
PUBLIC WORDS AND BODY POLITICS:

Reflections on the Strategies of Women Poets in Rural Yemen

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This paper provides historical perspective on the mediation of women's public verbal activism in the Republic of Yemen by considering the public expressive strategies of two rural women poets. Much of the research on the expressive lives of Middle Eastern women has focused on verbal genres typically designated private or domestic, such as agricultural and wedding songs, lullabies and songs about personal experiences, and stories, tales, or narratives not traditionally considered "poetry." In contrast, this essay attends to public poetry and related discourses produced by and about two specific rural women. By examining how these women have managed, appropriated, and interrogated dominant patriarchal discourses of tribalism, Islamism, and nationalism, and by considering how media technologies contribute in different ways to embodying women's voices, this essay articulates a methodological framework that can better account for the expressive capacities of contemporary women activists in the rural Middle East.

In the Republic of Yemen, as in other countries in the Middle East, discourses of women's liberation have contributed continuously to the formation of a modern national polity.¹ Through years of socialist-inspired state building and earlier, one of the prominent sites of political expression for women, as for men, has been oral folk poetry, especially in rural areas where illiteracy rates have been higher. Given the performance settings of vernacular oral poetry and their association with realms of heightened verbal creativity, rural women activists have regularly used poetry to navigate between radical and uncertain shifts in public political orientation. As economic development and mobility have increased over the course of the century, however, discourses of modernity have had both positive and negative effects on the expressive capacities of such political women. Although expanding systems of formal education and egalitarian discourses of civil society have contributed to women's liberation from structures of patriarchal control, the increasing concentration of symbolic, political, and material capital in the metropolises, both inside and outside of Yemen, has advantaged generations of younger men who have the means and mobility to access such capital. Equally serious, rural women poets' opportunities to perform in public have been constrained, since the early 1980s, by the growth of conservative Islamist movements that emphasize gender separation and a domestic destiny for women. Where

women performers in general have been increasingly banned from the public limelight, some rural women poets have turned to writing—even if in vernacular grammars—to maneuver in relation to changing structures of power and prestige. In an era of rapidly shifting discourses about civic participation, public and private bodies, and political agency, written poetry, if managed carefully, provides women with a venue for broadcasting their voices while preserving distance between themselves and their potentially disapproving audiences.

I suggest that literary theorist Marshall McLuhan's oft-cited proposal that the medium *is* the message, despite its oversimplification of audience reception, continues to offer critical leverage in attempts to understand the expressive strategies of women activists.² In Yemen, as elsewhere, women's use of different forms of communication—from the oral recitation of poetry, to audio-media such as the radio and audiocassettes, to television, to writing and print—has always been politically fraught. This article seeks to historicize and contextualize Yemeni women's public, political communicative acts by considering the lives and works of two women poets. The first is Ghazal al-Magdashiyya from Dhamar (central Yemen), who was born in the first half of the nineteenth century; the second is Nadra Ahmad al-Salahiyya from Yafi' (southern Yemen) who was born in the mid-twentieth century and lives today.³ The temporal and regional disparity between their lives provides a useful comparative framework for examining how each of them creatively draws from, and is drawn into, male-dominated political discourses. Foremost among these discourses is tribalism, which has traditionally been one of the most public forms of political expression for Yemeni in the highlands.⁴ However, discourses of Islamism and nationalism have transformed tribal expressive spaces through the appropriation, reallocation, or rejection of some of its representational conventions. Since strategies of language use are the principal points that locate these poets on various tribal maps, this article attends closely not only to the poetic formulas and content that mark discourses as tribal, but to tribally marked genres of poetry that are mobilized by the two poets as well as those who narrate their lives. By correlating women's expressive capacities with the gender politics of specific forms of mediation, it develops a more pragmatic approach to women's political participation, one that problematizes the "public" and "private" dichotomy even while suggesting ways to move beyond it.⁵

The Permutations of the Embodied Voice

Ghazal Ahmad 'Alwan al-Magdashiyya was born in the 1860s to a family from the village of al-Hawarwar, today an hour's drive along a

gravel road from the regional capital of Dhamar. Like the vast majority of women of her day, Magdashiyya received no formal education, and knew neither how to write nor read. Yet her skills as a versatile poet and mediator brought her wide recognition as one of the region's powerful political voices.⁶

Although Magdashiyya did not travel widely, her experiences as a poet and politician were informed by an historical imbrication of rural and urban populations that distinguishes Dhamar. Located within a fertile agricultural belt known as the "Central Region," Dhamar lies on the principal artery between Sanaa and the northern highlands to Yarim and the more desert areas of Lahej and Abyan further south. As a result of its location along major trade routes, Dhamar has long been a commercial, religious, and administrative center for a number of important surrounding tribes. The `Ans, to whom Magdashiyya's family belonged, and the Hada are both within the Madhhaj, the dominant tribal confederation of the region since pre-Islamic times when they contended with the Kinda for control over large sections of southwest Arabia. Over the centuries, groups such as the Bakil and tribes of Himyaric ancestry had also settled in Dhamar. Magdashiyya's poetry represents a political rhetoric tailored deftly to her audiences, at once tribal in form and content yet cosmopolitan in its expression of diversity and tolerance.

While Magdashiyya probably composed in a number of different oral registers, she is known for excelling in two genres of poetry that are oral hallmarks of tribal society throughout much of northern Yemen: the *zamil* (pl. *zawamil*) and the *balah*. Although women's participation in the *zamil* genre has generally not been common, this genre has occasionally served as an effective means for women to express political views in public, sway opinions, and build group solidarity.⁷ The second and more common forum for women's public political expression has been the *balah* competition.⁸

Typically two to four but occasionally as long as twelve verses, the *zamil* poem expresses trenchantly the feelings or position of a selected poet or a group.⁹ The concise, rhymed structure of the genre makes compositions easy to memorize and circulate quickly by word of mouth. But the performance conventions of the *zamil* also make them effective forms of political oratory. Set to simple melodies designed to arouse spirits and incite action, they are collectively chanted by large groups before battle or dispute mediation, at weddings, and at celebrations and major social events. Participants often dance the *bar`a*, a traditional tribal dance, while chanting the *zamil*. Amidst the brandishing of weapons and firing of guns, the *zamil* performance is one of the most impressive visual displays of tribal identity in Yemen.¹⁰

Central to dispute-mediation, a persuasive *zamil* can sometimes conclude negotiations to both sides' satisfaction before they officially begin. I was told of one such occasion in which a dangerous dispute broke out between the Hada tribe and Magdashiyya's own `Ans tribe. One of Magdashiyya's men, al-Ju`bla, had stolen a sheep from a member of the Hada named al-Sufi. Hearing of the incident, the Hada leader Shaikh al-Bukhait made his way to Hawarwar in order to discuss settlement of the issue with Magdashiyya. He greeted her with the following *zamil*:

Ghazal O Magdashiyya O Ghazal all alone
 O branch from eastern Isbil, see who is the aggressor!¹¹
 Bukhait is the bull of reckoning day, if he stirs he threatens¹²
 Locusts on high from Tihama, whoever touches them
 becomes diseased.¹³

Shaykh al-Bukhait's greeting is sharply calculated to compel a response from Magdashiyya in both word and action. At once recognizing her authority as a representative of Isbil, a region that extends widely beyond her own village, he simultaneously portrays her isolation: the crime that has been committed by one of her tribe may leave her exposed to dangers of a wider tribal consensus that condemns the act. Magdashiyya responded extemporaneously, as is the tradition among poets of the *zamil* genre, with the following poem. Like all *zamil* poems, it displays a mastery of tribal tropes and matches the former poem in rhyme and meter:

Welcome as firmly as the woolen mats of Radaa` are tightened
 A welcome that fills Shar`a valley, [where] you carry and cinch,
 Arise, my Bukhait, and go home. `Ans will solve,
 Al-Ju`bla will satisfy al-Sufi by two for one.¹⁴

The terms of the settlement are clear: `Ans will compensate the plaintiff with two sheep for the one taken. Magdashiyya's response demonstrates her proficiency in the particularities of tribal law, her mastery of tribal poetry, and her capacity to wield power in order to ease tensions in her community.

The *balah*, especially in the central and southern regions of Yemen, has long been one of the most inclusive performance events in rural society: young and old, high-status and low—and in many areas, women as well as men—take part. It is precisely the *balah*'s performance at weddings, often among close relations and people known to one another, that makes it more conducive to women's participation than other genres whose martial functions are tailored more explicitly to inter-group rivalries. The *balah* event varies by region. According to anthropologist Steven Caton, participants in the northern Khawlan region gather in two large circles, a

small one inside a larger one, and step slowly, each circle rotating but in opposite directions.¹⁵ In central and southern areas, varieties of the *balah* (known as *sufuf*, *ragza*, or *margaz*) are arranged slightly differently: instead of circles, lines are formed facing one another, and participants, often both men and women, are arranged according to various customs. Sometimes women are in one row and men in the other, sometimes only women form rows, and occasionally each row is composed of an alternating woman-man format. A poet then steps into the center of the circle or rows and extemporaneously delivers two or more hemistiches (half-lines of verse), the last hemistich of which is then echoed in chorus by the others. The poet then either continues with two new hemistiches or exits from the center to allow another poet to enter and follow with verses that match the former in meter and rhyme.

Authorship is more pronounced in *balah* verses than in those of the *zamil*. Whereas the collective performance of the *zamil* induces poets to express group consensus, the serial contributions of individual poets in the *balah* permit a much wider space for the idiosyncratic and dissenting voice. Debate is, in fact, central to the *balah*, as poets spar with one another over issues such as political affiliation, religious piety, social status, and personal integrity. Anthropologists have studied how poetic language, rich in polysemic and multiple indexical symbols, can allow women to explore imbalances and tensions inherent in dominant social and political worlds.¹⁶ The inclusive participation frameworks, including continual rotation of turns and inherently agonistic aspects of the event, make the *balah* an especially exciting site for interrogating norms.

The following verses were related to me as an example of one of Magdashiyya's contributions during a *balah* event. She lambastes a suitor, a state-appointed tithe collector, by framing his intentions as less than sincere, and simultaneously defends her own reputation:

O men of the region, the tithe-appraiser has been errant	
Has he come to look for sorghum, or for women?	
He said he wants Ghazal	Or else he increases the [tithe] penalty
I'll strike him on the skull	Or else tie him up with a turban
If he should return [after that,]	
O men	There is no blame on me. ¹⁷

In the first verse, Magdashiyya produces a pointed analogy. The standard meaning of *mukallif* is "someone in charge" (of affairs, property, and so forth). The lexicographer Mathar al-Iryani relates that the dialectal word *maklaf* (pl. *makalif*) signifies a woman whose affairs are entrusted to a man.¹⁸ Through syntactic parallelism in the second hemistich (*ja yatuf adh-dhurah* and *ja yatuf al-makalif*), Magdashiyya renders "women" analogous in the

suitor's mind to "sorghum," capturing her sense of the crude reproductive interests of the nefarious suitor. In subsequent verses, Magdashiyya's response is decisive. In publicly demonstrating her verbal dexterity, her power to humiliate (the desecration of the turban), and her capacity for violence, she defends her honor in terms suited to the moral space of tribal discourses.

Observing that genres of *zamil* and *balah* poetry have traditionally enabled many rural women to express their political views publicly, one notes the concurrent tendency in many verses cited above of referencing the body and its kinetic movements, denoted in verbs of stirring, touching, carrying, cinching, striking, and so forth. In both poetic discourse and in performance, bodily action becomes a referential framework by which participants define the terms of their political engagement. Acts of "embodiment," however, must not be seen necessarily as conscious "strategies" that women deploy according to their own interests or advantages. Such assumptions of free will are disturbed by the Foucauldian view of subjects as materially constituted by power relations.¹⁹ Rather, as demonstrated in insightful ethnographic studies, embodiment is better understood by locating agency within, rather than in contradistinction to, historically specific fields of power.²⁰

In the verses cited above, for example, Magdashiyya's own somatic agency is expressed from within a masculinist discourse of tribalism. Such a discourse initially works against her: she is engendered as a subject of male lust, becoming objectified as "sorghum." In the latter part of the poem, distinguished from the first by a more sonorous rhyme scheme, Magdashiyya uses her verbal dexterity to access a more virulent register of tribal embodiment. By emphasizing her capacity for self-defense—a combination of both the physical ("I'll strike him on the skull / Or else I'll tie him up with a turban") and the verbal—against an individual who is on the verge of committing an infraction against tribal law ("or else he increases the penalty"), she becomes an empowered tribal actor who can countermand the body's sexualized vulnerability.

In interviews I conducted in Dhamar in 1998, one young man called Magdashiyya a "real man" (*rigal*) in the history of tribal personalities in his region. Her legacy as a powerful political actor and poet was narrated publicly through stories of her life as well as her poems. In a space of public tribal rhetoric, however, her agency makes sense primarily in terms of her embodiment within a masculinist discourse of power. To acknowledge such a qualified definition of agency is not to condemn inquiry to monolithic narratives of domination. Rather, if agency is approached as a social and discursive as well as an individual matter, then political activism may be viewed as conditionally construed. Thus, not all women have

been able to manage as well as Magdashiyya in a public space of orally performed tribal poetry. Aside from the courage and confidence required of women to participate in spaces dominated by men, factors of age, status, and class as well as social constraints and personal alliances have advantaged some women over others. Where constraints operate in one case, we can look to alternative modes of political expression. Additionally, however, discourses of power, such as those of tribalism, are always historically specific, and exist simultaneously with other claims upon the identity of subjects, such as those articulated by nationalism and Islamism. Such personal and discursive complexity presents a considerable challenge to any analysis of women's political activism, especially analysis that engages with the historical transformations of such activism.

The historically variable nexus between women's bodies and public political spaces can be considered by exploring how social forms, linguistic structures, ideological frameworks, political movements, and technological mediums can variously embody women's voices. When does the performing body become an issue and when does it not? How have women negotiated around constraints? How might Magdashiyya's political voice have been differently embodied than those of contemporary rural women? An examination of recent transformations in popular attitudes in various parts of Yemen, especially since the 1980s, reveals how women's participation in oral genres of poetry and song, more generally, has been dramatically affected by new discourses about the mobility of the woman's body and voice.

One of the most important aspects to consider in any analysis of popular attitudes toward women's public bodies and voices is Islam. While Islamic discourses on this subject have of course varied historically and geographically, the emergence over the last several decades of conservative Islamist movements throughout Yemen has generally had a negative impact on women's live performance in public events.²¹ Women performers made significant gains after the Revolutions of 1962 and 1967. By the 1970s, Ta'izz and Aden had become lively centers for performance by Yemeni as well as Egyptian and Lebanese women. However, the cultural efflorescence that occurred during these years, particularly for urban women, began to diminish in the early 1980s as Saudi influence in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) grew stronger. When relations soured between the YAR and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) after Northern president Ahmad al-Gashemi was assassinated in 1978, conservative Islamic groups found leeway to wage more virulent campaigns against the leftists. The Yemeni Reform Association (*Jama'iyyat al-Islah*) was established in the mid-1980s with the main aim of canvassing support for Islamic law (*shari'a*). Southern regions witnessed particularly

aggressive campaigns launched by Islah's leading ideologue, 'Abd al-Majid al-Zindani. Zindani used audiocassettes to disseminate Wahhabi-influenced Islamist messages, many of them targeting Family Law legislation that had given women access to considerable economic and political empowerment in the South, especially Aden.²² Such Islamist movements met with some success through the late 1970s and 1980s in promoting conservative social attitudes toward the woman's public presence, especially in rural areas. In Yafi', for example, despite its progressive political leadership in the PDRY, women's public participation in traditional *balah* performances had become politicized to the extent that, by the mid-1970s, microphones began to be used to establish distance between sexes. Central regions around Dhamar, too, experienced similar setbacks for women performers. By the 1980s, women were rarely seen in *zamil* and *balah* events. Although women in the more remote regions continued in modified ways to partake in performance events with men through the early 1990s, unity in 1990 and especially the Gulf War (1990–1991) fostered a rapid decline of these traditions, as conservative Islamist discourses gained wide currency.

As Yemenis have grown increasingly sensitive to women's embodied presence in public spaces, rural women over the past few decades have confronted more powerful pressures to withdraw from public performances. In light of such changes, some of them—especially singers—have found outlets through media technologies, notably audiocassettes. Where a physical presence might be provocative to some audiences, the disembodied voice can more easily avoid provocation. After Yemeni women singers first performed on Radio Aden in the 1940s, a growing number of women, including those in North Yemen, found increasing opportunity to sing through the decade of the 1970s. Many of these songs were love songs and traditional songs, but political and national songs were also very popular. Frequently, women who had difficulties singing publicly in their own villages found acceptance and even encouragement once their voices were broadcast on radio, cassette, or television. Southern women tended to use their own names while Northern women assumed pseudonyms.²³ Where media technologies enabled an overnight transition between the role of *mughanniyya*, or songster, to that of *fanana*, or artist, women singers acquired a modern identity that was more readily commendable even—indeed, perhaps especially—among rural audiences.²⁴ The relations between media, women, and modernity deserves far more in-depth treatment than I can give here. However, I would suggest that, for many women, their voices became popularly acceptable by virtue of the distance established between their bodies and their modern sound-images.

Although rural women popular singers have successfully used new media technologies to circumvent sanctions against live performances, their vastly expanded public roles have not come without a price. Almost without exception, they have been unable to author their own verses. Women singers have been able to sing lyrics publicly as long as these are either from men's poetry (composed in classical verse or in *humaini*, a formal if somewhat colloquialized, urban genre of Yemeni poetry) or are couched in anonymous "traditional songs" (*aghani turathiyya*). Such restrictions have had obvious impact on rural women poets who have been largely unable to use media technologies to gain recognition for their work.²⁵ The occasional woman poet whose verses are sung must, almost without exception, remain anonymous. When male singers introduce a woman's poems on cassette, they often either use the woman's pseudonym, recognizable as such by audiences, or explain that the author wishes to remain anonymous. An example of such a cassette was one released by the Ma'ribi singer Abu `Askar in the mid-1990s called "*Fatat Sirwah*" [The Girl from Sirwah], in which the anonymous poet laments being forced into marriage by her father. The cassette has had a tremendous popular reception by both male and female audiences, yet the author remains entirely unknown.

Serious setbacks for women singers and poets arose in the 1980s, when conservative Islamist discourses began to turn public opinion not only against live women performers but also against their voices, whatever the content of the message. For many, the broadcast voice became a dangerously embodied presence; no longer safely mediated, it needed containment. Especially in the North, numerous women pop-singers met with unprecedented resistance during these years that forced them either to quit singing altogether or sing exclusively for private, female audiences. A reemergence of women cassette-performers has occurred since 1991, a factor traceable largely to two concomitant trends. First, government and popular support for radical Islamist politics has begun to wane slightly, after a period of strident conservatism following the Yemeni war of 1994. (In the 1997 elections, the Islah Party lost parliamentary seats.) Second, women's membership in the Islah Party, currently the leading Islamist party in Yemen, has grown steadily over the course of the 1990s. Islah leaders have thus been wary of censoring popular women performers, a large majority of whom are now veiled, for fear of alienating some of the Party's most active members. Still, as Islamist discourses—from their span across two rival nationalist trajectories—have given rise to new registers of embodiment, they have effectively hampered the public oral performances that Magdashyya and other women enjoyed in an earlier era of tribal politics.

Voices beyond the Body: The Written *Qasida*

Given such transformations in Yemen, how have rural women poets managed to continue composing political poems for public audiences, and how have these audiences changed? What strategies have such poets adopted to enable their political activism in the face of serious constraints? A partial answer to these questions may be found in the life and works of a contemporary Yemeni poet, Nadra Ahmad al-Salahiyya. Hailing from the region of Yafi`, northeast of Aden, Salahiyya has repeatedly used poetry to express her views on the most pressing social and political concerns of her community, her region, and Yemen as a whole.

Nadra Ahmad al-Salahiyya was born in the early 1940s in the village of al-Magra in Lab`us, Yafi`. A mountainous region of approximately 175,000 people, Yafi` is the most densely settled area in the south outside of Aden. A combination of its strong tribal structure and its mountainous and rugged terrain has facilitated its relative autonomy from centralizing powers through history. The Yafi`i are known to have played pivotal roles in tribal politicking not only in the southern regions, and especially Hadramawt, but throughout the Arabian Peninsula, where they contributed to the first campaigns waged by `Umar Ibn al-`As as early as the mid-seventh century. In recent history, Yafi` has produced many national leaders, despite its severe economic deprivation. Its poets are famous among rural and urban audiences alike for using various traditions of *zamil* and sung folk poetry to advance trenchant social and political commentaries.

Salahiyya's successes in securing the skills required of a Yemeni poet have been achieved through determination. To begin with, acquiring an education necessary to speak to broader audiences was not easy. Since primary and secondary schools did not exist in Yafi` before the Revolution of 1967, she had to learn to read and write from her father, who spent afternoons and evenings teaching her at home. She married at a young age and became the mother of six children, a role made no easier by a series of tragedies. When Salahiyya was still a young woman, her husband died when a well collapsed in on him. She later remarried, but her second husband was killed in combat during Yemen's war with Saudi Arabia in 1975. Her accomplishments as a poet are all the more remarkable given these misfortunes and the heavy family responsibilities she has had to shoulder.

The most serious blow to Salahiyya's activity as a public poet has come in recent years, however, with the spread of Islamic conservatism in her region. Prior to the 1990s, she had mainly operated within the traditions of publicly performed oral poetry. Salahiyya, like Ghazal al-Magdashiyya, had mastered at least three different genres. To begin with, she had par-

anticipated in extemporaneous verses of wedding songs sung by women to the bride, guests, and groom's family. While the themes and formulae of these traditional songs had generally been more conventional than those of other poetic genres, they could be adapted for the occasion and, in some cases, permitted considerable improvisation. Secondly, she had composed many *zamil* poems, like Magdashiyya, contributing to a genre dominated by men. Finally, she had been a regular participant in a version of the *balah* popularly called *sufuf* (literally, "lines"), found in various forms throughout Yafi` as well as the plains areas of the governorates of Lahej, Abyan, and Shabwa. This event is frequently referred to as "diversions" or "games" (*il`ab*). Women's participation in the event was severely curtailed after unity in 1990, however. As men have filled the places of the women, the event has been renamed in Yafi`: *ragza*, taken from the *ragaz* meter occasionally used by poets in performance. The melodies featured in *sufuf*—variations known as *bal* melodies—were generally slower than those in the *balah*, giving rise to an easier pace that could accommodate less competitive lyrics and more amorous themes. Performed at weddings, celebrations, and major social events, *sufuf* had long been one of the most enjoyable performance sites for both men and women in many southern rural areas. As with the *balah*, it had also been one of the most public arenas that rural women poets had for expressing their political and social views.

Salahiyya's freedom to compose such oral poetry grew increasingly limited several years after unity, however, when the *sufuf*, along with other performance opportunities for rural women poets, came under virulent attack by conservative Islamists. In southern areas, the traditional wedding, so often the site for poetry and song, became a prime target, since in many regions there had been little rigid separation between men and women. Charges of illicit cavorting intensified during and after the Gulf War, when Saudi Arabia expelled more than eight hundred thousand Yemeni men, most of whom returned to their natal villages. Many of those who had picked up more conservative religious values while abroad now took a dim view of the traditional wedding. In several cases, attacks by armed militants on weddings resulted in the deaths of participants and the terrorizing of both rural and urban populations. Such attacks mounted again after the Yemeni war of 1994, when administrative structures were thrown into a tumult and security in the countryside deteriorated.²⁶ The spread of conservative Islamist discourses, fueled by growing economic deterioration, led to the disappearance not only of women, but also of women's voices, from long-established sites of public performance. There have been direct consequences for my own efforts at documentation: as a male researcher, it was nearly impossible for me to record women's recited or sung poetry in Yafi` and neighboring regions.²⁷

As these conservative discourses have constrained Salahiyya's work as a public poet, she has had recourse to one of the most important skills that she learned as a child: her ability to write. Where a woman's voice, when broadcast by mediums of "secondary orality," such as radio, cassettes, and television, has become more rather than less threatening to many conservatives (if still somewhat less so than a woman's unmediated presence), writing has offered the possibility of conveying a somewhat more disembodied message, one that can still deliver a political punch. Salahiyya composes in what is generally recognized throughout the Arab world as the most prestigious, formal genre of poetry, the *qasida* (pl. *qasa'id*). The *qasida* has a long history in the Arabian Peninsula and its principal forms and meters are understood widely. Consisting of anywhere from 12 to 100 lines, it adheres to a set of conventional meters (adapted to sung melodies), themes, plot sequences, and poetic formulas. Today, rather than being produced extemporaneously, the *qasida* is the result of the meticulous orchestration of language and idea, and so is mostly produced through writing and, occasionally, lengthy revision.²⁸

Little research exists on practices of writing poetry among rural women in Yemen. My own research in Yafi` suggests that, in comparison to men, few rural women produce *qasidas*. Salahiyya explained to me that although she frequently exchanges political *qasidas* with other male poets, she rarely exchanges with women because there are too few around who write *qasidas*. I suspect that this is generally true throughout Yemen, due in part to the genre's attachments to structures of male prestige and authority to which women rarely have access. Women as a rule have not had the opportunities for education or the mobility that men have had, and their access to broader social networks, information, and circles of power has been more limited. As a result, many choose alternative forms of poetic expression that do not rely on forms of knowledge they may feel unequipped to demonstrate.²⁹

Nevertheless, I would argue that as opportunities to reach live, public audiences dwindle, many women poets have had to turn increasingly to writing (the *qasida*, for example) rather than reciting. To be sure, practices of writing poetry are not new to Yemeni women, especially those from urban elite backgrounds.³⁰ In rural areas of the South, moreover, literacy and writing skills for both men and women had, by the 1980s, reached some of the highest levels in the Middle East. But diminishing alternatives have compelled women to devise new strategies of composition, performance, and distribution that enable their political voices to carry beyond former, more bounded domains of written words produced and received.

Other scholars have considered how women in the Middle East have

used writing to further their activism where other avenues may be closed.³¹ While these studies have provided valuable insights, their almost exclusive attention to urban elites has left much room for research into the practices of rural women writers. Salahiyya's participation in a written poetic genre dominated by men thus provides a valuable opportunity to investigate how she has used writing to negotiate her way around patriarchal structures. Taking up anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod's call to examine the specific and complex ways in which resistance is managed, I would suggest that comparing a woman's *qasidas* with similar *qasidas* of other male poets might yield diacritical distinctions that reveal a great deal about precisely where challenges and potentials lie.³² Although definitive conclusions cannot be drawn based on a restricted sample of Salahiyya's poetry, three distinctions emerged when I reviewed her *qasidas* in light of a much broader collection of men's poetry.

To begin with, Salahiyya uses a language register that is one of the more strongly vernacular that I have seen.³³ Sensitive to the dramatic sounds that can be produced through informal spoken registers, she creatively appropriates vernacular words with less inhibition than most male folk poets I have encountered. In the following *qasida* in which she complains to the district authority, she uses a number of English loanwords, picked up by speakers when the British were in Aden, to sustain her rhyme scheme.³⁴ After describing how a malicious neighbor has illegally built a road over her small plot of land, she suggests that the authorities have been complicit with his violations. Her use of the alien words, all of which end with the morpheme [-*uut*], sharply parodies the language-use of those conspiring against her. The words in quotation here are the actual words used, although she of course writes them in Arabic script:

If I asked for his apology he says "not"
 Yet Ahmad is greedy, hard at work, he labors for his purse . . .
 They gave him an invitation and granted him a waist-cloth and "coat"
 Even if Ahmad already knows this is injurious
 Injuries are marginal compared to the meat of the "pot"³⁵
 Those who don't know good or innocence provoked him . . .
 They handily he has gained favor through the sandal and "boot"
 How our plate has been spoiled by this incontinent bull.³⁶

In these verses, Salahiyya ingeniously exploits her knowledge of idiosyncratic vernacular features: the treachery of the road-builder and the complicit authorities is iconically reproduced through linguistic duplicity. They have sold out.

Where most male poets would edit such loan words from their poetry for fear of criticism, Salahiyya employs them in a deliberate linguistic

strategy that works to her advantage. More generally, such a strategy helps create a space for poets who cannot, or choose not to, compose in more standardized language registers. Salahyya's verses may index an important trend taking place in contemporary practices of poetry in Yemen. As rural women poets, now increasingly forbidden traditional opportunities for public performance, search for new spaces in which to broadcast their political views in an alternative language, they may be refashioning the formal, public aspects of the *qasida* in a more vernacular language. Such creative adaptation may ironically extend the life of the *qasida* by rendering it more widely understood, appreciated and, as the above verses adequately demonstrate, by giving it new forms that are no less aesthetically rich than more classical forms.

A second distinction of Salahyya's poetry is the sheer length of her *qasidas*. When I asked Salahyya why her *qasidas* were regularly some of the longest I had acquired (some stretching up to 130 hemistiches), she replied, "I have a lot to say. . . I don't rest easily."³⁷ An additional reason may be linked to performance conditions. Where male poets often have the opportunity to recite poems publicly among groups of other poets, before large audiences of listeners who assemble in afternoon social gatherings, and to visiting delegations on formal occasions, many women poets, especially in rural areas, have comparatively few chances to recite their *qasidas* publicly. As a result, Salahyya may be increasingly targeting a *reading* audience. On the several occasions that I met her, she was frequently photocopying her *qasidas* in batches of 20 or 30 to send out to prominent poets, local shaikhs, and important political figures. Her poems may extend beyond what would be the typical length for recited poems because she wants to make the most of the attention of individual readers, who can read slowly, digest, and reflect on her poems without the time constraints of a live performance. Through writing, she can circumvent sanctions against her physical presence while still delivering her political message.³⁸

A final hallmark of Salahyya's poetry relates to style and content; a fair proportion of her *qasidas* consist of "grievance" poetry (*shi`r al-shakawa*). While grievance has always been present in Arab poetry, women folk poets today compose grievance *qasidas* in the form of written letters, which they then send to specific individuals, often those of authority and power, with the intent of swaying their opinion toward some matter of practical importance. Since oral recitations in the offices of male authorities would not be permitted, these written letters are sometimes the only opportunity to plead their cases through the expressive terms of poetry. Grievance *qasidas* are not common among male poets, many of whom tend to couch grievance in the strong language of tribalism, along with some-

what stylized reflections on the heart and themes of lost love drawn from a tradition of romantic Arabic poetry. To be sure, Salahiyya's tribal voice is sharply articulated. In one poem, she admonishes a housing authority official from whom she needs assistance to be just and to fend off profiteers:

The ignoble will indeed come, ripping into quartered rip-chunks
 They balance them evenly before they simmer and boil.
 Expunge the evil from every sorcerer and snatcher!
 Redress the people with a measure, adjust your weights . . .
 Justice is due, not hindrance. Take mark!
 We would laud every authority and reiterate your command
 Even as he held a knife in his hand and blades to shave us.³⁹

Salahiyya keenly replicates here the masculinist language of tribal power central to much of the highlands *qasida* tradition. However, scattered amidst such powerful verses, she also articulates her own vulnerability. As the *qasida* unfolds, she implores the official in a piteous tone, remarkably locating her embodied pain:

Answer the one whose heart, feet and ankles are so tired.
 If you choose to harm me, whom do I have to help me, except yourself?
 Consider with compassion the circumstances of she who complains
 I have come with such intent, and wait for your answer and solution.⁴⁰

Salahiyya uses the form of a written letter—at once private and publicly distributable—to navigate between private and public spaces of expression in a way that would not have been possible in the more public venues such as oral performance or in poems written expressly for large audiences. Through the grievance letter, she manages, even through the masculinist discourses of the *qasida*, to vocalize a strikingly personal, embodied suffering even where her physical body is absent.

These trends in Salahiyya's poetry—vernacular registers, length, and tribal admonitions juxtaposed with marked vulnerability—help illustrate the kinds of discursive modifications that one rural woman poet has used to disseminate her work across corporeal, ideological, linguistic, and spatial boundaries that might otherwise prove insurmountable.

Representations

Despite the challenges they have faced as women poets in tribal societies, Magdashiyya and Salahiyya—through creative activism—have played an important part in public, political culture. This section considers some of the costs that they have incurred in choosing to participate in the worlds of male-dominated public discourse. It examines how their

identities as women political poets have had to be reconfigured, either by themselves or others, to better fit masculinist and especially nationalist narratives of the public, political actor. Within a discursive space of historical narrative that is aggressively maintained by the state, how must Magdashiyya now, nearly a century after her death, be represented by those who write and narrate her life? How must Salahiyya represent herself to regional and national audiences? It is not enough to review their poetry, the obstacles they have faced, and the strategies they have used to continue successfully reaching the public. We must also consider how the stereotypes propagated by dominant narratives continually threaten to recast their words and actions in accordance with more complicit ideological frameworks.

Magdashiyya through National and Domestic Narratives

Although Magdashiyya died early this century, her poetic presence continues to circulate through the lively exchange of her verses. She maintains a clear reputation among popular audiences. In recognition of her importance to both men and women, an initiative was recently launched to found the main lecture hall at the Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center at the University of Sanaa in her name, thus establishing one of the few public sites in Yemen named for a woman.⁴¹ Despite and because of her popular and increasingly national appeal, her poetic presence has become heavily mediated, as suggested by contradictions about her life and work revealed in different narratives.

The only significant published material on Magdashiyya is found in a chapter of a book written by `Abdalla Baradduni, widely recognized as Yemen's greatest national poet, who comes from a village close to Dhamar.⁴² Baradduni emphasizes several points about Magdashiyya. First, he explains that she was a member of a low-status group known throughout northern regions of Yemen as the "Bani Khums." This group has traditionally worked as barbers, musicians, butchers, heralds, and providers of basic services, and has been considered to occupy a lower status than tribespeople.⁴³ Evidence for his claim derives from a small poem—perhaps the most famous of Magdashiyya's verses—in which she speaks out against the injustice of social hierarchies and, specifically, against her own degradation and that of her mother. By parodying a popular view that "Bani Khums" means, literally, "Those of the Fifth," she exposes the absurdity of any kind of ranking system that discriminates among human beings who are all equally subject to God's decree.⁴⁴

They said [that] Ghazal and her mother Sur`a are daughters of a fifth
There is no fifth, O Servants of God, nor even a sixth

He who has risen tossed his head [from us] and counted cash
Saying: "Not too shabby." How much he conceals, and yet doesn't
conceal.⁴⁵

Even Even, O Servants of God, Even-handed
No one is born free and another born a handmaid
My family is nine, yet they said some of us have one house
While others have a second house, a secondary essence.⁴⁶

Those considered Bani Khums are equal to anyone else by virtue of their humanity. As Baradduni points out, this assertion is poignantly illustrated in the phrase, "my family is nine": Magdashiyya, like any other woman, bears children after a nine-month pregnancy.⁴⁷

Baradduni uses several framing strategies to depict Magdashiyya as a low-status woman who nevertheless surmounts the social inequalities of her day. First, he mentions that these verses were composed in the *balah* event, the most structurally egalitarian of traditional performance events. By foregrounding this performance genre, Baradduni helps create a more accessible space for her performance as both a woman and a member of the Bani Khums, who is still able to speak for equality. Second, he introduces discussion of Magdashiyya as a member of a low-status group with a long treatise on the virtues of rural life over life in the city. Through a romanticized narrative that juxtaposes rural life against urban ills, Magdashiyya becomes a poor, disadvantaged but innately virtuous country-dweller who, through her participation in the *balah*, rose above the stigmas associated with her gender and social status. Given the wide readership of Baradduni's books—which are among the most popular in Yemen—these frames have served to incorporate Magdashiyya into a national narrative in which an individual can triumph, despite restrictions of gender, status, education, and wealth, over social hierarchies and rural "backwardness."

Third, Baradduni can only locate Magdashiyya in a more public, national frame by underscoring her mobility across several divides: she was a member of the Bani Khums, yet able to openly challenge social inequality and become envied by shaikhs, merchants and "those known as Big men";⁴⁸ she used a poetic register that was at once vernacular and incipiently classical;⁴⁹ she produced verses that were instinctively rural and yet popular among urban populations.⁵⁰ Of course, representations of mobility are essential to the lives of famous men, too.⁵¹ As a woman, however, Magdashiyya must be re-presented through a further frame: she is gendered as male. Thus, although portrayed as a beautiful woman, she also embodies the qualities of an ideal tribesman.⁵² Her marital state is simultaneously rendered ambiguous. In describing how Magdashiyya was

forced into a wedding ceremony by her father, Baradduni relates an incident that casts doubt on whether Magdashiyya finalized her marriage: "And when her father paired her with someone she did not want, she entered the *balah* on the night of the wedding party and recited this beautiful poetry: 'Oh people, I didn't want any but Nasir Qarra' / Who was my companion since the days my robe was only an arms' length'."⁵³ Whether Magdashiyya made this bold declamation before or after the consummation remains unclear; the ambiguity has led other authors to imply similarly that she might have remained single.⁵⁴

The extent of the narrative mediation of Magdashiyya became apparent to me when I interviewed members of the Magdashiyya family in Dhamar. They explained that she had in fact married and provided me with a detailed descent-line to prove it.⁵⁵ In re-presenting Magdashiyya to me outside narratives of national prominence, they extolled her roles as wife and mother. For them, she was a female relative whose identity was best understood in more domesticated discourses of power and descent; it was only secondarily, and then with considerable ambiguity, that she could be "properly" inserted into a masculinized national narrative in which the public political actor was male.

During my interviews in Dhamar, I discovered an additional twist in the narratives about Magdashiyya. According to her descendents, Magdashiyya had not been a member of the Bani Khums, but rather a daughter of one of the most prestigious shaikhly families in the area. Baradduni did include a small footnote in the fifth edition of his book acknowledging that he may have misinterpreted Magdashiyya's social status, but the chapter remained otherwise unchanged. His failure to acknowledge conflicting reports more explicitly is surprising given the likelihood of such a rereading of a major Yemeni figure. The most convincing evidence of Magdashiyya's shaikhly status, as suggested by her descendents, is her poetry. Rather than drawing on the *balah* for verification, my interlocutors cited the *zamil* poems mentioned above (in which she negotiates with Shaikh al-Bukhait over the stolen sheep) as ample confirmation of her central role in tribal negotiations. It is difficult to imagine that a member of the Bani Khums would have been given the authority to negotiate during such a conflict on behalf of the tribe; that a *woman* of such a low-status group negotiated seems even less likely. Magdashiyya, they asserted, was a woman of considerable status and means, as well as one who spoke out against the injustices of social stratification. Through this more domesticated discourse of tribalism, she was refigured as a key tribal actor, though she remained a woman.

Analysis of Baradduni's representation of Magdashiyya in light of another, less nationalized narrative underscores the kinds of resistance, as

well as spaces for mobility, that women activists in general encounter when participating in public arenas. On the one hand, narrators agreed not only that Magdashiyya had been figure of remarkable power, but that she deserved recognition precisely for having transcended the social conventions of her time and protested social injustice. Both narrations touted her as a strident political voice in a society in which women's opportunities for public, political expression have been limited. On the other hand, as Magdashiyya became increasingly incorporated into the national narrative as a political spokeswoman, she was both recast as non-tribal (as a member of the Bani Khums) and re-gendered beyond the domestic; she became a charismatic crusader instead of a mother.

The maternal gendering of Magdashiyya in the discourse of domestic tribalism recounted to me by her descendents suggests a relative latitude for gender ambiguity when women's lives are narrated in less publicized venues. Nevertheless, attempts to bracket her motherhood within a masculinist discourse became apparent in the final poem recited to me by her descendents. In these prophetic verses, Magdashiyya cautions women against roaming into "the market" (a place of loose morals in a conventional tribal idiom) and seeking an education:

The time will yet come when women do not become embarrassed
They will carry notebooks and books and will study
They will go out, exposed, into the market to do business
Carrying in their bellies without nursing.⁵⁶

Popular opinion maintains that Magdashiyya's final hemistich prognosticates the arrival of canned infant formula, which swept through Yemen on the crest of a massive campaign by Nestle during the 1980s. Whatever the accuracy of such verses, they indicate the difficulty of eliciting a "true" historical biography of early women political actors when public memory is subject continuously to the normative constraints of male-dominated narratives.

Scholars have begun to investigate how women activists' identities and political strategies may be modified when they engage with the public sphere.⁵⁷ Such research is especially germane in light of the growth and many permutations of modern and traditional Islamist discourses, the expansion of state control, and the efflorescence of media technologies. Further research into the ways in which women's identities are differently subject to dominant narratives can tell us much about the ideological structures with which women activists must grapple. How are women re-gendered when they are incorporated within national narratives? If they are not re-gendered, how must their attachments to other key aspects of identity (the home, family genealogies, institutional affiliations, major

events, and so forth) be refigured? As national narratives are increasingly retold within global contexts, will women's words and lives be more radically re-narrated and the nation's narrative itself refigured? If our project is to identify how finely gendered narratives of national public culture can be written, I would suggest that it is only in attending to prevailing patterns in narrative practice (strategies of framing, metapoetic explanation, text interpretation, and so forth) that we can identify possibilities of re-narration.

Nadra al-Salahiyya: Between Oral and Written Locations

Nadra al-Salahiyya is a living poet whose work I was able to document through several interviews. Since access to her poetry was less subject to the interpretations of narrators and go-betweens, I was able to retrieve her corpus and her political voice more directly. Nevertheless, the apparently clear, first-hand nature of the material should not mask other forms of mediation. To begin with, I had spent nearly a year living a few houses away from the market of Suq al-Salam, where she worked, before I ever learned of her poetry. Although I had asked repeatedly about women's poetry and song, I had been led to believe by the men I had spoken to that women were not serious poets, only singers of traditional agricultural and wedding songs. As in Magdashiyya's case, I had to learn how to get beyond predominant male narratives of great poets and poetry.

I conducted two interviews with Salahiyya herself, during which she gave me handwritten copies of her poems. When I interviewed her in her shop, follow-up questions or discussions were brief and pursued only with difficulty due to the flow of customers. Since I was unable to record her poetry, I was left deducing her politics largely through the written word, a medium that presented its own ambiguities and interpretive challenges. Where Magdashiyya's experiences as a political poet had been refracted through the gaps and condensations of male oral narratives, Salahiyya's experiences have been accessible primarily through close readings enabled by the tools of linguistic anthropology and literary criticism. Close attention to the language registers in which she works, the lexical choices she makes, and the modifications to generic form that she accomplishes yields clues to her practical life as a political poet. Such observations culled from a written corpus assuredly enables a fuller understanding of the poet's own voice than that which had been passed down from Magdashiyya.

Nevertheless, I am still left wondering about the mediating structures that, precisely in their internalization, are all the more elusive. What aspects of her life as a political poet did she choose to share with me? What others need to be recognized, despite their absence? Along with the

stern warnings and seething accusations in her grievance poetry, there are tones of resignation that I have rarely seen among other poets. In the following *qasida* composed in 1998, she asks the president of Yemen, `Ali `Abdallay Saleh, to consider the inadequacy of her widow's pension:

Where is the care for the shattered patient?
 Where is medicine or an examination for the diseases of the body?
 My children number from one to ten
 Behind the feral wolf, each one's lot is drawn
 [Her] daughters, family, and husband
 All of them have sought a sprig of moist basil from me . . . yet there's
 naught
 My [only] aim is for a morsel of food, a satisfying life
 That has honor, for the lack thereof is the stopping of breath.⁵⁸

The accusative-case rhyme scheme and thematic organization of the poem are formal—befitting a letter to the president—and the composition is typed rather than handwritten. Nevertheless, traces of the suffering body permeate through poetic form, conveying a heightened urgency. *Salahiyya* ultimately implores, against undeniable odds, that the tender and perhaps more quiet articulations of her political message receive as much attention as those that leap from the page.

Conclusion

Most research on rural poets in the Middle East fails to give due attention to women's contributions. Among Western ethnographers, research has been conducted at largely two levels. Male ethnographers have tended to masculinize the world of poets and poetry to the extent that women poets, if discussed at all, are marginal and obscure satellites. Female ethnographers have tried to recenter women poets by foregrounding agricultural and wedding songs, lullabies and songs about personal experiences, and stories, tales, or narratives not traditionally considered "poetry."⁵⁹ Many of these genres have been designated somewhat too conveniently by these scholars as private or domestic poetry, or poetry recited in strictly same-sex gatherings. While such research has produced valuable insights, this essay suggests some of the ways in which scholars have overlooked the public activism of rural women and their poetry.

Anthropologist Cynthia Nelson's early scholarship on domestic empowerment as a means to public activism will remain generative for feminist scholars of the Middle East for years to come.⁶⁰ However, in a discursive sphere increasingly permeated by translocal technological mediation, renewed inquiry into the ongoing construction and contestation

of public space is ever more important. Attention to the mediation of embodiment can help locate not only the discursive parameters of public spaces, but also the translations and obstructions of women's verbal capacities across such spaces. As a male ethnographer, my access to women's domestic lives in rural Yemen has been extremely restricted; most of it has been heavily mediated through men. As a consequence, I have attended to women's political voices that emerge in other spaces, spaces in which embodiment becomes both a political force and a problematic.⁶¹ The women considered in this article are not obscure satellites in a world of male politicking, nor are they restricted to the "domestic" genres that have been the mainstay of feminist scholarly attention. Considering the discursive means through which the circulation of women's texts and performances of text take place suggests something of how women poets and performers operate within and upon multiply mediated, public spaces. And although women such as Magdashiyya and Salahiyya are to some extent exceptional, they also represent many other rural women who have, in similar if less prominent ways, contributed centrally to public political life.

NOTES

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¹In Southern Yemen, formerly the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), an especially successful consolidation of women's political activity occurred after independence, in the wake of radical Marxist-Leninist teachings. Activists helped found a range of literacy initiatives, women's cooperatives, scout clubs, and prominent political and cultural positions for women. See Maxine Molyneux, *Social Change and the Position of Women in the PDRY between 1967 and 1977: A Case Study of Female Factory Workers* (Geneva: ILO Press, 1981); and "The Law, the State, and Socialist Policies with Regard to Women: The Case of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 1967-1990," in *Women, Islam, and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1991), 237-71. See also Helen Lackner, *P.D.R. Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985). In Northern Yemen, formerly the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), gains by women activists were won with more difficulty, since nationalism drew centrally from tribal and Islamist discourses that were more explicitly masculinist in orientation. Margot Badran, "Unifying Women: Feminist Pasts and Presents in

Yemen," *Gender and History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 498-518; Carla Makhlouf, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernization in Yemen* (London: Croom Helm, 1977). North and South Yemen united to form the Republic of Yemen (ROY) in 1990.

²Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

³While personal names in the Middle East can be a confusing series of first names, names of descendents, and names of groups, decisions made by authors reflect interpretive strategies. I have noticed that most male authors identify men by their family or group names and women by their first names. To counter implications that women are somehow less representative of affiliate groups, I have chosen to identify both poets by their extended family names.

⁴Najwa Adra, *Qabyala: The Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands, the Yemen Arab Republic* (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1982); Steven Caton, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁵Although I may discuss generalities about Yemeni women's lives, I should clarify that I am concerned almost without exception with rural women, whom I understand in a more sociological sense as women who have spent the vast majority of their lives outside large urban centers. Yemen's social and cultural diversity makes generalizing about rural women's lives extremely difficult. United Nations statistics gathered in 1995 provide sobering figures: Yemen's fertility rate of 7.6 percent is one of the highest in the world, as is its infant mortality rate of 119 out of 1000 births. Additionally, an estimated 76 percent of women are illiterate, and 70 percent of girls of secondary school age are not enrolled in classes. The latter figures represent a drastic decline in female literacy from the early decades of the PDRY, when state-sponsored campaigns brought functional literacy to an estimated 55 percent of women in the South. Ahmad as-Sayyad, *al-Mara'at al-Yamaniyya wa Tahaddiyat al-'Asr* (Damascus: Dar al-Mada lil-Thaqafa wa-l-Nashr, 1995), 15. In any case, rural areas remain the most severely underdeveloped. For more on rural Yemeni women's lives, see Susan Dorsky, *Women of 'Amran: A Middle Eastern Ethnographic Study* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986); Martha Mundy, *Domestic Government: Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); and Anne Meneley, *Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). See also Joke Buringa, *Bibliography on Women in Yemen* (Westbury, NY: American Institute of Yemeni Studies, 1992).

⁶Arab scholars have documented the contributions of rural, often illiterate women poets to public life throughout Islamic and pre-Islamic history. Many collections are authored by men, and include 'Abdalla Ibn Raddas, *Sha'irat min al-Badiyya* (Riadh: Dar al-Yamama, 1969), which contains numerous examples of poetic exchanges similar to those discussed later in this article, and Ibrahim Wannus, *Sha'irat al-'Arab* (Antelius, Lebanon: Myriam Publications, 1992). By and large, however, little attention is devoted in such collections to practices of oral performance or literacy, or to the pragmatics of communicative mediation with which I am concerned in this article.

⁷Both Magdashiyya and Salahiyya compose *zamil* poems, and other au-

thors mention women's participation in the composition and recitation of the genre. Majed Muhammad, "Adat Jamila Ta'ish fi Hadn al-Mujtama'," in *Maqalat wa Dirasat `an Mudiriyya Yafi` wa Ta'rikhiha* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1985), 65–70; Saleh Saleh Muhammad, "Akhira al-Fursan," in *Turath Sha`bi Khalid: Sha'if al-Khalidi* (Aden: University of Aden, 1998), 23–25. After independence in the South, when revolutionary *zamil* poems—sometimes retitled "anthems" (*anashid*)—were frequently featured in state-sponsored celebrations, women poets grew especially familiar with the genre. According to my own observations, women who compose the *zamil* today generally recite them to friends and family in more private settings.

⁸Professional women singers, known as *munshidat* or *mazayyinat*, have long performed at weddings and other celebrations in Yemen. As noted by ethnomusicologist Jean Lambert, such singers' specialization in religious and spiritual material, and their performance in domestic settings, distinguish them from those who perform the genres of tribal poetry that I consider in this article. Lambert, *La médecine de l'âme: Le chant de Sanaa dans la société yéménite* (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 1997), 28.

⁹Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*, 127–54; Saleh Harithi, *az-Zamil fi-l-Harb wa al-Munasibat* (Damascus: al-Katib al-`Araby, 1990).

¹⁰Adra, *Qabyala*, chaps. 8, 9.

¹¹Isbil is the name of the region in which the village of al-Hawarwar is located.

¹²This may refer to an old pre-Islamic myth that held that the world rested between the horns of a great bull, and that earth tremors were the result of his head shaking to and fro.

¹³The image of deadly locusts is a metaphor for the poet's linguistic power as a wordsmith, and social power as a shaikh.

Ghazal ya Magdashitiyya ya Ghazal al-firid
Ya ghusn fi sharqi Isbil shuf min-hu `anad
Bukhait thawr al-qiyama la tabawwa` yahad
majrad nu`alli tihami min takk-ha jurud

¹⁴*ya marhaba ma yashaddu min Rada`a al-bijid*
marhab mala qa` shar`a wa ant hamal wa shadd
qum ya Bukhaiti tarawwa `ans hiy ba tasadd
al-Ju`bla yardi as-Sufi bi-mithni wahad

¹⁵Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*, 81–83.

¹⁶Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Terri Brint Joseph, *Poetry as a Strategy of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993); Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

¹⁷*ya rijal al-balad qad al-muthamir mukhalif*
ja yatuf adh-dhurra aw ja yatuf al-makalif

qal yashti Ghazal *wa illa yazid al-gharama*
ba adrab-uh fi al-qadhal *wa illa arbut-uh bi-l-`amama*
la raja` ya rijal *ma shay `alayya malama*

Quoted in Abdalla al-Baradduni, *Rihla fi al-Shi`r al-Yamani*, 5th ed. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 334.

¹⁸Mathar `Ali al-Iryani, *al-Mu`jam al-Yamani fi-l-Lugha w-at-Turath* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1996), 781.

¹⁹Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27–28.

²⁰Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 208; Aihwa Ong, "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 2 (1990): 258–76, esp. 259; Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36, esp. 203.

²¹Conservative Muslim attitudes toward the public performance of song, in particular, have a long and complex history in Yemen. As early as the tenth century, Zaidi (Shi`ite) authorities in northern Yemen took especially vehement positions against male and female musicians and performers, promulgating certain measures of "correction" (*ta`dhib*). In practice, such measures could be circumvented, and a flourishing indigenous song tradition developed in Sanaa. Shafi'i (Sunnite) interpretation in southern Yemen tended to be more permissive of song, although occasional bouts of censure also occurred. At the margins of conservative legalism across Yemen, however, Islamic discourses interfused with the practice of song to the enrichment of both. For a superb analysis of song and spiritual sentiment in Yemen, see Lambert, *La médecine*.

²²Wahhabism is a conservative religious reform movement founded in central Arabia in the mid-eighteenth century. The PDRY Family Law included among other things the banning of polygamy, forbade unilateral divorce by the husband, and instead allowed both spouses to petition for divorce on the same grounds. See Badran, "Unifying Women," for comparisons of the PDRY Family Law with the YAR Family Law of 1978 and the post-unification law.

²³Most of these early women performers were from Southern regions or the Tihama: Fattum Nasser, Nabiha Azim, Raja`a Ba Sudan, Sabah Monasser, Asmahan, and others. Women from Northern regions occasionally managed to travel to Aden and record with major record companies, using pseudonyms such as "The Veiled Musician," "Country Girl," "Fatima of Sanaa," and so forth. Abdalla al-Baradduni, *al-Thaqafa wa al-Thawra fi al-Yaman* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998), 154. Nevertheless, travel to the South was difficult due to strictly monitored national borders.

²⁴Nabat Ahmad from Dhamar, one of Yemen's earliest women popular singers, explained in one interview that constant harassment from members of her tribe ended when she began to sing for Radio Sanaa. At that point, those who

previously ridiculed her began visiting her house to commend and support her efforts as a singer. *al-Jumhuriyya al-Thaqafiyya*, 7 May 1998, 10.

²⁵There have been very occasional exceptions of rural women poets who are interviewed on television, especially during the 1980s in the former PDRY. Urban women poets have met with somewhat better success in reciting their verses on television and radio throughout Yemen, though their performances are still minimal compared to those of men.

²⁶Such an attack occurred in a village near Dhali` in the spring of 1996.

²⁷Women researchers tend to have better success at recording women, especially if they choose less formal genres of verbal art such as storytelling and personal life narratives. Also, some areas of Yemen are more sensitive to such forms of documentation than others.

²⁸Practices of orality and writing in the *qasida* genre overlap in complex ways. Despite centuries-old traditions of writing among rural poets, the oral and musical underpinnings of written *qasidas* remain extensive. I leave this topic, however, for another essay.

²⁹Storytelling, for example, is far more popular among women in Yafi` than poetry. Tales of the early Yemeni King Abu Nuwas, refashioned as a cheeky trickster, and his brother Lhas have commonly serve as moralizing narratives. In other tales, King Sulaiman and Bilqis are frequently invoked as protagonists, as are the Islamic prophets in variations of their biographies (*sira*). This form of verbal art deserves more attention.

³⁰For selections of verse by famous Yemeni historical figures, including the eighteenth-century poet Zaynab bint Muhammad, the Qasemid poet Fatima bint al-Hasan, and the Abbasid poets Sawda al-Hamdani and Shams al-Hawr al-Wazir, see `Abdalla al-Hibshi, *Mu`jam an-Nisa' al-Yamaniyyat* (Sanaa: Dar al-Hikmat al-Yamaniyya, 1988).

³¹Saddeka Areby, *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14–16; Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1990); Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Gabriele von Bruck, "Elusive Bodies: The Politics of Aesthetics among Yemeni Elite Women," *Signs* 23, no. 1 (1997): 175–214.

³²Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no.1 (1990): 41–55.

³³Standard Arabic is spoken by formally educated speakers across the Middle East and North Africa, and is based on a variety of "classical" Arabic formalized in the Quran and later schematized by grammarians after the eighth century. Region-specific, dialectal varieties of Arabic tend to be the currency of everyday language, and differ from the standard by degrees.

³⁴Their function as loanwords for *Salahiyya* was made clear to me during my interview with her. When I asked her about the rhyme scheme, she explained that a number of the end-line words had been incorporated from English into vernacular Yemeni during the period of British colonial rule. Interview by author, Sabr, Lahej, 19 February 1998.

³⁵The rhyming word here is actually *dusut* (sing. *dist*), which means "pots." Although it is a Persian rather than English word, it would still be oddly marked for most Yemeni speakers. I have translated the word as "pot" to give English readers a clear rhyme scheme that is comprehensible.

³⁶*la talabtuh ma`dhira yaqul nut* [pronounced nuut]
Ahmad samaq bi-sh-shughl yashqa li-lakmar . . .
sawwu l-uh `azuma w-intawal futa wa kut [kuut]
wa la qad Ahmad `arif an hadha darar
wa in ad-darura ghair `an laham ad-dasut [dasuut]
gharru-uh dhi ma ya `rifu khair wa barr . . .
bi-yid haqqu al-ma`ruf bi-sh-shanbal wa but [buut]
bal hawdna taghayyar sabab sharr al-baqar

³⁷Salahiyyah, interview.

³⁸Although men, too, may compose long poems, such practice is generally used to demonstrate a kind of artful facility with versification that is less suited to the rhetorical concision of highlands political verse. In my experience, vernacular *qasidas* longer than 80 verses were generally criticized for failing to meet popular standards of effective political oratory. See W. Flagg Miller, *Inscribing the Muse: Political Poetry and the Discourse of Circulation in the Yemeni Cassette Industry* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2001), 277.

³⁹*ba yagi akhgaf ba-yabzaqha tarabi` bazzaq*
shara`u-ha sawa qabal-ma tanakhkhat wa tartak
wa iba`du shirrha min kull saha wa matraq
salah ash-sha`ab bil-kaffuh wa ta`ddal bi-waznak . . .
shirrha wa al-bala ma `ad yahtag safaq
dabbar al-amr ya Saleh Munassar bi-mahlak
wajib `adl wa la mana` `alaik at-tahaqqaq
kull mas`ul bi-niyatuh wa ba-naqul amrak
wa in bi-yidduh lana as-sakin wa amwas halaq

⁴⁰*jawibuh dhi ta`b qalbuh wa-l-aqdam wa-s-saq*
min lana ghairik a yansaf idha ikhtart zulmik
min shaki halatuh qaddar zurufuh bi-sh-shifaq
jit `ani wa mustandar jiwabik wa halik

⁴¹In the fall of 1999, the Center's activities were all but terminated after the Islamist *Islah* party and other conservative groups launched a smear campaign that denounced the concept of "gender" (*al-jandar*) as alien to Islam. At present, the Center has been renamed and fundamentally restructured in accordance with a conservative statist agenda that has emerged in post-unity Yemen. See Margot Badran, "Gender: Meanings, Uses, and Discourses in Post-Unification Yemen," in the *Yemen Times* 10 (2000): 25-27, and Badran, "Unifying Women."

⁴²See Baradduni, *Rihla*, 332–40. Another of Yemen's poet-laureates, `Abd al-`Aziz al-Maqalih, published a chapter on Magdashiyya in his book *Shi`r al-`Amiyya fi al-Yaman* [Popular Poetry in Yemen] (Beirut: Dar al-`Awda, 1978), 401–08. However, his article draws most of its information and narrative orientation directly from Baradduni's *Rihla* (1972), with the exception of his discussion of a few longer *qasidas*.

⁴³Adra, *Qabyala*, 42–50.

⁴⁴Debate over the significance of the "fifth" has a colorful history in Yemen. One legend holds that "Those of the Fifth" are descendents of a fifth of those taken prisoner in an early Yemeni battle. Some claim that the name derives from the practice of giving a fifth of the booty of battle to accompanying servants and porters. See Adra, *Qabyala*, 42–46 and Mundy, *Domestic Government*, 40–41.

⁴⁵In these verses, Magdashiyya describes the impudent behavior of the wealthy who try to conceal their money but only expose themselves as greedy and exploitative.

⁴⁶*qalu Ghazal wa umm-ha Sura`a binat al-khums
ma buh khums ya `ibad Allah ma buh sudus
min qad taraffa` liwa rasuh wa `ad al-baqash
wa qal la ba's kam yahbas wa ma yahtabas
sawa sawa ya `ibad Allah mutasawwiyya
ma had walad hurr wa ath-thani walad jariyya
`ayali tisa`a wa qalu ba`dna bait nas
wa ba`dna bait thani `ainuh thaniyya*

⁴⁷Baradunni, *Rihla*, 335.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 336–37.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 334–35.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 333.

⁵¹The Qatari television program *al-Jazira* held an interview with Shaikh `Abdalla al-Ahmar in May, 1998 in which anchor Sami Haddad interrogated him about his conflicting allegiances as paramount shaikh of the Hashed tribe, parliamentary chairman, and leading representative of the Islah Party. Here the representative's political mobility became the subject of criticism even as it indexed the broad scope of his power.

⁵²Baradduni, *Rihla*, 334–35.

⁵³*Ya nas ma kan waddi ghair Nasir Qarra` / dhi kan rafiqi min ayyam kan thawbi dhara`*. Quoted in Baradduni, *Rihla*, 334–35.

⁵⁴Another author uses Baradduni's narrative to draw even more explicit conclusions. University of Sanaa professor `Aref al-Khubairi writes: "Among her well-known stances was her rebellion against the traditions of her day that required the girl to accept a husband selected not by her but by her father. In this regard, Ghazal trumpeted publicly her refusal of marriage. Indeed, she spoke

clearly about whom she desired in a strange event during a wedding celebration where she said: 'Oh people, I didn't want any but Nasir Qarra` / Who was my companion since the days my robe was only an arms' length.'" Al-Khubairi, "Ghazal al-Magdashiyya," undated pamphlet, Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center, Sanaa, Yemen.

⁵⁵Given the detailed family history with which I was provided, I have little doubt that she did in fact marry. Shaji` is Magdashiyya's grandson through affinal links, since his mother had married into her patriline. Ahmad `Umar Alwan al-Magdashi was Ghazal's father; `Ali Amir, her husband; and Muhammad `Ali, her son. Musbah Muhammad, who today lives in Dhamar, is her grandson. I am grateful to `Abd al-Hakim Hamdani for the patriline information.

⁵⁶*ad ba yagi waqt ma fih an-nisa yastahain
yatahammalain ad-dafatir wa-l-kutub yadrusain
yakhrujain kashifat la-s-suq wa yatasawwuqain
wa yahmalain fi hashahin wa la yard`ain*

⁵⁷Nilüfer Göle, "The Gendered Nature of the Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997): 61-81; Milani, *Veils and Words*.

⁵⁸*win al-`inaya lil-marid at-talifan
win ad-dawa l-amrad jismuh wa-l-fahis
min raqm wahid usrati li-l-`ashiran
kullan wa luh hissa qafa adh-dhaib ash-sharis
karayimuh wa-l-`a'ilah wa-z-zawjatan
kullan yabi ghusni shuqr rawi wa lais
qasdi bi-luqmat `aish `aisha mardiyyan
al-`izz fiha wa-l-`adam qat`a an-nakhis*

⁵⁹Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 30; Dorsky, *Women of `Amran*, chap. 10; Margaret Mills, "Gender and Verbal Performance Style in Afghanistan," in *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), 56-77.

⁶⁰Cynthia Nelson, "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World," *American Anthropologist* 1, no. 3 (1974): 551-63.

⁶¹For a recent article on the differently mediated, if still problematic embodiment of male cassette-poet voices in a recording industry, see W. Flagg Miller, "Metaphors of Commerce: Trans-valuing Tribalism in Yemeni Audiocassette Poetry," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002): 29-57.

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