secure an apartment in Tal al-Zahra. Jafra prided herself on her ability to get along with anyone, and she constantly had visitors. Her sister, her sister-in-law, or her brother's daughters; her neighbours, from within the building and from elsewhere on her block; and her friends from elsewhere in the neighbourhood or the city, including myself, cycled through her living room. She used *muatibeh* on us all to varying degrees, and the conversations often ended with her laughing musically at the exchange that ensued. Having engaged in *muatibeh*, she proceeded with the conversation confident that her friendships were intact and enjoyed a cup of coffee in our company.

Jafra activated her wide network to find homes that I could rent, and one day I found myself enmeshed in the network activation as well, seated on her couch working the phone alongside her. I was speaking to Aziza, who had found a house for me to look at – her friend Nour owned a small rooftop space that she used as storage, and Aziza thought it would be perfect for one person to live in. (Clearly, friends and money were very much mixed in this configuration: my rent money would stay within the social network of Jafra and Aziza, and I had few others to call on in a context where only personal connections could help me find a flat.) Jafra addressed whispered additions and hand gestures to me as Aziza recounted her efforts to convince Nour to rent me the space, prompting me to ask different questions and refuse different proposals. Jafra called Nour when I finished to persuade her to show me the apartment.

Jafra began the call with *muatibeh*. 'Where have you been?' she asked Nour. 'You don't respond to my messages, you don't visit, you don't call!' She paused, then upped her shrillness. 'I wasn't going to talk to you at all! I'm only speaking to you because Suzie wanted me to.' She continued in this vein, eventually laughing and confessing that she missed Nour and would be mad if she was not able to see her soon – itself a promise to engage in future *muatibeh*. They made plans for us to visit Nour and hung up.

'*Wallahi, ana muqassara* (God, I've been falling short),' Jafra said when she hung up, imitating Nour's speech for me.[2] Nour had responded to Jafra's chastisements

with this phrase, apologizing for her unsatisfactory performance as a friend. She was overextended caring for her four young children, and often neglected to return phone calls. Her straightforward admission that this made her a weak correspondence partner charmed Jafra, and she repeated it for me. Her lecturing inspired a confirmation of intimacy: Nour shared about her personal circumstances, Jafra could then play the role of sympathetic friend, and their bond was affirmed. *Muatibeh*, in this case, had brought them together. Behind it, though, was Nour's admission that maintaining friendships was a struggle for her in her family circumstances. While she might have appreciated having Jafra closer, she was not always able to do the friendship work of staying in touch with her. Her admission was also a statement of fact, that she would continue to disappoint Jafra.

Muatibeh underpinned close friendships as it pushed people to engage with one another, to stand up to one another, and to defend themselves from criticism. As such it required time, attention, and care – all resources that were structurally scarce in the urban environment of Amman (Gaul, Pitts & Valosik 2021). When women weighed up whether to bother with *muatibeh* in their relationships, they considered the depth of their feelings for the other party and their capacity for opening up this avenue to reciprocity. Being the one performing *muatibeh* meant preparing to receive it eventually.

A failure to engage in *muatibeh* appropriately could end a friendship, and women took pains to contain its effects. Aziza extended me this courtesy when I followed up with her about the apartment. Like Nour and Jafra, she was in her thirties, accustomed to the daily grind of life after the end of school; unlike Nour and Jafra, she was unmarried and had no children, giving her time a different quality. I told her about Jafra and Nour's conversation, and even repeated Nour's '*Wallahi, ana muqassara!*' for her benefit. She did not laugh. 'Why is Jafra calling Nour and not you?' she asked. 'You should call, not her.' I was silent, obviously embarrassed, and then rushed to agree with Aziza. Our conversation became awkward as she tried to both lecture me and apologize for lecturing me, uncomfortably reiterating that I was wrong while also trying to make me feel less embarrassed about being wrong. That is, she attempted to play both her role in the *muatibeh* and the one that I was meant to play by defending myself or countering her criticism of me with criticism of her. We were both uncomfortable with this conversation, and it did not last long; my quick concession had left Aziza without a partner in *muatibeh*. She noted this and protected our friendship from that fallout. She also showed her intuitive sense of *muatibeh*'s duality; it only works properly when both roles are taken up.[3]

Aziza may have understood that my failure to engage in *muatibeh* with her was a product of my own cultural incompetence and not an indicator of my warmth towards her; in any case, in that conversation, she hinted to me how I ought to have handled it better. I learned, though, through my own repeated mistakes, that women understood a refusal to engage in *muatibeh* as boundary-drawing, that is, as a refusal of intimacy. Nour told me once, following a lengthy recitation of her marital conflicts, 'You know, Suzie, I don't know what you think of what I tell you, because you don't tell me what to do.' She expressed this with some confusion and some frustration: she was disappointed in my continued distance, even as she attempted to fill the gap between us by sharing about herself.[4]

Muatibeh and its intricacies presented problems; finding and maintaining the friendships that could accommodate it was a separate challenge. The rhythm of social life reflected the ambivalence that characterized close friendships. Periods of

overwhelming busy-ness, where houses were full and many friends and family were present, alternated with periods of quiet, of empty afternoons watching television and drinking coffee. Women often complained of fatigue during the busy periods, but the slow periods were characterized by a depressive kind of boredom – the opposite of the frenetic stress of constant socializing.

Solitude was valued because it put distance between a woman and the potential drama that relationships with other women could cause. Not seeing many people meant there were no bruised feelings to repair, no gossip to hide or pass on. Friendships, though they sustained women's energy and provided emotional and material support, required the constant negotiation of tensions that arose from *muatibeh* and its polite opposite, *mujamileh*.

Mujamileh: politeness and entanglements

If *muatibeh* demanded delayed reciprocity that represented an indication of a person's affections (or lack thereof), *mujamileh* followed inverted rules. *Mujamileh* was polite, ritualized speech that relied on formulaic sets of responses to appropriately compliment a conversation partner (Ferguson 1976).[5] A person excelled in *mujamileh* by saying yes to all their conversation partner's requests, twisting every statement into occasion for a compliment, and performing genuine pleasure in these acts of generous welcome. 'Perform' could mean anything from outright pretence to complete embodiment, and to my eye the latter was more common than the former; of course, *mujamileh*'s dialogic nature meant that the outcome of the interaction shaped the truth of its introductory politesses. A sincere desire to invite someone in might be remembered differently if they came in and stayed for a further five hours, eating through the contents of the host's pantry. In Tal al-Zahra, it was gracious for a hostess to send first-time visitors away from her home with instructions to come again. This invitation was certainly *mujamileh*: an intention to invite, but not itself an invitation. The polite response was *in sha allah* (God willing). This phrasing – which placed the question of a second visit in divine hands and out of the visitor's own – avoided refusing an invitation but acknowledged its pro forma nature. If the hostess never followed up on the intention, then that could be attributed to God, and not her. When this formulaic exchange went as it was meant to, both parties could enjoy the exchange of warm sentiments without the uncomfortable residue of insincerity.

Refusal was part of the choreography of *mujamileh*. A teacher opening a bag of crisps in the lounge between classes would offer the open bag to everyone present and invite them to take one. A proud mother talking about her son's upcoming wedding with an acquaintance would almost certainly find herself extending an invitation to that person. A university student complimented on an attractive piece of clothing would likely offer it to the complimenter (Farghal & Al-Khatib 2001). In all these instances, the polite thing was to refuse the offer in a gracious, formulaic fashion. Other teachers would wish the crisp-eater good health (*sahtein*); the complimenter would tell the wearer that the clothing was intended for its owner (*l'ishabo*). The acquaintance would fabricate another obligation on the night of the wedding. If neither party was invested in a specific outcome, then the exchange might wind down after the initial offer and gracious response. If the offer was sincere, however, the initiator would repeat it many times and insist that she did, in fact, want to share her crisps or give away her scarf. The recipient's failure to refuse appropriately had the power to break down the niceness of the exchange: the example of the complimented clothing might illustrate it best. It is

absurd to imagine a college student taking off her blouse to give to a friend, to then spend the day without a top; other offers, though, are harder to read, and could be accepted haplessly, creating awkwardness or inconvenience.

Mujamileh appears in other Arabic-speaking times and places. Caton (1986) noted the careful attention that men in the Yemeni highlands paid to greeting one another appropriately, with the accurate honorifics, arguing that this ritual of greeting constituted personhood. Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) noted the range of ways that Jordanian university students responded to compliments, which they – in particular women – often used as greetings. These ritualized 'politeness formulas' (Ferguson 1976) constitute a genre where respect for the other is central. This genre mandates politeness, so by its nature requires a degree of insincerity. In *mujamileh*, it is a violation of the formula to be direct and sincere. Insincere offers and reluctant or tactical refusals are a central part of this mode of communication. Speakers perform the ideal of a selfless and overly generous friend in *mujamileh*, but everyone knows it as a performance; in Tal al-Zahra, anyone who believed a statement made in *mujamileh* would be disappointed. *Muatibeh* addressed this lacuna: its harshness actually made sincerity possible. It distinguished the relationships between acquaintances and intimates.

Friendship, effort, and disappointment

Many Jordanians criticized *muatibeh*, complaining that it was tiring and invasive. Dismissed as tedious, hypocritical, and anachronistic, *muatibeh* forced women to defend themselves and their choices, underlining all the tensions that arise when obligation and autonomy conflicted with sincerity and politeness. Underneath their complaints were concerns about being pushed around, taken advantage of, and lied to, as well as the desire – sometimes unspoken, and sometimes vocalized – that everyone just leave them alone. While successfully engaging in *muatibeh* was a means of delineating a circle of intimates and establishing one's influence within that circle, it exacted costs – monetary and emotional.

People orientated towards these costs in different ways, just as they orientated differently towards the range of capitalist subjectivities on offer. One possible approach was refusal, and one of my Tal al-Zahra interlocutors, Aziza, most closely approximated this approach. Aziza was a single woman in her late thirties, part of a growing number of unmarried women in Jordan who were, and are, collectively contributing to reshaping their families' notions of what constituted a fulfilling adult life for women (Adely 2024). These women contended with a popular narrative of their single status as a social problem; their lived experience of this problematized status varied hugely. Adely (2024) is emphatic that women's agency has a creative character, but not (usually) a revolutionary one; women bring together different and conflicting commitments in ways that are original but not without ambivalence. Aziza can be read through this light, as someone whose unchosen unconventionality was an affordance for new ways of being. Aziza took advantage of her freedom from burdensome housewife responsibilities to adopt playful modes of aspirational reinvention. She playfully imitated the Lebanese dialects that she saw on television; she experimented with chic clothing styles reminiscent of magazine spreads; she deliberately tried on behavioural tics from friends and acquaintances. These personal adaptations were often experimental, but always studied; they reflected Aziza's attention to the world around her and her absorption and interpretation of what she saw. Aziza had a fundamentally cosmopolitan outlook: from her East Amman sofa, she took in a wide range of lifestyles

on television. From her Amman taxi rides, she took in a wide range of lifestyles across the city. She compiled all of these observations as evidence that she did not have to follow the precise contours of female life that her female neighbours might have encouraged her to follow. Aziza prided herself on being an individual. Like her friends, she disliked *muatibeh*. Unlike her friends, she often refused to engage in it.

One day I went to Jafra's for coffee along with another friend of ours, Reem. They had invited Aziza, and she had waffled on, responding to the invitation before declining at the last minute when they called to ask when she was coming. An intense barrage of *muatibeh* ensued. Passing the phone back and forth between them, they told her that she should come, that they would be angry if she did not come, and that she had said she was coming so they had counted on her presence. They made every effort to show that they had expected to see her and would be disappointed if they did not see her. They went even further to introduce guilt, suggesting that Jafra had counted on her in her preparations. They invoked empty physical spaces to show how her absence would weigh on the gathering: her place was empty on the couch, and the coffee was boiled and ready for her to drink it. Their message was clear: their invitation was sincere, and politeness was no excuse for her decision to decline it. They expected her to return their invitation with attendance, at least.

After Jafra and Reem hung up the phone, they continued to complain about Aziza's absence, now with more rancour. She always did this, they said. Did she not want to see them? 'It's OK,' I told them. 'She had other things to do, there's no need to be angry at her.' My voluntary model of friendship was made explicit: if she wanted to do something else, who were we to interfere? Jafra looked at me seriously.

'We love her,' she said. 'We give her a hard time (*minatib alayha*) because we love her.'

Aziza, for her part, did not feel the love in it. She told me that she tended to avoid these shaming-and-blaming conversations, and that she preferred to distance herself from friends who treated her in the way that her colleagues had described as loving. In fact, her oldest friend, Muna – the only person that she did not have conflict with, she said – was the person who had taught her not to engage in *muatibeh*. 'It's tiring,' Aziza said. 'Muna got me used to this. You can't come over one day, you can't come over. That's all. It's much more comfortable.'

Aziza had enough forbearance in her stance against *muatibeh* that this was not her only conflict related to it; Nour often had to intervene between Aziza and the people that she had offended by her refusal to engage in this exchange of admonishing with them. Jafra, on more than one occasion, made the formal announcement that she was cutting Aziza out of her life in response to her persistent refusal to visit, call, or return text messages. Of course, Aziza's silence also constituted a refusal to engage in *muatibeh*, as Jafra's communiqués often consisted of language meant to guilt Aziza into maintaining more frequent contact. She made her genuine desire to see Aziza clear through full-throated anger that she was not seeing her. Aziza could not deny this desire without causing offence, and her inattention to visits and correspondences hurt Jafra's feelings.

Frustrated, Jafra sought Nour's sympathetic ear, and said that Aziza had clearly rejected her friendship. 'She doesn't want us,' she told Nour. 'If she did, she would visit, she would send text messages, she would return our phone calls.'

'No, that isn't true,' Nour told her. 'She wants someone to understand her! That's it. She wants you to understand her.' Aziza was not rejecting Jafra's friendship, she said. She needed her to understand why she could not always come over for coffee or respond

to messages in a timely manner. However, this understanding was not so much logical – as it was in the case of Nour, who had too many family obligations to be very social – as it was affective. Aziza had personal limitations that were left undefined. Jafra and Aziza both felt the disappointment of *muatibeh* not working, as they attempted to relate to one another in incompatible ways.

At the time, Jafra declined to respond, and dragged pensively on a cigarette to communicate that she was unconvinced of the value of understanding. Over time, the friendship between her and Aziza faltered, and then foundered. When I sent her WhatsApp messages to check in, she updated me that she is not hearing from Aziza. She experienced Aziza's cool reception of her heated *muatibeh* as rejection and searched for ways to reject Aziza in return. For her, the imperative of *muatibeh* continued as she strove to keep herself on equal footing with her friend.

In Nour's assessment, however, the problem was a different one. Jafra was doing nothing wrong, necessarily, but the cycle of obligation that she initiated with Aziza was not received the way that she intended it. Aziza was not prepared to engage in *muatibeh*, and her rejection was not of Jafra herself but of the obligation to enter into this sort of back-and-forth with her. Exercising her ability to make decisions about how she wished to spend her time, she rejected *muatibeh* as tiring and undesirable and forced her friends to accept this or live without her affections. Intimacy with Aziza did not mean consistently berating her choices and forcing her to engage in social obligations that she anyway failed to fulfil. Rather, it meant accepting her as she was. In return, she would do the same, as she and Muna had agreed to do. This demand, for acceptance rather than judgement, drew a line between her and many friends, including Jafra. While Nour represented a different archetype of female adulthood than Aziza, her interventions of this kind constituted her own experimentation with subjectivity; her cultivated tolerance and open-mindedness were also a practised and intentionally assumed experiment with a way of being friends.

Jafra and Aziza offered their friendship in different ways. Jafra made her desire to be friends evident by attempting to create a space in their friendship for honest, if harsh, discourse. Aziza offered a slightly different gift, that of authenticity, by being her independent – and at times flaky – self, with minimal tolerance for criticism. They represented divergent perspectives on friendship: Jafra valued her network highly, both for the fun she derived from it and the support her friends provided her, while Aziza – unmarried and covetous of the freedom that she imagined women elsewhere enjoyed – considered the obligation to incorporate others' visions of how she ought to behave onerous.

Nour's perspective aspired to encompass even more perspectives, including the distinct approaches of Jafra and Aziza. She defended Aziza and her need for understanding, though she complained of this tendency often. 'Aziza's complicated,' she would say when Aziza cancelled her third visit in a row, or 'she's difficult,' when Aziza would come over and refuse to eat anything offered her other than unsweetened black tea. Accepting that her friend equated sincerity with this quirky resistance to engage in meaningful exchanges of criticism – and food – did not make it any less disappointing that her friendship with Aziza did not look how she might wish it to look. Her offering of understanding was deliberate and effortful.

In her friends' analysis, Aziza was a bit odd and a bit challenging. In my analysis, she was also a person deliberately cultivating friendships that rejected (albeit inconsistently) an intimacy that was based on violating politeness conventions. Instead,

she experimented with an intimacy based on mutual understanding and acceptance. Importantly, the latter proscribes friends' excessive intrusion into one another's behaviour. Jafra, Nour, and Reem, to different degrees, experienced disappointment with Aziza because she blocked their *muatibeh*. She refused to be influenced by their admonishment, which left them powerless and stuck. Aziza's frustrated friends recognized that they could not engage her in intimate conversation; Aziza's offer of her always-sincere self was, perhaps ironically, experienced as distant.

Aziza was not alone in experimenting with understanding, accepting modes of being friends. She was more assertive than most in questioning the rules of social convention in Tal al-Zahra, but her gripes with them were not unique to her. Her decision to engage in friendship only insofar as it did not subject her to excessive criticism made her a particularly forceful champion of the need for autonomy that every woman in Tal al-Zahra articulated when she complained about the weight of social obligations, the backwardness of others' interference in her affairs, and the constant headaches, backaches, and fatigue from engaging in the constant cycle of visiting that *muatibeh* initiated. Aziza's sisters characterized her problem as a lack of flexibility (*maruneh*); while everyone had her same inclinations, most learned to flexibly work around them, putting aside their own feelings enough to let social life go on. Aziza did not have this ability.

Importantly, they did not characterize her desires as odd or unrelatable. Quite the opposite: flexibility was important precisely because the desire to be inflexible was so common. Flexibility made it possible to manage these impulses, to put aside ideals about how things should be in favour of pragmatism, accepting the imperfect reality of friendship and keeping people in their lives. Her lack of flexibility meant it was difficult to create intimacy with her, and accordingly her friendships faltered.

It is perhaps tempting to read Jafra's approach to friendship as following the rules of engagement in Tal al-Zahra and therefore more harmonious and free of disappointment. This was not the case: while Jafra and Aziza's friendship was uniquely challenging, most relationships between women included interludes of mutual disappointment. Flexibility, in practice, meant overlooking minor offences in the name of social harmony. In the analytical terms I offer here, many extensions of kindness were dismissed as *mujamileh*, and many attempts at *muatibeh* led to Aziza-like retreat and alienation, although often expressed in less principled ways, usually covered up by *mujamileh*. The opportunities for misunderstanding were myriad, as were the opportunities for disappointment. *Mujamileh* and *muatibeh* outline rules that, if followed perfectly, protect both parties to an interaction from humiliation, from excessive generosity, from betrayal. However, this level of execution is impossible. Instead, they make all interactions slight brushes with the risk of this humiliation, excessive generosity, and betrayal.

Conclusion

The triangle of Jafra, Nour, and Aziza echoes of different strands of the literature on friendship. Like the Greeks, they were selective with their friends and professed to form close bonds with only people of high morals. Shared morality (*akhlaq*) was a prerequisite for any friendship; friendship with people without *akhlaq* represented a social hazard. Aziza's conception of authentic affection and acceptance has features of the universal friendship that Silver (1990) attributes to Smith, and that anthropologists so heartily emphasize is not accessible to everybody; Aziza's own struggles to form

relationships are evidence enough that this path was an ambivalent one. The frequent, and effective, use of *muatibeh* throughout Tal al-Zahra relationships underlines that the idea of 'ethnographically specific' notions of friendship is itself an unstable assertion as it expects friendships to be more consistent than they are. In Tal al-Zahra, the local meaning of friendship was being constantly constructed and contested as women negotiated the terms of relationship between themselves. It was rare for two friends to understand one another seamlessly, without disappointment. In Pitt-Rivers's words, 'solidarity and cooperation cannot do without a degree of indulgence' (Pitt-Rivers 2016: 443). Judgement persisted alongside the indulgence: as Jafra articulated it to me, 'We always say, people don't understand, people don't understand [when they are rude]. What, it's only us that understand?' The implied lament: how can it be that so many people behave so badly? I list these links briefly here in acknowledgement of the varied truths refracted through these distinct readings of friendship.

More pointedly, though, what can be learned from this example about friendship and disappointment and their intersection with political economy? For one, it shows how ideal models of friendship, whether they rely on moral exclusivity or a particularly capitalist subjectivity, fail to capture the lived experience of friendship in this context. The example of *mujamileh* and *muatibeh*, and the many moves through them that constitute the formation and maintenance of friendships between women in Jordan, show how inhabiting a friendship is a processual accomplishment. Friends might achieve honest intimacy in moments of profound solidarity or connection. But the continual sparring of *muatibeh* shows how much work the ideal demands and how infrequently that work leads to gratifying results. Per Lugones and Spelman (1983), the effort of having an ideal friendship is one that often involves disappointment and discomfort at least some of the time.

Secondly, Jafra's, Aziza's, and Nour's negotiations of their friendships show how disappointments come to be understood and enacted in dialogue with the political-economic realities unfolding in the background. The elements of reflection, adaptation, and analysis in everyday social life in Jordan under changing economic conditions have already been well documented by Hughes (2021), who has eloquently illustrated the tensions that exist in Jordan between inherited formulations of social morality and timely exigencies of cost and scarcity. The Jordanians Hughes worked with creatively strive to strike a balance between these pressures. In a chapter on the reconfiguration of marriage rites in rural and urbanizing settings, Hughes draws out the ways that the weddings have changed to reflect the economic conditions of twenty-first-century Jordan. When the cost of a wedding saturated with the symbolism of generosity and hospitality becomes, as it has for so many Jordanians, ruinously expensive, families often face choices. Should they attempt to hold a massive wedding, bankrupting themselves in the process – and potentially still failing to enact the wedding ritual as imagined? Or should they accept pared-down, dry versions of the ritual, shorter and cheaper affairs that lack the connective power of a longer, more elaborate (and expensive) celebration? Wedding guests devote plenty of time and energy evaluating the bride and groom's event choices; either way, people will talk.

I understand the friendship without *muatibeh* that Aziza offered her friends as similar in nature to the pared-down, perfunctory weddings that Hughes observed among his more pragmatic participants. It offered the outward form of the friendship reasonably intact (a kind of box-checking around having friends), but the connectedness and mutuality were no longer there. A couple's wedding, though, is not

a processual relationship in the way friendship is. Guests might anyway attend out of *mujamileh* – an appearance, done for reasons of politeness and formality. Anyway, the wedding's most important function of allowing the bride and groom to commence married life is unaffected by gossip about what was served at the event. Friendship, however, could not so easily be converted into such a perfunctory mode. Its closeness required the discomfort and up-close engagement demanded by *muatibeh*. Aziza's friends' and sisters' consensus that her approach to friendships was unsatisfactory underlines the futility of an affection-based approach to friendship in this context, because affection always emerges processually alongside other feelings and ways of relating. It also shows how, despite her approach being unsatisfactory, she did maintain many friendships. She did engage with her friends around the confusions of friendship in their particular social context. Unsatisfactory is not the same as unreal or absent. Disappointment is a part of the processual maintenance of friendship.

The literature on friendship suggests that most of what is ugly in friendship – its self-interested sides, its disappointing moments, and its stubborn refusal to live up to our expectations of it – are obstacles. These aspects disqualify relationships from the status of friendship, or downgrade it to a lesser form. But this literature discounts the everyday effort required to do friendship, effort that is highlighted here in the elaborate etiquette of *mujamileh* and *muatibeh*. Attention to the friendship choreographies that women invented to perform this etiquette, and to the way they take shape alongside other political and economic social shifts, shows that friendship is processual, uncomfortable, and full of daily efforts that build intimacy. This perspective draws attention away from the scholarly juxtaposition of friendship against an ideal type of friendship, and into the daily realities of lives in specific political-economic contexts, where friendship is shifting and changing as quickly as any other area of social life.

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NOTES

[1] This set of references incorporates ethnographic work from Iran, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco; by any account, a broad spread of geographies, all of them consistently appearing on syllabi for courses in the anthropology of the Middle East.

[2] Nour, an Iraqi woman living in Amman, spoke with a Baghdadi accent.

[3] Beeman (1976) noted a similar dynamic in Iranian politesses: people recognized that polite interactions required roles, and accordingly picked up whatever role was required to move the interaction along.

[4] Thanks to Aziza and Jafra, Nour became my landlady; my rent payments allowed her to top up her cash reserves without going through her husband, a self-evidently desirable arrangement. She took pains to treat my presence as an affective boon rather than a financial one, calling me a part of her family and once recounting a dream where she asked me to help her with the children. Again, money and friendship thoroughly mixed in this case.

[5] Much of *mujamileh* consists of what Charles Ferguson (1976) calls 'root-echo responses', paired statements that make use of the same three-letter root. These are common in Arabic. Ferguson uses the example of '*mabruk*' and '*allah y'barik fik*', the word for congratulations and its formulaic response, which both use the b-r-k root.

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Proximité et déception en amitié en Jordanie

Résumé

Les modèles traditionnels occidentaux de l'amitié supposent que les amis s'apprécient mutuellement et ils impliquent donc des sentiments positifs réciproques. Les récits d'amitié d'autres temps et d'autres lieux suggèrent pourtant que la déception va aussi souvent de pair avec l'amitié que l'affection mutuelle. Des anthropologues ont relevé le problème de la déception en amitié, examinant les liens de l'amitié avec l'essor des sociétés de marché et sa capacité à résister au statut de classe ou à le renforcer. Cependant, personne n'a encore théorisé la déception que suscite l'amitié elle-même. Le présent article avance que ce sentiment fait partie intégrante de l'entretien processuel de l'amitié et qu'on la négocie d'une manière qui reflète des dynamiques sociales plus larges, notamment celle de l'économie politique. Pour illustrer ce point de vue, l'autrice s'appuie sur un travail de terrain mené en Jordanie, où les femmes doivent composer avec des normes opposant insincérité polie (*mujamileh*) et registre intime de la réprimande (*muatibeh*). Cette dynamique crée une foule de situations propices à la déception, que les femmes interprètent à la lumière des changements sociaux en cours qui créent de nouvelles attentes et de nouvelles aspirations dans les amitiés féminines.

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