

Unveiling Saudi Feminism(s): Historicization, Heterogeneity, and Corporeality in Women's Movements

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ABSTRACT

Background *Current Western discourses on women's movements in Saudi Arabia proffer an understanding that is adverse to history and sidelines the region's local knowledges, replacing such knowledges with a techno-utopian assumption that technology would produce better social or political conditions, and exhibit a pattern of disembodiment.*

Analysis *This article endeavours to disturb ahistorical, monolithic, and disembodied accounts of Saudi women's movements through three interventions: the historicization of the Saudi women's activism and feminist movements; the recognition of the heterogeneity of Saudi women's movements; and finally, the acknowledgement of the corporeality of Saudi women's resistance.*

Conclusion and implications *These interventions facilitate a better, more nuanced, and more contextual understanding of revolutionary and feminist practices, not only in Saudi Arabia, but also elsewhere in the world.*

Keywords *Saudi Arabia; #Women2Drive; Feminism; Technological utopianism; Driving; Embodiment*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Les discours occidentaux actuels dépeignent les mouvements féministes en Arabie saoudite d'une manière qui est contraire à l'histoire et qui marginalise les savoirs locaux de la région. Ces discours occidentaux remplacent les savoirs locaux par une approche technoutopique selon laquelle la technologie réaliserait de meilleures conditions sociales ou politiques. Ces discours manifestent en outre une tendance vers la désincarnation.*

Analyse *Cet article met en question les comptes rendus ahistoriques, monolithiques et désincarnés sur les mouvements féministes saoudiens en soulignant : l'historicisation du militantisme des femmes saoudiennes et des mouvements féministes dans le pays; la reconnaissance de l'hétérogénéité des mouvements féministes saoudiens; et finalement la corporalité de la résistance par les femmes saoudiennes.*

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Conclusion et implications Ces mises au point permettent une meilleure compréhension, mieux contextualisée et plus nuancée, de pratiques révolutionnaires et féministes, non seulement en Arabie saoudite mais aussi ailleurs dans le monde.

Mots clés Arabie saoudite; #Women2Drive; Féminisme; Utopie technologique; Conduite automobile; Incarnation

Introduction

In a royal decree issued on September 26, 2017, the Saudi King Salman announced on state television that he would lift the ban on women driving, granting women the right to get behind the wheel starting from June 2018 (Kalin & Bayoumy, 2017). The decree came after a series of activist efforts and campaigns to end the ban, which gained momentum in 2011. As mass protests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were launched in an event popularly called the Arab Spring, a much smaller movement, called Women2Drive, started in June 2011 to lift the ban on female driving (Al Omran, 2011).

Many forms of gender inequality exist in Saudi Arabia, including the hindrance of political and economic participation (Al-Rasheed, 2013), but the ban preventing women from driving has represented a system that keeps women restricted in terms of both mobility and morality. The ban has both produced and reinforced the domesticity of Saudi women, “whose ultimate role is to demonstrate the piety of the state and its leading role in maintaining an authentic nation” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 20). The ban has been perplexing in such a way that it has neither been cultural, legal, nor religious in nature. The country’s traffic code has never explicitly stated the ban but locally issued licenses have been required to drive (IBP Inc., 2015). However, in practice, these licenses are not issued for women, making it effectively illegal for them to drive (IBP Inc., 2015). The ban has also been enforced by the religious police, *mutawa* (IBP Inc., 2015), as well as the state police. Interestingly, women in rural parts and remote villages of Saudi Arabia, which generally represent families with stricter cultural and religious values, have been accustomed to driving (Kirk, 2017). However, other women participating in driving, who have been largely urban residents, have faced arrest and other disciplinary measures from the state (Murphy, 2008). The ban has, in a sense, become an unwritten law prohibiting women from driving motor vehicles.

Western media (see Fisher, 2011; Hyde, 2011; Watson, 2011) have misleadingly and ahistorically categorized the Women2Drive campaign, which encouraged Saudi women with foreign driver’s licenses to post photos and videos of themselves driving, as another protest in a string of Arab uprisings galvanized by or mobilized through the use of social media. As Katy Watson (2011) commented in the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News*:

One thing it has in common with the Arab protests is the role social media played. Through Twitter and Facebook, the ‘Women2Drive’ campaign gave women a voice for other people to hear. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly supported their cause. Even some of the Saudi royals have backed what the women are doing. (para. 6)

Western media’s coverage of the Women2Drive campaign was not different than those of the Arab uprisings, which commonly incorporated terms such as “Twitter Revolution”

and “Facebook Revolution” (Esseghaier, 2012; Giglio, 2011; Smith, 2011; Vargas, 2012). Many of these reports have turned “bloggers” and “social media activists” into symbols of the uprisings, with many, including the Google executive Wael Ghonim and the self-declared atheist and blogger activist Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, gaining world fame.

Preoccupation with social media also spilled over into academic research. Scholarly work on the Women2Drive campaign has questioned whether Twitter usage promoted social progress (Chaudhry, 2014) and argued that digital activism revolutionized Arab women’s struggle for equality and human rights (Sara, 2015; Yuce, Agarwal, & Wigand, 2013). The interpretations of the events through the prism of social media were, according to Christian Fuchs (2012), a “search for control, simplicity and predictability in a situation of high complexity, unpredictability and uncertainty” (p. 386). They substituted thinking about society with a focus on technology, thus reducing societal problems to a technical level (Fuchs, 2012; Lim, 2012). The technoutopian accounts of the Women2Drive campaign resemble much of the early analysis of the Arab uprisings,¹ which proffered an understanding of the MENA movement that was adverse to history and sidelined the region’s local knowledges, replacing such knowledges with an assumption that technology would produce better social or political conditions (Alrasheed, 2017). Importantly, these accounts obscured historical resources and material actions while shifting attention away from complexities that inhere within the region (Alrasheed, 2017).

Besides dehistoricization and the erasure of complexity, technologically utopian discourses about social and political movements, such as those of the Arab uprisings and the Women2Drive campaign, exhibit a pattern of disembodiment. While the human body is inherent to the formation of any movement (such as bodies protesting, bodies marching, bodies performing, or bodies driving), it is usually forgotten and alienated in discussions that focus on technology in investigating social and political movements (Lim, 2014). This discursive separation, or what Donna Haraway would describe as “dualism” (1991), between corporeality and political movements, is a ramification of the imagination that virtual technologies can be fenced off from the real (Bogard, 1996; Penny, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Because of this separation between the real and the virtual, an offshoot of Western modernity’s binary way of knowing (Haraway, 1991), social media are imagined as possessing qualities removed from people’s behaviour. They are celebrated and made distinct from human physical abilities, capabilities, and skills.

In his book *The Naked Blogger of Cairo*, Marwan Kraidy (2016) has drawn attention to the role of the “body” in the Arab uprisings. He argues that focusing on new digital media overshadows the role of old media—the human body, graffiti, poetry, singing—which animated Arab uprisings in Egypt and Syria a century ago and still continue to mediate recent Arab rebellion and activism (Kraidy, 2016). Before the internet, people used their bodies in the French Revolution in 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 (Kraidy, 2013). The body is also indispensable in recent Arab activism:

When Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated to protest repression and poverty in Tunisia; when Alia-al-Mahdy posted nude pictures and transgressive text on her “A Rebel’s Diary” blog in Egypt; when peaceful Syrian protests demonstrated bare-chested to prove they were not concealing

weapons; they all used their bodies as media in brazenly political behavior that violated social taboos and political red lines. (Kraidy, 2013, p. 287)

The examples provided by Kraidy all represent radical actions and occurred in life-threatening conditions: they are “naked” actions. But even if revolutionary and activist actions are not as bold, strong, and brazen as Bouazizi’s self-immolation or Alia’s nude pictures, they still rely on the body as a main resource for resistance (Lim, 2018). And this informs part of this project: how to retell women’s movements in Saudi Arabia, which seemed to offer more quiet actions than other movements in the region, through a prism of the body.

The “body” to be incorporated in this narrative, however, is not the Orientalized body. Infused with a utopian way of speaking about technology evident in discussions of the MENA movements is an Orientalist imagination of Saudi women as the exotic “Other” (Said, 1978). A noticeably exotic dimension to media coverage of the recent Saudi women’s movements revolves around an unveiling of the mysterious. Photographs juxtaposing Saudi women swathed in traditional long, black veils—*abayas* and *niqabs*²—with modern cars surfaced on mainstream media such as the *Guardian* (Malik, 2011), *CNN* (Jamjoom, 2011), and the *Washington Post* (Fisher, 2013). These articles epitomize not only the exotic but also a victimhood discourse in which women are perceived as oppressed and subjugated by their society and religion (Ahmed, 1982; Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). This sexualizing and victimizing narrative heightened a binary rhetorical opposition between tradition, as symbolized by the black veil, and modernity, symbolized by cars or cellphones. Such Orientalist and techno-utopian discursive elements construe a dramatic and exciting scene in the Western imaginary, at the cost of the complexity and history of the culture and the context of women’s movements in Saudi Arabia. This scene, which combines contrastive elements and reinforces a “demarcation between East and West” (Said, 1978, p. 39) as well as tradition and modernity, has represented the movement in reductively techno-utopian and Orientalist terms.

The necessity of conceptualizing the movements otherwise than through the lenses of Orientalism and technological utopianism suggests that a rethinking of “agency” (Butler, 1997) is necessary in the context of Saudi women’s movements. Drawing on notions that build bridges between structure and agency (Goffman, 1959), it is revealed that these activists, when opposing current social systems, work within pre-existing social and cultural meanings. In this context, the concept of “performance” can be used to reassess how the women’s movements are understood, drawing attention to “shared knowledge needed for these performances” and “existing repertoires of meaning” (Fuist, 2014, p. 429). It also can steer attention to the role of the body (and its extensions) in modifying existing meaning systems—signs, symbols, and representations of the movement.

The analytical tools employed for this article can be summarized as follows:

1. Using historical analysis as a perspective to situate current events, thus discovering points of reference in which experiences of the past resonate (or not) with the present.

2. Employing a critical perspective through which to step further away from dominant Western narratives of the Saudi women's movement due to their failure to observe the complexity and heterogeneity of the movements and their cultural and social contexts.
3. Adopting performativity as an analytical lens.

Utilizing critical discourse and historical analyses as the chief methods, this article privileges voices from scholars and activists in Saudi Arabia, and their arguments are not subsumed into dominant academic discourse originating from Western scholars and feminists. This article also relies on different sources of data, including academic texts and media commentaries produced by the regions' academics and activists, journalistic accounts, Saudi creative productions, and social media conversations and debates produced by different Saudi actors engaged with the movements.

There is a dilemma facing many academics writing on Middle Eastern women or activists: the dilemma of producing work that can portray MENA women as complex agents while fighting against negative regional representations and local patriarchy. This dilemma is beyond the scope of this article and better left to Saudi activists. Therefore, the question of which forms of Saudi feminism are legitimate and which are not is avoided here.

To sum up, to produce a better understanding of the women's movements in Saudi Arabia, Orientalist and techno-utopian narratives that overlook the role of stories, histories, voices, and women's bodies in Saudi women's struggles—and also portray those women as silent mythical creatures prior to the introduction of social media—must be abandoned. This does not entail sidelining how digital media shapes political and social practices, but in order to develop a critical understanding of new media and an informative account of MENA's cultural and political complexities, new media must be contextualized in their historical, political, social, and bodily dynamics, and the development of new media use must also be understood with geopolitical and historical sensibility. In this way, new media are not seen as ahistorical objects but as ones that are embedded in historical accounts and perceived as developments with local precedents.

Attempting to achieve this goal, this article endeavours to disturb rigid accounts of Saudi women's movements through three interventions: *historicizing* Saudi women's movements, and highlighting in these historical accounts the ambivalent interaction between local media and Saudi women; recognizing and highlighting the *heterogeneity* of Saudi women's movements; and finally, acknowledging the *corporeality*, the resourcefulness of *the body* for Saudi women's resistance even with the use of new media.

Historicizing the movement

Social movements are historical social phenomena (Sogge & Dutting, 2010) and their media use are shaped by historical conditions. To fully understand “their politics, choice of strategies, and the meaning and impact of their presence and actions” (Horn, 2013, p. 19), movements need to be read in their historical context.

The Women2Drive campaign is not a new kind of movement. It has a history extending back to Saudi driving activism in the 1990s and wider Arab women's movements earlier in the century. It can be more accurately described as another manifestation of forms of resistance that have marked women's struggles in Saudi

Arabia and in the region periodically since the early twentieth century. Two years prior to the 2011 driving movement, female activists in Saudi Arabia launched a project called *We the Women* and produced and distributed stickers with messages, such as “To drive, or not to drive, that is the question” and “I don’t like the backseat” (Mackey, 2009), to raise awareness about the driving ban. In 2008, Al-Huwaider, a known Saudi activist, drove in Riyadh and posted a video on YouTube of herself driving (Yes2WomenDriving, 2008). In the preceding year, she and another activist formed the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia and sent a petition to King Abdullah with 1,100 signatures supporting Saudi women’s right to drive (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2012). Beyond the right to drive, Al-Huwaider’s online campaign revolved around women’s rights in general. Her online writings intimately analyzed the position of women in Arab society, in which she criticized the status of human rights and protested discriminations and violence against women (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2011).

In December 2005, approximately 20 women gathered in Riyadh to commemorate their defiance of the ban fifteen years prior, on November 6, 1990 (Ambah, 2005), which is another important date in the history of women’s struggle in the country. On that particular date, prior to the emergence of social media, 47 Saudi women in Riyadh drove their cars in protest against the driving ban. They were imprisoned for one day and had their passports seized, with some losing their jobs as a result of the protest (Al Tamimi, 2012).

The 1990s driving campaign took place during the Gulf War, with the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia. In recalling her days prior to the driving campaign, Aisha Al-Mana, one of the campaign participants in the 1990s, said:

Our main obstacle was mobility ... This was November 1990, during the Kuwait War. I had recently been traveling from Bahrain to Dhahran, and I passed a convoy of American troops. I saw American women driving trucks. And I can’t even drive my car? I said to myself, “I’m going to drive and tell the Americans to go back home.” Americans here are doing whatever they want. They talk about democracy. It’s democratic for them, but not for us. (cited in Danforth, 2016, p. 66)

Watching female American soldiers driving trucks and mobilizing in Saudi Arabia at the outset of the Gulf War emboldened Al-Mana to defy the ban in the hope of limiting the control of American troops on her land while enhancing her own mobility. Resentment against American imperialistic notions of freedom uttered by Al-Mana, also shared by other “women drivers,” was another notable source of the driving campaign. Even years later, some of the drivers still held resentment against the United States. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2002, one driver said, “Americans are always saying they’re concerned with freedom and the democratic will of people ... But they didn’t care about what was happening inside our country in 1990. And they still don’t care. We are seen only as the ladies in black” (Dowd, 2002, para. 20).

The struggle against hyper-masculine laws has roots in earlier struggles of Saudi women and particularly in 1990s activism focused on driving. However, it can also be located in the subversive heritage of Arab women. In 1919, Huda Sha’arawi, an Egyptian feminist, openly challenged the lack of women’s participation in public and political

spaces by organizing the largest women's demonstration against the British colonial state (Deb, 2016). Although the movement was led by elite women, such as Huda Sha'arawi, women in villages also participated in anti-colonial work, such as "the destruction of railway lines and other acts of sabotage" (Deb, 2016, p. 180). In the same way that the Saudi women's driving protest occurred as a reaction to the sight of female American soldiers driving in Saudi Arabia, women's impairment of British railways in Egypt symbolized a struggle for free territory liberated from the colonizer, and a desire to limit the colonizer's mobility while widening colonized women's terrains.

This is not to say that this anti-colonial history was the main source for the ideology of feminism in Saudi Arabia. Rather, it is to situate the Saudi struggle for women's rights in the region's long-standing female-led struggle and highlight similarities between the two forms of resistance. The tradition of dissidence against patriarchal systems dates back to the liberation era from colonialism in the early nineteenth century and that era's subsequent formation of a heterogeneous collection of women's movements raising awareness of the socio-political conditions that limit women's equality or participation.

Chronicling media

Investigating the wider history of Saudi women's struggles to carve a space in political and social life, this article underscores a complex relationship between these struggles and media. This relationship has been hugely shaped by political, social, and economic exigencies. Saudi women's involvement in public media can be traced to the role of female newspaper writers in the 1940s, when pages dedicated to women started to emerge and women often edited these sections (Al-Sudairy, 2017). The *Kuraish* newspaper's women pages, for example, had a few female editors, even though their names were never mentioned. In an account of Saudi women's feminism, Hatoon Al Fassi (2016) indicates that the presence of women in the press was publicly known when Latifah Alkhatib published articles in the newspaper *Sahifat Albilad* under her real name in 1951, followed by Thuria Qabel in 1959, at a time when many women chose to publish under a pseudonym (Al-Sudairy, 2017). Both Alkhatib and Qabel's writings showed a social and collective sense of justice on behalf of women. For example, in one of her essays Alkhatib demanded a maternity hospital (Al-Sudairy, 2017).

During the 1950s, more Saudi women joined Alkhatib in writing for national newspapers. The expansion of education for girls in the 1950s caused a noticeable growth in women's literary participation. The development of women's presence and participation, however, went through a drawback during the 1980s. The siege of the Grand Mosque in Makkah by the tribal and religious militant Juhaiman Alotaibi in 1979 had an influence in limiting the presence of women in media (Al Fassi, 2016). The extremist insurgents of Alotaibi's group called for the overthrow of the Saudi royal family and advocated a return to the puritan way of Islam, a rejection of Westernization and an abolishment of Western new media, such as television. After two weeks, the siege ended, but the event had a deep impact, especially on women's participation in Saudi Arabia. The main impact of the crisis crystalized around the appearance of women on television and their engagement in public spheres (Al Fassi, 2016). Subsequently, the media started to embody a restrictive space limiting women's participation and empowerment.

The lack of women's presence in public media did not mark an absolute end to Saudi feminism but can be seen as discursive interventions occurring across stretches of time. Despite the fact that women's media presence was restricted, religious and educational spaces were more available to them. According to Nora Doaiji (2017), while the state aligned itself more clearly with the Saudi Islamism group known as the Sahwa³ after the siege of Makkah, lower oil prices due to the Gulf War led to the acceleration of Saudization policies and thus an increase in Saudi women's employment in educational and religious sectors. During this period, Saudi Islamist feminists began to emerge as "celebrities" and respected icons in society (Doaiji, 2017). These women were hugely influenced by the Sahwa, but also "maintained their own agency in female spaces and formulated their own Islamic feminist critiques" (Doaiji, 2017, p. 4).

The post-1980 era was more than a setback in women's participation; it was a moment that enabled the conjecture of different discourses, inscribing, transforming, and reinforcing the travesty of Saudi feminism. While the moment served as a temporal deterrence to liberal feminism, it conjoined it with different narratives, mainly nationalism and Islamism. Further, it produced long negotiations of the tropes and metaphors born of these narratives, such as the metaphor of Saudi women being "queens" served by males that is championed by Saudi conservatives (Doaiji, 2017). Although conservatives and Islamists produced the image, actors in other feminist discourses continually engaged with it (Doaiji, 2017). Feminist activists have ridiculed this metaphor by memes, GIFs, and hashtags. They have also celebrated feminist achievements by referring to the trope of "queen." In her book *Daring to Drive*, Manal Al-Sharif (2017) states, "The Saudi men call women 'queens,' and say that queens don't drive. Women often mock this title by saying 'The kingdom of one king and millions of queens'" (p. 10). During Queen Elizabeth's visit to Saudi Arabia, a photo of her driving her jaguar was also circulated around on social media with comments such as "real queens drive" (Al-Sharif, 2017).

Observing heterogeneity

Despite their embeddedness in a historical struggle, Saudi feminist movements cannot be described as a spin-off of one source of knowledge. They are, rather, a repository of different knowledges and a conjuncture of intersecting forces. Many discussions of the recent Saudi women's movements have pointed out that the conceptions of gender in Saudi Arabia are underpinned by a shared understanding invoked by Islam (see Calamur, 2017; Farrell, 2017). Particularly, Wahhabism⁴ is framed as "an ahistorical coherent corpus of religious knowledge that is responsible for persistent exclusion of Saudi women" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 16), a conception built on the assumed polarity between the West and Islam. Contrary to this conception, which dehistoricizes a much more complex world and simplifies the experience of Saudi women, Saudi women's movements embody different strands and ideologies rather than one coherent approach with shared tenets and objectives. Feminism in Saudi Arabia is multiple, a site for different and intertwined forms of knowledge. There is, therefore, no uniform feminism. Saudi feminism(s), instead, is shaped by different ways of knowing and modes of engagement with gender and women's issues, as well as different social and political developments. This article highlights four of these feminist trends and identifies the different beliefs serving as their foundations.

Legal

The first group of female activists focus on the legal dimensions of feminism. They endeavour to empower women by challenging patriarchal laws. Alongside Aysha Alamina, Wajeha Al-Huwaider and Fawzia Al-Oyouni have also worked on women's rights. They are known for their attempt to help a Canadian woman, Nathalie Morin, who was subjected to abuse by her Saudi husband. The criminal court in Al Khobar province charged the two activists with instigating the wife against her husband and attempting to smuggle her and her kids out of the country (HRW, 2013).⁵ The two activists were sentenced to two months in prison and a two-year travel ban (HRW, 2013). In 2008, Al-Huwaider also participated in activism and gained media attention for her work. In one interview, she insisted that gender inequality is an outcome of a legal system that renders Saudi women dependent and vulnerable (Zordiask, 2012). Al-Huwaider further argued that once these legal issues are corrected, women's rights will be normalized in Saudi society (Zordiask, 2012).

Another activist, Hala Al-Dosari, participated in the Women2Drive campaign and her writings were featured in different media outlets, including the *Guardian* (Al-Dosari, 2016) and *Aljazeera* (Al-Dosari, 2011). Besides voicing her critique in the media and defying the driving ban (focusing on the legality of empowerment), she directs a women's rights advocacy project, Aminah, through which she offers information to women about human rights and ways women can take advantage of holes or gaps in Saudi legal systems (see Aminah, 2018).

Political

Another approach advocated by Saudi women activists is politically, rather than legally, mobilized. Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013), an academic in King's College, mainly posits that neither Islam nor tribal ethos explains gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. She argues instead that the marriage of nationalism and religion makes women symbols for the nation, similar to the role of secular nationalism in non-Arab countries. As with secular nationalism, religious nationalism singles out women as pillars of a nation's imagined communities (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Both imaginations are dominated by "women questions" despite differences in legitimation narratives, motives, and solutions (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

In this context, the state forged a convergence of tribal ethos, the Wahhabi tradition and its ideologues, and the obedience to the monarchy to keep women in patriarchal relationships as part of the imagining of a Saudi nation (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Obsession with women, their bodies, and segregation, therefore, reflects the process of defining national boundaries important to the state and to the maintenance of their legitimacy.

Cultural

The third strand exists not on political or legal understandings, but it affirms that women face misogynistic religion and a male-dominated culture. Actors in this discourse interpret misogyny as a cultural and religious issue. Among them is Mona Eltahawy (2012), an Egyptian woman who lived part of her life in Saudi Arabia. In an article for *Foreign Policy* entitled "Why They Hate Us," she writes, "Name me an Arab country, and I'll recite

a litany of abuses fueled by a toxic mix of culture and religion that few seem willing or able to disentangle lest they blaspheme or offend” (para. 6).

This circle of feminists, largely critical of cultural and religious components of misogyny, is various. While Eltahawy rejects Western patriarchy, this circle also includes groups of activists who describe themselves as ex-Muslims and have sought asylum in Britain or the U.S. Many tell stories of abuse they were subjected to when in Saudi Arabia. CNN (2017) recently published “The Saudi Women Afraid to Go Home,” interviewing three of these women. In their call for women’s liberation, some of these feminists invoke an Oriental voice and align themselves with right-wing politics. Following the texts produced by many of them reveals that some have displayed support for alt-right members, including Paul Joseph Watson, a vlogger based in England known for promoting alt-right rhetoric.

Islamic

The fourth group includes those who work to empower women through religious solutions and who believe they should work within Islamic frameworks to achieve that. They situate women’s emancipation within an Islamic framework and invoke Islamic teachings as ideal solutions for gender issues and social problems in Saudi society. While the previous group draws on a utopian and ahistorical understanding of Western liberalism, this group poignantly reinforces a utopian understanding of Islam and reiterates that Islamic teaching responds to any modern dilemma. Nawal Aleid, Rugayah Almuhareb, Asmaa Alrwaished, and Noura Assad are the most prominent academic names associated with this discourse and are described as being against women’s rights by liberal Saudi feminists (Hijazi, 2004). They have fought against the introduction of sexual harassment laws because they understand them to be a means to normalize a more open society (Hijazi, 2004). They have rejected any call for lifting the ban on women’s driving, describing the campaign as an elitist one aimed to serve upper-class women (Hijazi, 2004). However, Islamic feminists have also concerned themselves with other women’s issues. They have made explicit demands focusing on the struggle of divorced and widowed women, demanding salaries for housewives and support for mothers (Hijazi, 2004). They have also continually urged the state to expand female employment in all-women spaces.

While many ignore this group’s role in shaping women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, it is the most active in producing academic scholarship on women’s rights that is guided by Islamic principles (Algoftail, 2016). They have, for example, established a centre for women’s rights in Riyadh with the goals of, according to the centre’s website, “building a positive public opinion towards women’s issues” and “providing intellectual and scientific support for women active in their communities” (Bahethat, 2017, n.p.).

Al-Rasheed (2013) highlights that Islamist women, just as liberal women, have asserted a niche in the public sphere. They have contributed regularly to political, social, and economic problems relevant to them as women. Unlike liberal feminists, they have located the roots of discrimination in social norms rather than religious teachings. Therefore, they have avoided a critical reading of Islamic fatwas or confrontation with religious scholars (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

While plurality is a positive phenomenon, it also leads to a level of contentiousness that may hinder solidarity among different feminist circles. Such division and fragmentation are also reflected online. Despite promises of online spaces as deliberative, networked public spheres (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2009), these promises have not been fulfilled for the feminist groups referred to. While many members of these groups have engaged in online debates about the nature of feminism (Doaiji, 2017), women's empowerment, femininity, religion, law, the state, the West, and other issues and actors relevant to Saudi feminism, they have neither reached any coherence nor consensus. A wide range of feminisms and the fragmented online environment have collectively made the discord more conspicuous.

Corporeality: Embodying and performing the movements

Technological utopian discourses of Saudi women's movements have noticeably detached the role of the body from these movements. Although the human body is essential in protests and critical to understanding the cultural and material nuances of social movements (Lim, 2018), the role of body in women's movements in Saudi Arabia have been widely neglected in the discussions surrounding them. This article aims to counter this dissipation of the body by incorporating an analysis of the corporeal as an anchor of resistance knowledge and action in Saudi women's movements.

In order to highlight the corporeal elements of Saudi women's movements, they are examined from the perspective of performance (Butler, 1979; Fuist, 2014). Performances, in what Todd Fuist (2014) specifically calls *ideological performance*, offer a "possible shift toward a more grounded, interactional understanding" (p. 427) of movements. Here, ideological performances are not only public and conscious performances found in large-scale movements but they also include private and "regular parts of our interactive world" (p. 433). Such concepts proffer an opportunity to observe how performances rely on aesthetics, humour, clothing, references, symbols, and knowledges, and locates through these both performers and audiences in shared meaning systems (Fuist, 2014). Performance theories, such as that of Fuist, also steer attention to the role of the body (and its extensions) in mediating and modifying existing meaning systems, and thus they provide a holistic, rather than fragmentary or binary, vision of media and human bodies.

Performances and the presence of the body are compared in three recent developments of the demand for freedom of women's mobility: the Women2Drive movement, the creative spaces of *Wadjda* and *Hwages*, both are videos produced by Saudi filmmakers/artists, and, finally, the 2017 silent walking protest. A comparison between the three demonstrates a shift toward more "embodiment" in the past decade, from driving, represented in the Women2Drive movement, to cycling, shown in *Wadjda* and *Hwages*, and then walking, represented by the 2017 silent walking protest. While the demand for driving is ongoing, the body in the course of feminist movements in Saudi Arabia has become more engaged and active in creating meaning and performing social action. Automotive mobility was at the forefront in the earlier stages. However, the machine became simpler, by turning into a bicycle, and then, in the latest form of resistance, it disappeared altogether as a tool of protest.

The driver

The Women2Drive campaign was active for several years as women mounted pressure on the government to lift the ban on driving. From the 1990s, there were reports of scattered incidents in which women were caught driving and some were even reported to have died in car accidents while attempting to drive (see *Al Arabiya News*, 2008; *BBC News*, 2009). The campaign, however, gained new momentum in 2011 when around fifty women took to the streets, many in the company of relatives and friends. Their companions were a source of support for the drivers and, in some cases, videotaped them. The campaign occurred in different locations in Saudi Arabia's big cities and the main prerequisite for participation was holding a driver's license from another country. Throughout its years, the campaign maintained rules for its participants, such as maintaining the legality of action (that the participants should be technically allowed to drive by having driver's licenses), driving only during the day, avoiding direct confrontation with the government, and avoiding gathering in central locations to avoid the pitfall of the 1990 dissent (Women2Drive, 2012).

While face visibility was not a requirement for the movement (many drivers wore their *niqabs*), the participants maintained dialogues with their companions. Eman Alnajfan, an activist in the campaign, could not drive herself but asked another woman, Azza Alshmasi, to drive her through the city of Riyadh (Al Omran, 2011). During the ride, Alnajfan videotaped the driver, the streets they passed, and the driver's three kids, who sat in the back. Alnajfan also made comments during the ride on Alshmasi's excellent capabilities as a driver and the fact that the kids were wearing safety belts. She and the driver also commented on the reactions of other drivers to seeing a woman driving.

The campaign also relied on the visibility of speakers, especially in international media, to propagate their message. For example, Loujain Alhathloul, an activist and the face of the 2013 driving campaign, was arrested and detained for more than two months in December 2014 for defying the female driving ban after attempting to cross the border in her car from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia. Global media widely followed her arrest and release. She was interviewed for a PBS documentary on Saudi Arabia, titled *Saudi Arabia Uncovered* (Jones, 2016). Manal Alsharif, an organizer of the Women2Drive campaign, who was detained after driving a car in the city of Dammam in May 2011, was also a visible speaker. Her detention was covered by global media. In June 2012, following an invitation to speak at the Oslo Freedom Forum and to receive the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent, Alsharif revealed that she had received death threats. She was also stigmatized as a traitor following her Oslo speech (Pizano, 2012).

The body was constantly present in the Women2Drive campaign, with its main role being to drive and operate the car; however, the body was unmarked. In other words, the actions of the body, other than driving, were not meant to stir a reaction. While the campaign was definitely feminist, it did not hold to the radical exclusion of men. Male relatives accompanied many participants, such as Loujain Alhathloul and Maha Alqahtani—a mixed-gender composition strategy to attract as much public support as possible and deter any social or political backlash.

The cyclist

The Saudi women's demand for freedom of mobility has become more embodied, metamorphosing from a narrative of driving to one of cycling. *Wadjda* (Al-Mansour, 2014), directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour, the first Saudi woman to direct a feature film inside Saudi Arabia, is about an eleven-year-old girl named Wadjda who dreams of owning a bicycle. The bicycle's cost is Wadjda's main worry, until her school announces a \$1,000 prize for a Quran reciting competition. While not labelling it as a feminist protest movie, the director makes clear that the movie is meant to be part of a wider debate on women's rights in Saudi Arabia: "I wanted to have a voice, and I wanted to say something" (Harrod, 2013, para. 7). Similar to the driving campaign, the movie steers clear of any specific political critique. It expresses Saudi women's mobility grievances, but clearly aligns itself with the state rather than against it. During the final scene of the movie, for example, while Wadjda is happily riding her bike, she passes by a bus with a placard on its back showing the Saudi flag along with pictures of the late king, crown prince, and deputy prime minister. It bears the words "May continue to prosper, our homeland" in what seems to be a declaration of loyalty to the government. Also, similar to the driving campaign, the movie does not render men the root cause of the oppression. While Wadjda is the protagonist of the movie, men (and boys) do not act as a source of control. They do not impose direct control over Wadjda. Rather, the social system restrains her and her mother. For example, Wadjda's female teachers act as a counter to Wadjda's freedom and exert more control over her than the other male characters in the movie.

The body in *Wadjda*, however, represents a more active role than in the driving campaign. The bicycle as a machine is less complex than the car, and it relies mainly on human power in order to work. So, the human body becomes more prominent. Challenging social orders, Mansour makes the heroine salient in the title of the movie, its poster, and throughout its story. Wadjda appears in the poster with jeans and a shirt while wearing an open *abaya* and posing in a way that suggests typical masculinity: her facial expressions are without a smile and her legs are wide apart. She stands in a public road that evokes Riyadh's streets. Such a pose symbolizes the occupation of Saudi male space and a disturbance of the codes that allocate public spaces to men and private ones to women. Here, Wadjda takes centre stage, without a male companion, outside the domestic sphere, thus undermining male domination. However, stretching the limits of female space, Mansour also soothes the message by utilizing a child in this narrative—one who, in the Saudi media landscape, is not typically associated with sexualized discourses and is also relieved of adult social conscience.

Feminist presence can be further normalized by integrating the demand for mobility with traditionalism in a comic style of communication, as in the song video by Majed Al-Esa, *Hwages* (Al-Esa, 2016). In this video, women in *abayas* and *niqabs* appear in the backseat of a car with a child driver, mocking the gender hierarchy of the society. These women quickly appear out of the car, lifting their *abayas* to reveal traditional coloured garments, called *Rose*, while running, skateboarding, playing basketball, and biking. All of this is accompanied by the chorus of folklore with satirical lyrics sung by older women in the region. "May all men vanish / May all men vanish / They caused

us psychological illnesses / They caused us psychological illnesses.” The feminist view adopted in the video ascribes patriarchal roots to “men.” The two men in the video wave fingers at the women to threaten, restrict, and stop them. They also continually show off their own privilege by flying and driving without guardians and holding political offices.

One trope worth noting in this video is the linkage between the nostalgic, through traditional clothing and music, and the attempts to rebuild such a past using untraditional female roles; women in their traditional clothing are not cooking or nurturing their families but instead skateboarding, biking, and playing basketball. The usage of feminist folklore lyrics also demonstrates an attempt to localize feminism and portray it as a familiar social trope rather than a Western imposed ideology.

The walker

In April 2017, a number of short video clips showing women walking surfaced online. These clips contained footage of Saudi women campaigners who had filmed themselves silently walking in the street without male guardians as part of their fight to drive (Roberts, 2017). Some of these videos emerged on social media with the hashtag #resistancebywalking in Arabic and English. Silent walking, a new form of resistance employed by female activists in this 2017 protest, explicitly demonstrates the centrality of the body in Saudi women’s activism. Female bodies do not habitually appear in the public streets of Riyadh and other Saudi cities. If there is a body in the public space, it is masculine; and the body in the private sphere is feminine. Walking is symbolic of women taking part in a practice that is usually associated with males. By “entering the public realm women seem to be bringing with them a principle of reality into this sphere, namely the necessities which originate with having a body ... [which] have no place in the public” (Benhabib, 1993, p. 98).

The silence of the activists while walking was an aesthetic expression but also symbolic on two levels. Accompanied by the activists’ fixed look toward their cell-phone cameras (thus their viewers), the silence had an emotive force in both delivering the anger of the activists and highlighting the absurdity of the restrictions placed on women. It seemed as if there were no need for words to justify the obvious right of women to mobilize; the silence also had the discursive function of interrupting, pausing, and creating a gap in the noise and contention surrounding women’s rights in the Kingdom, which may have suppressed local women’s voices. This silence ironically opens space for women to speak up and make their voices heard.

The silence of the walking was followed by online commotion, so to speak. Here online spaces functioned as extensions of the offline. Many women, including the activists themselves, reacted and expressed their opinions on the new movement. Using the handle @ms_freespeech, Mariam Alhubail, the campaign organizer, tweeted: “We want to encourage women to go out alone for a walk or to do their daily tasks and reject the idea men take care of these tasks” (cited in Roberts, 2017, n.p.). In another tweet, she added, “I walk alone. Until we have the streets again” (cited in Roberts, 2017, n.p.). Other women followed suit. A tweet from Ms Saffaa (@MsSaffaa) stated, “Everyday acts of resistance. #Saudi women walking everywhere since driving and peaceful protests are banned” (Saffaa, 2017). Meanwhile, Manahel Aloatibi @1994_the-

freedom tweeted, “They don’t mind me crossing the streets on foot. What matters to them is that I shouldn’t drive and that I don’t become my own guardian” (translated from Arabic) (Aloatibi, 2017).

What speaks volumes from this online action is not the tweets themselves, but the fact that these women activists curated a site for their bodies to act together. By posting their videos and tweets in concert, they created “the *polis*” for the “space of appearance” (Arendt, 1958) where one appeared to others as others appeared to one. The curated social media space was then made political by the capacity of these women to act together for a public political purpose, which is what Hannah Arendt (1958) calls power. Bodies online and offline, together they turned “an invisible resistance into a visual spectacle” and converted “grievances into a display of collective power” (Lim, 2018, p. 126).

Conclusion

Technological lenses may lead to a skewed reading of society as they acutely centre on the characteristics and features of the associated technology, overshadowing more complex issues related to culture, politics, and social dynamics. Moreover, they tend to erase historical contexts and, subsequently, render human agency invisible. This article repositions women, their acts, and their agency from the margin to the centre in an analysis of Saudi women’s movements. Following Colombian scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero, in this article the Saudi women are read as “active, intelligent, and tactical beings who are fully capable of disrupting, subverting, resisting, and appropriating media processes and messages” (cited in Richardson, 1994, p. 1).

Steering away from technological utopianism as well as an Orientalist framework, this article offers a nuanced, historically grounded reading of Saudi’s women’s movements by privileging the histories, voices, and bodies of the Saudi women and centrally incorporating them into the analysis. Historicizing the movements not only reveals different nuances of Saudi women’s movements, it also demonstrates how different discourses inscribe, transform, and reinforce the formation and trajectory of Saudi feminism. In highlighting and recognizing the heterogeneity of Saudi feminism, we identify legal, political, cultural, and Islamic feminisms and ascertain how these different ways of knowing and modes of engagement become a resource for Saudi women’s movements. And, lastly, the analysis of the movement’s performance in this article has not only highlighted the potency and efficacy of the body in Saudi women’s movements—which has become even more prominent with the development of the movement—but it also brings out the social, political and gender dimensions of the movements. Beyond the Saudi women’s movements, the analytical and intervening repertoires—*historicization*, *heterogeneity*, and *corporeality*—are important in facilitating a richer, more nuanced, and more contextual understanding of revolutionary and feminist practices, not only in the MENA region, but also elsewhere in the world.

Notes

1. Examples include Breuer & Groshek, 2014; Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2014; Soengas-Pérez, 2013.
2. *Abaya* is a simple, loose over-garment worn by some women in parts of the Muslim world, including the Middle East and North Africa. A traditional *abaya* is black and covers the whole body except the head, feet, and hands. It is sometimes worn with *niqab*, a face veil covering all but the eyes.

3. The Sahwa (meaning the awakening) is a political religious movement that gained its momentum in the 1990s. It was a fusion of both Wahhabi and the Muslim Brotherhood movements and mainly calls for a return to the tradition of prophet Muhammad and his companions. For more on the Sahwa, see Lacroix (2011).

4. Founded by Mohammed Ibn Al-Wahhab (1703–1792), Wahhabism is an Islamic doctrine and religious movement attempting to restore pure monotheistic worship or *tahwid* in Islam. It stresses the absolute sovereignty of God and advocates a return to the purity of the first-generation Islam, the *salaf*. It also rejects any reliance on the intercession of the Prophet Mohammed and denounces pilgrimages to saints' tombs. Today, Wahhabi teachings are the official, state-sponsored form of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia.

5. According to an article published in January 2015 in *Le Journal de Montréal* (Maher, 2015), Morin was still held in Saudi Arabia. By the time of writing of this article, there is no further update on her story.

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