SOCIOPOlITICAL NARRATIVES AND CONTESTATIONS IN KUWAIT’S
CREATIVE SECTOR POST-2012

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Introduction

In the summer of 1951 in Kuwait City, a blind Kuwaiti poet by the name of Fahad Al-Askar passed away at the age of thirty seven, alone on his deathbed and ridden with illness. Only five people prayed at his funeral, the only known person being a local Imam. His family refused to partake in his burial or funeral, and burnt most of his poetry after his death, perceiving it to be disgraceful to the family and inappropriate for his time and society. What survived of his poetry is owed to his very few friends who enjoyed listening to him and collected his poetry. Al-Askar was a pan-Arabist and a romantic who criticized traditional marriage, political religiosity, and used poetry to express his deep affection towards women and liquor – two taboos that left him shunned and ostracized from what was then a highly conservative society and led his father to kick him out of his home. Today Al-Askar is celebrated by both government bodies and the general public as a dissident of his time, a man who challenged traditional beliefs and advocated for rebellion against society. In Abdullah Al Ansari’s biography of Fahad Al Askar, he describes him to be a man whose “poetry came as a revolutionary storm, a revolution against inherited customs and traditions, and when he did not find the engagement he had dreamed of with his revolution, nor an echo of his cries to destroy barriers and break restrictions, he began to ache and suffer” (Al Ansari 1997, p. 15).

Al-Askar went from being a mysterious, tortured reject who ached with loneliness and longed for acceptance and affection in his society, to a hero in modern-day Kuwait, with his works often still quoted and seen as relevant to many contemporary issues and concerns. Graffiti drawings of Al-Askar can be found today at the traditional Souq Al Mubarakiya in Kuwait City, his poetry was taught in public schools during the 1970s and 1980s, and a TV series was made in honor of his memory. Yesterday’s ostracized artist is both accepted and celebrated today primarily because many of his ideas, which were revolutionary for his time,
have become normalized in today’s society and no longer considered taboo to at least discuss. Another element that is important to consider is the fact that the censorship and rejection Al-Askar faced did not come from an institutional body, but from his own family and society. Today much of cultural production is regulated and institutionalized, i.e. subject to the laws and control of the state, and sometimes exploited as a proxy tool between the government and the National Assembly; given the disparity between the structure of political institutions and the will of the general public, it is likely that what would be seen as inappropriate and unacceptable by an institutional body would still be revered by members of the general public. With the institutionalization of cultural production, various forms of creativity are subject to state scrutiny and under the control of state law. The state is the overarching power that determines what forms of cultural production are permissible to be presented to the public, even when it is created by non-governmental groups.

Today, cultural producers are monitored and censored by political institutions, including both the legislative (elected National Assembly) and executive (government) branches alike. Perhaps among the most prominent examples of recent censorship is that of award-winning Kuwaiti author Saud Al-Sanousi, who was a speaker at the annual Nuqat cultural conference in the spring of 2016. Al-Sanousi, like Al-Askar, is critical of Kuwait’s social issues; identity and belonging are the central themes of his literary novels, for he writes about racism, sectarianism, women’s roles, religion, and the issue of the stateless/Bedoon community. His 2015 novel, *Mama Hessa’s Mice*, was banned on the grounds that it “stirred sectarian sentiments” *(Al Kuwait Tamna’a Tadawul Riwayat Fi’eran Ummi Hessa NEED Date)* although the dystopian novel actually warns of the consequences of turning a blind eye

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1. Kuwait was not founded as an independent nation state until June 1961, and therefore formal government bodies

2. Nuqat is a non-profit Kuwait-based organization which aims to empower communities and individuals to overcome social challenges through creative and critical thinking. They have hosted an annual conference that attracts speakers from across the region since 2010.
to fermenting sectarianism. Upon learning of the decision to ban his book, Al-Sanousi went to the Ministry of Information to inquire about where the two thousand confiscated copies of his book were taken. “To the incinerator,” he was told. As he relayed this exchange at the Nuqat conference, the audience audibly gasped in horror at the image in their minds: two thousand confiscated copies of a novel that resonated deeply amongst Kuwaitis, burned en masse by a government entity. While this was reminiscent of the unfortunate incident of Al-Askar’s poetry being burnt, the former was carried out by family members, and the latter was a state-sanctioned act of censorship that embodied Ray Bradbury’s dystopia, *Fahrenheit 451*.

Kuwait’s history of political and social movements reveals a richness and innovation in the means of conveying discontent. From Fahad Al Askar’s provocative poetry to a silent march that took place at the NCCAL’s3 2014 annual book fair in protest of *Bedoon* children not having access to education, various groups in Kuwait have utilized creativity to their benefit in bringing attention to what they feel are important and overlooked causes.

This thesis examines more contemporary examples from Kuwait’s history of social movements, specifically the creative cultural movement that emerged post-2012. I examine the creative cultural spaces in Kuwait as a site of contested sociopolitical narratives, noting that these spaces appear to have emerged as alternatives in the absence of political avenues. Creative cultural spaces are inclusive of all forms of creative production: art, literature, theatre, dance, and music. With a regression in political and civil rights and increasing censorship of political activity and opinion, we find young people utilizing their creative platforms to discuss matters that, in the past, were primarily discussed in political spaces such as the *diwaniyya* or the halls of the National Assembly. This thesis is about creative groups of a primarily grassroots, nongovernmental nature that were established after 2012 and have

3 The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters is a government cultural institution that falls under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and Media.
taken on various causes that would otherwise fall under both the interests and responsibilities of either civil society organizations or the legislative elected branch, i.e. the elected National Assembly. I argue that creative producers have grown to be an advocacy force that sheds light on various public concerns while simultaneously attempting to create legislative change through lobbying and social media campaigns.

The term ‘culture’ in this study is used to refer to creative acts, creations and performances, inclusive of theatre, music, dance, literature, poetry, and more recently, digital media. In her discussion on the significance of cultural spaces, Nieuwkerk describes that they:

[ground] new processes of social production and reproduction in the Muslim world, as elsewhere. [They constitute] an infrastructure, and as such, [are] a site of struggle. In its multisensory embrace, in its repetitiousness and ubiquity, in its enliving of bodies, it mobilizes conceptions of the human being that exceed the narrowly prescribed roles of citizen, consumer, believer, employer, laborer, housewife, unemployed youth. (2016, p. 17)

Nieuwkerk’s definition of cultural spaces acknowledges the ability of cultural spaces to empower and mobilize marginalized or disempowered groups, while simultaneously being an arena of contestation that challenge the hegemony of narratives within these spaces. In this thesis I consider creative spaces as sites of contestation and struggle, per Nieuwkerk’s definition. In the cases that I will be examining, I pay particular attention to power dynamics, and how people are asserting their voices and narratives through a creative cultural platform.
Political Events

In this section, I briefly contextualize the political tensions that marked the period of 2010-2013. In 2010, news of MPs being bribed by then-Prime Minister Nasser Al Mohammed Al Sabah led to mass protests in the ‘Irhal’ popular campaign, leading him to become the first Prime Minister in Kuwaiti history to be removed in response to popular demand (“Kuwait’s Prime Minister Resigns After Protests”). In 2011, Kuwait’s stateless community took to the streets of Taimaa for the first time and was met with violence, tear gas, and arrests (“Kuwait: Dozens Injured, Arrested in Bidun Crackdown”). In 2012, the Karamat Watan movement rallied the largest protests witnessed in Kuwaiti history in objection to a change in the electoral law that reduced citizens’ votes from four votes to one. The new one-vote system has had an impact on candidates as well as citizens’ approach to elections. The switch was designed to “limit the ability of different ‘groups’ – tribes, proto-parties, and other ideologically connected factions – to form electoral coalitions and mobilize voters” (Tavana 2018, p.2). In essence, it puts tribal, opposition, and Islamist candidates at a disadvantage. The protests objecting to the change were met harshly, with arrests, tear gas, and excessive force (Albloshi 2018, p. 4). Finally, in 2013, an election took place under the new one-vote law that was boycotted by the opposition and major tribes in Kuwait. The National Assembly that was elected into power for the next three years passed restrictive laws such as the cybercrime law (“Kuwait: Cybercrime Law a Blow to Free Speech”) that led to the arrests of hundreds of people in the consecutive years because of Tweets. It took no stance when citizenships were collectively revoked (“Kuwait: Government Critics Stripped of Citizenship”) from opposition members and their entire families, and was generally complicit in allowing the public’s political and civil rights to be stripped from them.

From the aforementioned events, the 2011 Bedoon protests and the 2012 Karamat
Watan protests are probably the most relevant to contextualizing this research given the fact that their timing aligned with that of the rest of the Arab uprisings, and that their repercussions have persisted until this day. In the case of the Irhal campaign, the Prime Minister was removed and the Amir was largely responsive to the demands; another distinction is the fact that the 2010-2011 Irhal campaign was not met with violence and repression as was the case with the other two movements. This is not to imply that there were no consequences whatsoever. In the Irhal campaign, some protesters who stormed Parliament were sentenced to prison after an eight-year trial (Spencer 2011).

In February of 2011, Kuwait’s stateless community took to the streets demanding their right to citizenship and human rights. While this was not the first instance of Bedoon activism, it marked a rupture in the sense that it was the “first instance of a spontaneous street demonstration” (Beaugrand 2017, p. 501). The word ‘Bedoon’, which literally translates to without [nationality] in Arabic, is used to refer to “a group of people who claim entitlement to the Kuwaiti nationality based on the absence of other state affiliation, while the State of Kuwait considers them ‘illegal residents’ on its territory” (Beaugrand 2018, p. 11). They currently make up approximately ten percent of the Kuwaiti population, their numbers estimated to be at 110,000 (Beaugrand 2018, p. 12). Present in Kuwait since its creation as a nation state, the state’s attitude and policies towards them has undergone significant deterioration throughout the years, reaching its current state today of perceiving them as illegal residents who possess foreign passports and falsely claim entitlement to Kuwaiti nationality. The majority of the participants in the 2011 demonstrations were young, male, and second and third generation Bedoon who chanted “Bedoon until when?”; “Kuwaitis! Kuwaitis!” and “If the people want to live (Iza al’shab yuman arada al-hayat), the last verse of the Tunisian national anthem (Beaugrand 2017, p. 501). The protests were met with
violation and the participants that were identified and arrested had security blocks⁴ imposed on them, many which still stand until this day.

The *Karamat Watan* movement came a very short period after the *Irhal* campaign; the atmosphere in the country was still tense, and the sentiments in solidarity with the Arab Spring were strong (Albloshi 2018, p. 17). However, despite this feeling of solidarity with the Arab Spring, the movement insisted that their demands were not to topple the system or the ruling family, but to improve and reform the existing status quo (interview with Athbi Al Mutairi, July 28 2018). After elections were held in February 2012, a group comprising more than half of the MPs in Parliament announced the formation of an opposition bloc named *Al Aghlabiyya* (‘the Majority Bloc’), which went on to become arguably the “most vocal anti-government opposition bloc in the National Assembly’s history” (Tavana 2018, p. 2). The Majority Bloc criticized the government so intensely that the Amir dissolved the National Assembly, a constitutionally protected right of the Amir when he deems it necessary or appropriate (Article 107, Part IV of Kuwait Constitution). The dissolution led to an intense political crisis, which the Amir attempted to resolve in the government’s favor by amending the electoral law in October 2012, switching to a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system. Each voter now had one vote instead of four as they did in the past. It was this Amiri decree that led to the Karamat Watan movement, a series of massive protests that combined street demonstrations with social media mobilization. The change in the electoral system weakened the opposition’s chances of gaining more seats in the National Assembly. While the movement’s initial announced goal was to return to the previous system, it “evolved into a demand for a full parliamentary system” (Albloshi 2018, p. 4). The movement was

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⁴ ‘Security blocks’ or ‘security flags’ are arbitrary flags imposed on a number of politically active people in the Bedoon community that effectively blocks them from renewing official documents, being able to work legally. At times, these blocks are imposed on families collectively, leaving whole families without a source of income or the right to work (“Country Information and Guidance: Kuwait Bidoons”).
comprised of Kuwaiti men and women from both tribal and hadari backgrounds, although some participants, particularly those who were Shia, were hesitant to join and “suspicious of what impact the outcome would have on [them]” (interview with Bashar Al Sayegh, July 2018; interview with Mohammed Sharaf, May 2018). The movement was violently repressed and marked the end of a lively political atmosphere in Kuwait from that point on.

The context of the described political events marked a significant rupture in what had previously been a vibrant, relatively free political atmosphere in Kuwait. Perhaps most importantly, it also led many young people to lose faith in any chance for political reform. Instead, some resorted to alternative means of change and expression: namely, cultural production.

In a series of interviews that I conducted over the summer of 2018, many of the young people who are now active participants in the cultural scene or even started their own cultural projects described the beginnings of their activism being of a political nature, either tracing back to the Karamat Watan movement, the Taimaa protests, civil society groups, or a wider sense of hope that came with the wave of the Arab Spring. In these cases, participants described a loss of faith in political institutions and political reform. How, then, is creative culture relevant?

In Nieuwkerk’s study of creative and popular culture during the Arab uprisings, she explains how revolutions have always been accompanied by outbursts of cultural production from below, which reflects the “energy released when hardened political and sociocultural systems suddenly are pried or explode open, releasing incredible amounts of cultural production – poetry, music, art, literature, and prose” (2016, p. 14). However, in this study, I argue that rather than outbursts of cultural production from below being an indication of hardened political and sociocultural systems’ collapse, in the case of Kuwait, it is actually an
indication of their enduring strength. This is evidenced in the rapid intellectual migration of various youth groups from political activities to cultural spaces. Recognizing that Kuwait did not experience a revolution per se, the events that took place are still relevant to Nieuwkerk’s perspective given the fact that they involved large numbers of people rising up to what they perceived to be autocratic rule. Later, having given up on the prospect of being able to bring down or reform the political system post-2012, they redirected and rechanneled their energies and efforts elsewhere. This, of course, does not include all political activists, but rather those who already had an inclination towards the arts and other creative tools.

Between 2013 and 2016, a proliferation of new cultural spaces, groups, and activities swept Kuwait. As Kuwaiti author Bothayna Al Essa described to me in an interview over the summer of 2018, “We went from having nothing to do, to having eight different things happening on the same day to choose from”. In these early stages, the cultural activities were primarily of a grassroots, non-governmental nature, with the exception of the NCCAL’s Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah, whose presence has played a defining role in young people’s social lives and creative aspirations, as I demonstrate in later chapters.

While creative culture may come off as irrelevant to the state of politics to the unfamiliar eye, it is actually utilized as “the site where many of the most important and controversial issues are explored and debated” (Nieuwkerk 2016, p. 10). In totalitarian socialist Europe for example, a “prohibition of art for art’s sake” (Harastzi 1987, p. 101) was introduced, not with the desire to necessarily disseminate politically neutral artwork, but with the desire to disseminate artwork that is “not only entertaining but enlightening as well” (1987, p. 102). In essence, artwork under politically restrictive conditions is not necessarily stripped of any political connotation, but rather is directed to conform to a specific political agenda in accordance with what the state perceives to be the social context (Harastzi 1987, p.
104). Therefore, cultural production is often a testament to the state of politics and society, rather than being a distinct sphere that isolates itself from sociopolitical affairs and concerns. A state that imposes censorship policies on cultural production is aware that politically neutral art “poses no threat” (Harastzi 1987, p. 103), but on the contrary, “fosters assimilation” (Harastzi 1987, p. 103). It creates a sense of complicity and docile cultural production, and is therefore desirable and encouraged by totalitarian states. While the case studied in this thesis does not qualify as a totalitarian state, Harastzi’s argument that non-democratic states are conscious of the influence of artistic production is relevant; we see in Kuwait that censorship is imposed on government-sponsored art galleries, but not without simultaneously pushing forward particular types of art production that are often centered around patriotism and allegiance to the Amir.

Abdulaziz Al Awadi, founder and CEO of Wejha Art Space⁵, had a different take on the subject of the intersection of art and politics. He recognized politics to have an impact on the arts in Kuwait, but said that most participants and artists at Wejha “aren’t interested in politics” and “live in their own world”. “When someone does start to talk about politics, it brings in a negative vibe. We don’t want negativity to come here” (interview with Abdulaziz Al Awadi, June 21 2018). This disenchantment and desire to distance their artistic space from any discussion on the state of politics can perhaps be attributed to his past experience with government-sponsored art exhibits; Al Awadi as well as other artists who are members at Wejha spoke about this with me at length. Al Awadi’s primary critique of government art exhibits which accept art works from Kuwaiti artists is the redundant nationalist theme, and the fact that government entities “have specific, rigid categories of what you can and cannot draw; you can’t draw nudity, violence, or anything related to religion or politics” (interview

⁵ Wejha is an SME-funded 24-hour co-working art space, the first of its kind in Kuwait that provides spaces for artists of various kinds to work together. It officially opened in December 2018.
with Abdulaziz Al Awadi, June 21, 2018). The private art exhibits, while they also have to function within particular restrictions have wider freedom to produce and exhibit the artworks they wish to create, in addition to being open to artists that are not Kuwaiti citizens. Still, perhaps what was most striking about my conversation with Al Awadi was the insistence on detaching from politics, and instead focusing on this concept of “art for art’s sake”.

It is important to also consider the very notion of art being revolutionary. Art is “not inherently revolutionary”, even if it carries the possibility to push for substantial change (Nieuwkerk 2016, p. 2). Some Middle Eastern artists are not only absent from political spaces or protest events, but are actively involved with and supportive of their respective regimes. There are others still who are, simply put, apathetic towards politics and endorse neither the regime nor any opposition groups. Art and popular culture can indeed “criticize and resist or [sustain] and enforce the regimes in power” (Nieuwkerk 2016, p. 2). Only since the middle of the twentieth century has “art been seen as synonymous with anti-authoritarianism” (Harasztzi 1987, p. 13), prior to which the promise of bourgeois civilization was “artistic autonomy [as] an end in itself” (Harastzi 1987, p. 13). With the turn of the twentieth century, art became recognized as “a symbol of the protest of individual consciousness, questioning the order of the world” (Harastzi 1987, p. 13). Thus while this concept of art as synonymous with revolutionary notions and sentiments is widespread, we also need to recognize that it is a relatively contemporary concept that still does not necessarily resonate with all artistic or creative communities.

While the shift in the cultural scene and its growingly active role in Kuwaiti society is perceptible to and sensed by Kuwaitis and residents living in the country, it may not be so to others from abroad, who still have the perception of it regressing into a conservative post-
Gulf War period. I had the honor of meeting the Palestinian author Mourid Barghouthi, whose work I deeply admire, at the Emirates Literature Festival in Dubai in 2015. I told him how we would love for him to visit us in Kuwait someday, as he had many fans in the country. He responded, “The last time I was in Kuwait was in the early 1980s, back when Kuwait had a real cultural scene, when it had a real press, when it had a real parliament, when it had real freedom”. This was disheartening to hear, but what was more disheartening was the impression that the Kuwaiti cultural scene was (still) dead. From my experience, it has not only been revived from its death in 1990 – it has erupted back into life. I wish to pay tribute to those efforts, recognize them, and make sense of their motivations and implications at large. I demonstrate how in spite of a shrinking in the space for political expression and tightening of general political and civil freedoms, people in Kuwait have been innovative and found alternative means of conveying both their discontent as well as their aspirations. The use of creative spaces to respond to sociopolitical events, in a context that has otherwise restricted citizens’ ability to protest and object, is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

Recognizing that the term ‘culture’ can certainly embody broader meanings, for the purpose of this study I am specifically examining it in a context of creative cultural production and performance. Dr. Ibrahim Ghuloum, a researcher on the history of creative culture in the Gulf, says that culture, “as an explosive human energy – can only be a form of expressing freedom” (2002, p. 174), and that culture “responds to its role in expressing the relentless desire for freedom, and to instill an awareness and practice of it, not only within organizations and institutions, but within the broader framework of daily life and behavior

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6 I am happy to say that since writing this, Mourid Barghouthi has finally visited Kuwait after an absence of almost forty years, upon receiving an invitation from Huroof Cultural Centre, another one of the new cultural platforms that opened in Kuwait. See: https://alqabas.com/650658/
and human situations” (2002, p. 175). In other words, according to Ghuloum, culture is utilized as a medium to convey a desire for freedom. Ghuloum argues that such cultural expression does not limit itself to institutional bodies; it extends to individual acts and day-to-day life. Transcending institutional bodies means that it surpasses state-sanctioned, official creative spaces, and can take the form of more spontaneous acts or creations that are independent in nature and thus reflective of the desires and aspirations of the general public, rather than the state narrative.

As Ghuloum describes, culture is perceived to be a holistic means of meeting the needs of individuals, in addition to it being utilized in the individual’s pursuit for freedom. Ghuloum has conducted studies surrounding the specific experience of theatre in the Gulf, demonstrating that it was not only an expression of the marginal freedom that mobilized change since the 1950s, but that “the theatrical experience was a real alternative to the democratic experience, which was absent in the societies of the region” (2002, p. 180). Given the absence of democratic institutions and the limits on citizen participation in decision-making, theatre became a space that resembled what a democratic institution would provide them with: exchanging heated debate, expressing opinions, witnessing disagreement, conveying demands and discontent. Ghuloum argues that not even the few existing explicitly democratic institutions at the time could provide what the cultural platforms provided:

Not the early beginnings of the press in the 1930s and 40s, nor the nationalist movement prevalent among clubs, or underground organizations could bring about the violent disruption of social traditions, and deliver to it the kind of blows we found in the poetry of Fahad Al Askar. These writings brought to the surface victims who were drowning in blood and tears before the cruelty and power of social traditions.
Al-Askar grew up in 1930s Kuwait, during a period when the country was experiencing extreme poverty and hunger; it was also a period when society was still quite conservative, which frustrated the life-hungry poet. The grief he felt, very evidently reflected in his poetry, is often cited by both state media as well as independent cultural producers as the epitome of the experience of sadness and a feeling of societal rejection in Kuwait. His needs – as Ghuloum described – were not met. How, then, can we make sense of a strikingly similar sense of frustration found today in a city that, on the surface and to many outside observers, appears to be prosperous and lavish?

A History of Kuwait, Politics, and Role of the Arts and Culture

Prior to Kuwait’s establishment as a nation state and achieving its independence from the British in 1961, the first formal [boys] school opened in 1912 (Nashi’f 17); initially dedicated mainly to the study of Arabic language, Islam, arithmetic and geography; the arts did not have a place in schools until the 1930s and 1940s (Suwailem 2009, p. 50). Art and crafts classes were introduced in the 1930s and its presence in the education curriculum was perceived to be “the epitome of the rise and progress of a nation” (Suwailem 2009, p. 51). Perhaps most strikingly was the active role that religious figures played in endorsing and encouraging the arts; among them was Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Rasheed, who initially believed that it was haram to read newspapers and magazines, and that one should avoid learning foreign languages (Suwailem 2009, p. 46). In an intellectual development, he later founded a magazine in 1928 that was centered around religious debate, history, literature and morality, and became among the foremost figures calling for the spread of knowledge and culture, and was appointed to be the Principal of the Al Mubarakiya school (Al Suwailem 2009, p. 46). In
In the 1930s, it was mainly Palestinian and Egyptian teachers who would teach art classes; by the 1940s, Kuwaitis began to teach art classes in schools (Suwailem 2009, p. 64). In this particular time period and within this Islamic context, worldly beauty and aesthetics were understood as “an emanation of God’s beauty, prompting a contemplative turn in his direction, away from this-worldly things” (Nieuwkerk 2017, p. 5). Thus there was an intimate relationship between religious values and an appreciation of the aesthetics of art.

Later, following the discovery of oil and with increased oil revenues, Kuwait developed the economic capacities to expand and institutionalize its cultural sector. Since 1974, the cultural sector in Kuwait was formally promoted and institutionalized by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters under the supervision of the Ministry of Information (Fabbri 2017, p. 286). Private collections such as the Sultan Gallery, the Tareq Rajab Museum, and the Al-Sabah Collection were among the key cultural initiatives established in the 1970s (Fabbri 2017, p. 286). Additionally, Kuwait also hosted numerous international musicians and artists during what was dubbed the ‘golden era’ of Kuwait, namely the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Kuwait was hailed as “the pearl of the Gulf” for its relatively liberal political system, space for freedom of political and personal liberty, and a vibrant arts and culture scene (Fabbri 2017, p. 285). Because of this political environment, Kuwait was a safe haven for many Arab authors living in exile and intimidated by their own governments: Iraqi poet Ahmad Matar, Egyptian satirist Mahmoud Al Saadany, Palestinian cartoonist Naji Ali, and many other highly-esteemed Arab figures were producing and publishing their works in Kuwait. (Al Aboush 2017) evidence of a thriving and free press and liberal cultural scene (Makanat Al Kuwait Al Thaqafiyya). The cultural scene, throughout Kuwait’s history, has reflected contemporary political conditions, even in more recent years where participants
within the cultural scene choose to strictly identify as apolitical. This desire to identify as apolitical is telling of the loss of faith in political reform and disenchantment with politics at large, which I allude to in more detail in the following chapter.

While the 1970s and 1980s are often longingly referred to as the “golden era” of Kuwait (Al Moufti 2012), since the 1990s Kuwait has undergone significant turbulence. The Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Center, currently the largest opera house in the Middle East, says on its website that “Kuwait’s cultural identity has always been rooted in a modern, avant-garde and experimental tradition. We wish to return to this identity at JACC and establish ourselves as the model space for all cultural events and activities, on national, regional and international levels” (“The Cultural Centre”). This stated desire to ‘return’ to a past cultural identity suggests recognition that some sort of change took place, although it does not explicitly say what. Among the most popular productions that JACC has put forth since its establishment in 2016 is “The Return to the 80s Show”, a performance directed by Kuwaiti citizen Jasim Al Qamis that reminisces and sheds light on life in Kuwait in the 80s with a particular focus on Kuwaiti television and theatre (“Kuwait Wows Gulf with 80s Show” [my translation]). This performance was then done in other Gulf countries and reflected the interregional affection that many Gulf citizens have for those memories, and was a big hit across the Gulf. This ‘golden era’ is therefore not only remembered in the consciousness of Kuwaiti citizens, but in the minds of others in the region as well.

Throughout my interviews, the beginning point of rupture in people’s consciousness and narration often began with the Iraqi invasion on August 2, 1990. Among the many effects of the post-invasion period, one of them was a decision from the Ministry of Education to do away with art and music classes to get students to catch up with the ‘more important’ classes, given the fact that the great majority was now a full school year behind (interview with
Shouq Muzaffar, June 2018). Vamik Volkan, a political psychologist, described the post-invasion period to be “[a point of] disjuncture in Kuwait’s sense of self” (2013, p. 232). The decades that followed were periods of attempting to recover from that trauma and living with the social and political symptoms of it. Among the effects of this trauma was a regression in the field of arts and culture, as part of a wider regression on freedoms more broadly.

During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, domestic civilian resistance was active in many forms (Sassoon & Walter 2017, p. 623); the occupying Iraqi forces had criminalized patriotic songs expressing loyalty for Kuwait, and local Kuwaitis used them as a form of resistance (Jarrah). Fayeq Al Abdul-Jaleel, a prominent Kuwaiti poet, playwright, and lyricist expressed the belief that poetry could be an agent of social change, that poetry, “is one grain of wheat which enters all ovens and bakeries to feed all the people” (Al Subaie 2015). During the invasion, Abdul-Jaleel joined a resistance movement comprised of other Kuwaiti poets and musicians, who wrote and recorded poems and songs intended to embolden Kuwaitis to resist the Iraqi occupiers. A network of Kuwaiti women would hide cassettes in their abayas and distribute them house-to-house. The Iraqis received word of the songs, which had grown vastly popular, the most popular being Nibga Kuwaitiyyeent ‘We Remain Kuwaitis’ [in spite of the occupation and attempt to turn Kuwait into Iraq], and arrested Abdul-Jaleel along with other poets and musicians on January 3, 1991, later executing them in Baghdad before the second Gulf War in 2003 (Mukharesh 2006).

Cultural diplomacy was an important tool that Kuwaiti citizens and officials relied on abroad to garner support for their cause of liberating Kuwait. Internationally, the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah (DAI) contributed in rallying support for the liberation of Kuwait. It was a structured cultural institution with international connections and a collection of artifacts that spanned from the eighth to the eighteenth century, and ranked among the top six art
collections in the world (Fabbri 2017, p. 291). Six weeks into the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iraqi trucks parked in front of the DAI museum and removed the entire DAI collection, comprised of around 4,000 objects and 3,000 books, as well as 60 percent of the Kuwait National Museum collection (over 40,000 pieces). While this certainly posed a huge loss, DAI’s director, Sheikha Hessa Al Sabah, was able to mobilize and capitalize on the concern of those in the art world about the fate of the collection in order to advance her cause of liberating Kuwait. Using this theft of national cultural heritage as her premise, she relentlessly denounced the Iraqi occupation. She also took advantage of an art collection that had already been touring the U.S. at the start of the summer of 1990. The traveling exhibition was titled ‘Islamic Art and Patronage’, and after its opening in St. Petersburg, its status shifted, no longer ‘objects of art from some oil-rich sheikhdom, but refugees from an invaded homeland’ (Fabbri 2017, p. 292). It was exhibited again in Baltimore in November 1990, in the presence of high-ranking politicians, academics, and a U.S. government representative of President George Bush Sr., who “highlighted the importance of hosting such the exhibition under such particular circumstances” (Fabbri 2017, p. 292). The fate of the stolen collection remains unknown.
The aforementioned examples serve to demonstrate the vibrant role that the arts and culture sector has historically played in Kuwait, both domestically and internationally. Following a period of religious conservatism in the 1990s, the early 2000s witnessed two political movements that shifted the sociopolitical atmosphere in Kuwait: *Nabeeha Khamsa*\(^7\) (*We Want it Five [Electoral Districts]*) and the movement for women’s right to vote and run for Parliament. The former movement was inclusive of various factions of society, from the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis to liberals and women. The women’s movement, which achieved women’s suffrage, marked an end to what was a proxy issue for conflicts between

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\(^7\) Nabeeha Khamsa emerged in 2006 with a platform to reduce the number of electoral districts in the country from twenty five to five, out of a belief that smaller district sizes provided the regime with more leeway of interfering in elections to influence the results. The movement claimed that a reduction in electoral districts would also contribute to countering corruption. By the end of 2006, the electoral law was successfully amended to five electoral districts.
legislators and the government in the early 1990s, particularly following the Iraqi occupation, during which Kuwaiti women were key players of the resistance. Both of these movements were substantial steps in sociopolitical reform during the 2000s. As Mary Ann Tetreault described in a commentary following the legalization of women’s suffrage in Kuwait, “Reform opens the possibility of changing the Kuwaiti political universe in a positive direction” (Tetreault). Kuwaitis thus were able to successfully achieve the goals of two political movements during the 2000s. This gave many a sense of hope for the future of politics in the country. However, the turning point in 2011 that would first uplift and then essentially defeat any hope was one that no one could have predicted, and that was the wave of the Arab Spring that spread across the region.

In the case of Kuwait, what happened following the events of Taima and Karamat Watan was a migration of youth intellect and energy towards the arts and culture following a period of political suppression and stagnation. The creative scene between 2013-2016 thus expanded via non-governmental and grassroots initiatives led by young men and women in Kuwait. ‘The creative scene’ in this thesis is inclusive of all cultural producers, be they writers and poets, actors and musicians, or artists and dancers. Cultural producers have used these spaces to contest their sociopolitical realities and even challenge government policies. The role and shape they evolved into is highly intriguing; the creative scene has become a force that challenges both the executive and legislative\(^8\) branches, simultaneously taking on a more active role than Kuwait’s own civil society. Beginning in 2014, the state took on a more interventionist role through increased censorship and bureaucracy. As I will demonstrate, later in 2016 it began to compete with the private sector and grassroots creative scene by introducing its own massive cultural projects.

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\(^{8}\) The ‘executive’ branch is used to refer to the government, and the ‘legislative’ branch is used to refer to the elected National Assembly, also known as the Parliament.
I divide the actors into two main groups: cultural producers and cultural consumers. The producers are the individuals and groups who I interviewed; the writers, artists, dancers, curators and musicians. The consumers are the individuals who participate in the events and activities that the producers put forth to the public, but do not partake in how it is organized. Based on my survey responses, the consumers are comprised of Kuwaiti citizens, non-Kuwaiti citizens, and stateless people.

In terms of their socio-economic status, the above chart demonstrates the monthly income based on the survey responses I received. Over 60% of the respondents make 1000 KWD or less per month. The chart below demonstrates the sectors that survey respondents work in, noting that 24.17 percent are comprised of students. Kuwaiti students receive a monthly government allowance of 200 KWD, while expatriate students who work on-campus jobs make an average of 80 KWD a month. This implies that one’s employment status combined with one’s nationality either increase or decrease accessibility to cultural events.
Consumers’ socioeconomic status plays an important role not only in their ability to participate in cultural activities, but also which cultural activities they can participate in. For example, activities that are free and open to the public are arguably considered accessible, but one has to take into consideration that transportation may play a role in planning to attend such an activity. Not all expatriates have a driving license, and with lower wages, they would have to account for cab fares and other expenses. The chart below sheds light on the factors that determine consumers’ decisions to participate in/attend a cultural event.

**Figure 3: Employment Sectors**

![Chart showing employment sectors: Government 42.86%, Private 24.17%, Unemployed 15.45%, Freelancer 11.30%, Student 6.23%]
We see that “Activity type” is given the most importance among consumers/survey respondents, with “Reputation of place or organizers” coming a close second. Kuwait is a small country and the cultural community is even smaller. Personal connections and relationships play an important role in people’s willingness to associate with a particular place, as it also means associating with the people behind the place. 30.67 percent consider ticket prices to be an important factor. With the emergence of cultural institutions such as Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Center and other for-profit private sector venues, there are more and more cultural events that require purchasing tickets prior to the event. For many, the prices are too expensive and therefore inaccessible. Recognizing that having access to and the time for cultural activities can, in and of itself, be a luxury, is important in making sense of these events. I discuss the subject of inclusion and exclusion in more depth in a later chapter.
Scholarship on the Arts and Culture in Kuwait and the Middle East

Creative spaces in the Arab world at large are utilized as tools of debate, protest, and subtle contestation with state and non-state actors within a context that restricts citizens’ ability to use explicitly political means of challenging systems of authority. In this thesis, I examine the case of Kuwait, studying both the motivating factors as well as the implications of the creation of such spaces. The time period I focus on is between 2012-2018, in a desire to examine “the outlets through which aesthetic alternatives arise” (Demerdash 2017, p. 29).

How does the interplay of religious customs, everyday politics and social norms impact creative individuals’ engagement and productions?

Demerdash addresses the impact of censorship on the arts and culture in the Gulf, and how various structures such as the state, political systems, and cultural and social values integrate in instances of censorship. In particular cases, it is the state which explicitly intervenes and imposes censorship, such as the case of Shurooq Amin’s art gallery being shut down in 2011 after being dubbed “indecent” and “obscene” (Westall) or the more recent spike in banned books from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information. In others, self-censorship takes place out of fear of facing repercussions from non-state authorities and actors, such as family and larger society. Demerdash explores how artists of the Gulf “engage with the region’s religious customs and everyday politics” (2017, p. 30) and “witlessly self-censor, thus effectively depoliticizing their practice” (2017, p. 31). Depoliticizing artwork is one form of self-censorship, while another would be de-eroticizing. Two of the artists whom I had interviewed, Abdulaziz Al Awadi and Fatma Abodama, spoke to me about their frustration with the censorship of erotic and nude art in Kuwait (interview with Abdulaziz Al Awadi, June 21 2018; interview with Fatma Abodama, May 2018). There are certainly other forms of censoring artwork; censorship is multi-layered and comes in various forms that
affect different people in different ways.

In several interviews, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was referred to as the ‘setback’—the point of consolidation of political Islam – and post-2012 being the point where openness and creativity was revived. Volkan explains how his visit to Kuwait after its liberation made him sense that there would be a “disjuncture in Kuwait’s collective sense of self” (p. 230). I draw on his discussion of the psychological effects of the invasion in order to make sense of some of the increasingly xenophobic sentiments, as well as the apparent strife between conservative groups and others who have been more vocal advocates of the arts and culture.

Recognizing that these new cultural spaces are not explicitly political – and sometimes strictly identify as apolitical, as was the case with many whom I had interviewed – the question of how much impact they have on society and policy is important to consider. Despite the fact that many artists identify and promote themselves as ‘apolitical’, the political conditions under which their work is produced and under which they must continue to function, makes them inherently political.

Bayat’s ‘Life as Politics’ is essential for making sense of the consequences of the mundane. The mundane’s existence and persistence proves that, “…despite authoritarian rule, there are always ways in which people resist, express agency, and instigate change, rather than waiting for a savior or resorting to violence” (Bayat 2013, p. 29). Thus while a seemingly apolitical act or event does not express an explicit challenge to state authorities, its consistent existence is evidence that under circumstances of repression, communities and individuals are able to devise non-violent mechanisms for conveying their discontent and challenging the status quo. Such is the case with the arts and culture scene in Kuwait; particular communities found themselves frustrated with much of the ongoing domestic politics, status quo and what they believe to be unjust policies, and resorted to the arts and
culture to convey their sense of discontent, question the status quo and demand policy changes.

Methodology

I conducted my fieldwork between the months of May and August 2018 in different parts of Kuwait, where I was born and raised and where I am a citizen. I adopted a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative. For the qualitative part, I relied on one-on-one interviews and content analysis. For the quantitative part, I carried out a survey which I distributed in both English and Arabic through different social media outlets. In total, I received 1384 survey responses and carried out thirty interviews with writers, artists, musicians, curators, activists, bloggers, and executive directors of cultural organizations in Kuwait. Methodologically speaking, what greatly contributed to me being able to receive this high number of responses was the utilization of Twitter, a tool that has grown immensely popular in both Kuwait and across the Arab region substantially since 2011. Given my own status as a citizen who was born and raised in Kuwait, it was not difficult for me to meet the individuals I needed to meet; even when I would interview someone whose name I had come across through a snowballing method, there would be a sense of familiarity thanks to our mutual connection. This, I believe, assisted in facilitating the research process.

I made a conscious effort to access diverse networks, of citizens, expats, and stateless people. I aimed to include balanced perceptions of both genders. During my interviews, I would sometimes conduct the interview in English and sometimes in Arabic, depending on the interviewee’s preference. I recorded and then transcribed the interviews.

I had a general set of broad questions prepared ahead of time, addressing the individual’s own personal background and life in Kuwait, any political activity or experience
(particularly between 2011 and 2014), and their involvement and respective role in the creative cultural sphere, which usually would have taken place between 2014 and 2018. While I was not only asking about the period between 2014 and 2018, this was the direction that the conversation took in all of my interviews. I interviewed Kuwaiti citizens, stateless individuals, expatriates living in Kuwait, and all the aforementioned groups included both men and women, primarily between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five.

People were very open and forthcoming in their answers and sharing their experiences, in large part due to our personal relationship and my guarantee that the sensitive elements would be kept anonymous. Respondents expressed a sense of faith in the importance of the subject and were enthusiastic to discuss and document their opinions and experiences. I established an agreement at the beginning of each conversation that the interviewee would say “this is off the record” for parts that they wanted kept anonymous, and those parts were predominantly political opinions or experiences of being subject to state repression. Particularly after 2014, Kuwaitis, non-Kuwaitis, and stateless individuals have grown acutely cautious of any political activities due to forms of repression they have witnessed or experienced. Sharing intricate details of such incidents with me took a great deal of courage and trust but they were willing to do so.

I would have ideally liked to include interviews with state officials and get the government perspective which was so heavily criticized by all of my interviewees and survey respondents, but Ramadan posed a challenge for their scheduling during that month (although individuals who were freelancing or working in the private sector of the cultural sector made time to meet with me either during the day or after Iftar), or they were unresponsive for the rest of the summer. This leaves a gap in the perspective of the state and its defense of its own policies.
Survey

A survey link of 26 questions was distributed electronically, with one version in English and another in Arabic. I received a total of 1384 responses. My initial plan was to combine the two results, and I had circulated one in English and one in Arabic to guarantee inclusive responses and wider accessibility. However, I found there were stark differences between the English responses and the Arabic responses that had to be taken into consideration, making me consider the role of language politics and identity formation coming into play in cultural activities; does the use of English marginalize the majority? Is Arabic looked down on by English-speaking groups? Responses from both of the surveys made allusions to ‘the other’, particularly in reference to choice of spoken language and how that is associated with a particular lifestyle and belief system. These are some possible questions to ponder, which I discuss in a later section.

I circulated the survey links via Twitter, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms. As of 2016, the average Twitter user in Kuwait sent out 4.2 tweets per day, that being the highest in MENA statistics, compared to the lowest coming from Iraq, that being 1.9 per day (Nordenson 2017, p. 157). For this reason, I thought Twitter would garner the desired interaction and responses. It proved to be effective. Through Retweets, I was able to reach thousands of ‘Tweeps’; 1384 took the time to fill out the survey, and some even reached out directly to share their insights and experiences. This cyberspace proved to be highly engaging.

Given the limitations of time and the depth of the subject, I was not able to include the experiences and perspectives of all the interviewees who I had met. Looking forward, however, the data collected is valuable and can prove to be advantageous for future projects as well and is worth further developing..
In the larger context of Kuwait’s rich history of social movements and innovative tools of dissent, post-2012 the country witnessed a re-emergence of a flourishing arts and culture scene. This was coupled with a regression in political freedoms and liberties. Young people built and utilized these platforms to address issues that they felt needed the public’s attention; simultaneously, both the government and the National Assembly monitor and censor cultural producers of various kinds. The executive and legislative branches continue to exploit cultural production activities as proxy tools between them. This means that they have grown to be exploited as a site of power contestation between the executive and the legislative branches; the legislative branch is prepared to interpellate the executive branch for cultural activities deemed to be ‘inappropriate’ or ‘un-Islamic’, and the executive branch is in a position where it is trying to strike a balance between avoiding a possible interpellation whilst presenting favorable cultural activities.

This thesis examines contemporary examples from Kuwait’s history of social movements, by focusing on creative cultural producers post-2012. I think of creative culture as a site of contestation that is not detached from the state of politics, but is a testament to and reflection of the state of politics and society. In chapter one, I discuss the regressing public faith in political reform, the role of social media in dissent, and obstacles that cultural producers face in their interactions with the state’s bureaucracy and censorship. In chapter two, I shift the focus to non-state factors that impede cultural producers’ ability to maximize their creative talents, such as the role of family, religion, and the inclusion of the cultural spaces themselves. I consider the impact of interactions between citizens and expatriates, as well as the influence of one’s choice to speak in English or in Arabic.
Chapter One: Citizen-State Contestation

“The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.” George Orwell

When examining the state of cultural production, one needs to take into account the various actors that come into play and the power that each one possesses; the state is an actor that possesses significant power, given the fact that it controls state institutions which regulate and control cultural production. While the state of cultural production in Kuwait is not entirely state-controlled, and there is substantial presence of grassroots cultural production, grassroots cultural production is still subject to the control of the state. As such, I examine the relationship between citizens and the state, in terms of how citizens navigate bureaucracy and censorship, as well as citizens’ dissidence through spaces that, initially, appeared to be a loophole to state regulation such as social media. The aforementioned interactions constitute the larger scene of social movements in Kuwait, which have historically adapted and taken on different forms in response to state impositions and limitations.

In this chapter, I shed light on and discuss the power struggles and ongoing contestations between citizens and the state. First, I provide a historical background of the history of social movements in Kuwait. I begin with the oldest known movement, the merchants movement of 1938, and then move on to the 1986 Monday Diwaniyyas in reaction to a suspension of the parliament and constitution, which came to an end as a result of the Iraqi invasion of 1990. Next, I discuss citizens’ faith in political institutions in light of the change in the electoral law post-2012, examining grievances with the performance and policies of both the government as well as the National Assembly. Based on survey
responses, I demonstrate how these grievances essentially paved the way for the intellectual migration to cultural spaces, as well as the limits imposed on these spaces. Specifically, I examine Twitter hashtags and the use of social media as method of trespassing these limits.

In the section following the examination of people’s faith in political institutions, I examine how much space people have to convey this sense of dissatisfaction, by looking at the limits of freedom of expression, and the role that social media with a specific focus on Twitter has played since 2012. The proliferation of social media and Twitter, has assisted in creating online Twitter debates via hashtags, and has simultaneously been utilized by dissidents to organize protests.

I then demonstrate the various obstacles to creativity and the claims made by different groups on what those obstacles are. Is it the state’s arm of censorship, or is it Islamist MPs pressuring the state into this policy of overbearing censorship? I situate the politicization of cultural institutions and activities in this overarching debate on cultural production, namely by focusing on two entities: the NCCAL and its own historic roots and contemporary influence on today’s cultural producers, and the Amiri Diwan cultural projects that have emerged since 2016, and occupy an interesting middle ground that has served as a loophole to the bureaucracy of the government, and the questioning of the Parliament.

Lastly, I discuss how cultural producers have taken on causes that would normally be taken up by civil society groups or even MPs. First I do this by shedding light on how the Bedoon cause is a subject of concern and activism for individuals within the creative community, and second, I discuss the ways in which cultural producers have dealt with and countered rampant censorship.
Historically, citizens in Kuwait have often challenged state policies and gone head to head with both the government and the ruling family. In doing so, citizens employed innovative means of conveying this discontent.

What was dubbed the ‘merchants movement’ of 1938 was the earliest instance of a collective opposition movement in Kuwait. With the decline of the pearling industry, the world depression and then finally the discovery of oil in 1938 (Crystal 1990, p. 44), then-ruler Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah raised the ruling family’s allowances and increased merchants’ custom taxes (Crystal 1990, p. 45). The opposition took three significant actions in objection to this. First, they utilized the strategic support they had from dissenting members of the ruling family led by Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem, a ruling family member who had an intimate relationship with the citizens and merchants; he sided with the merchants. Second, they utilized newly developed institutions as political ends (Crystal 1990, p. 45); this included the Education Council and the municipality, and both had a large support base from the general public due to the interest in education and basic social services. Most importantly, the merchants themselves funded these institutions. With the rise of their opposition to the ruler, Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah dismissed the Education Council, which was comprised of, elected and run by merchants (Crystal 1990, p. 47). In response, they took a third course of action: members of the municipality resigned, and when the Sheikh appointed others to replace those who had resigned, they refused to serve; the merchants were aware of the leverage they had due to their socioeconomic status and the positions they held in these newly established institutions (Crystal 1990, p. 47).

What is significant in the aforementioned acts of protest was how the merchants acted as a united front, unwavering in their stance against the ruler’s decisions. In Tilly’s theory,
one of the types of claims he describes is an “identity” claim, wherein “identity claims assert the presence of a substantial collective actor” (Tilly 2006, p. 42). In the events of 1938, the merchants represented a united, nationalist group that demanded their right to political participation and decision-making. This was carried out through the stances they adopted as board members within the municipality and the Education Council.

After this confrontation, the merchants’ increasing economic grievances made them adamant to pursue political participation as a means of addressing these problems and protecting their interests from that point on. This began in early 1938, when “a group of merchants met secretly to draw up a list of reforms which they then circulated in leaflets and anti-government wall writing”. Simultaneously, the Iraqi press published articles criticizing the Kuwaiti government (Crystal 1990, p. 48). The merchants utilized regional allies that they had in Iraq.

Muhammad Al Barrak, who had carried out the anti-government wall writing, was arrested under the accusation of “propaganda and intrigue” (Crystal 1990, p. 48), beaten into confession and forced to release the names of three other participating dissidents. Elections for a Legislative Assembly were held soon thereafter; post-elections, Kuwait’s first political party was formed: the National Bloc. The National Bloc aimed to “spread cultural consciousness, and kindle the spirit of nationalism (qawmiyya) among Kuwaitis” (Crystal 1990, p. 48). They did this by distributing pamphlets, organizing a large rally with speakers, readings of the Quran, and the recitation of poetry (Crystal 1990, p. 48). The dissidents created their own form of press to reach out to people, held speeches, appealed to the public’s religious beliefs, and displayed revolutionary eloquence through poetry.

With escalating opposition, Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber dismissed the assembly by December and called for new elections. One of the merchants, Khalid Al Zaid, sided with the
Shaikh during this ordeal. In response, an angry crowd led by the opposition burnt his car (Crystal 1990, p. 49). This method of expressing objection would later be used again in 2014.

In the series of actions detailed above, the opposition escalated their methods of protest to what Tilly refers to as a claim of “standing”: “Standing claims say that we Xs not only exist, but occupy a certain position within the regime” (Tilly 2006, p. 43). The merchants asserted their existence and their substantial position as stakeholders within Kuwaiti society by influencing and deriving support from the larger public, and then putting on a “performance”.

Tilly identifies performances as a repertoire of contention, categorizing it as a “theatrical metaphor”: “Presenting a petition, taking a hostage, or mounting a demonstration constitutes a performance linking at least two actors, a claimant and an object of claims” (Tilly 2006, p. 71). The performance adopted by the merchants was no longer restricted to the private interactions they had with the ruler, but expanded to the larger ‘stage’ of Kuwaiti society and public space i.e. they were conscious of the presence of an audience.

The new Assembly brought in twenty representatives, including twelve from the previous one. Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah submitted a constitution to the new Assembly that would have “significantly enhanced executive power” (Crystal 1990, p. 49). When they refused to ratify it, the Assembly was dissolved for a second time in March 1939. They objected to this by refusing to hand over accounts and records (Crystal 1990, p. 49); this is once again a utilization of their leverage by withholding important institutional documents through an exercise of both identity and standing claims, by Tilly’s definitions.

The final series of events that put an end to the dissent of 1938 was a violent conclusion. Muhammad Al Munayyis, a merchant who had left Kuwait to Iraq upon the series of arrests following Al Barrak’s detention, returned to Kuwait, “gave a moving speech to the Assembly members and handed out leaflets declaring the ruling family disposed and
calling on Kuwaitis to resist, assuring them of the Iraqi army’s imminent arrival” (Crystal 1990, p. 49). In this action, Al Munayyis once again drew on their cross-national strategic alliances, used pamphlets as a form of media to spread a message, and relied on a speech to sway public sentiment. This speech was significant because of its direct challenge to the ruling family’s authority, as was the case in Musallam Al Barrak’s speech in 2013.

Al Munayyis was arrested, convicted and executed crucifixion-style. The rest of the opposition’s leaders were arrested and jailed in Kuwait’s first jail for political prisoners, where they were detained until a general amnesty in 1944 (Crystal 1990, p. 50). This final stage of the 1938 movement encompassed all three of Tilly’s repertoires of claims: identity, standing, and “program claims”. Program claims “call for their objects to take an action, adopt a policy, or otherwise commit themselves to a change” (Tilly 2006, p. 42). In the final stage of the 1938 movement, they called for significant change by demanding an overthrow of the ruling family, and did this through a ‘theatrical metaphor’, which was Al Munayyis’ speech. Al Munayyis himself would later become a ‘theatrical metaphor’ of sorts as part of the later Karamat Watan movement.

A later episode of political opposition in Kuwait’s history was also met with repression. In 1986, the regime suspended parliament, a violation of the constitution, as well as other and constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties, including press freedom and the right to hold public meetings (Tetreault 2000, p. 60). Tetreault describes the significance of social space within the context of Kuwaiti politics:

In Kuwait there are two social spaces that are substantially protected, by tradition and law, from state intrusion. The first is the home and, by extension, the family and kin-based institutions and associations such as the tribe, the family business,
and the diwaniyya. The home is the only secular\textsuperscript{9} space that enjoys such a high degree of formal protection....this quality enhances its attraction to political organizers whenever public meetings are restricted or banned. Even during the worst of these times, such as the period of the 1989-90 pro-democracy movement, the privacy of the Kuwaiti home was rarely violated. When it was, the strength of citizen outrage forced the regime to moderate its behavior. (Tetreault 2000, p. 62)

The diwaniyya played a pivotal role in the events of 1989. When the state banned protesting in public spaces, citizens utilized their private homes for the diwaniyya as a place of weekly gathering every Monday. This space was violated by Special Forces in Diwan Al Sadoun with tear gas, batons, and dogs – the usage of dogs was particularly offensive to Kuwaitis who viewed dogs as “animals who are ritually unclean in Islam” (Tetreault 2000, p. 70).

The 1989 movement of ‘Diwaween Al Athnain’ or the ‘Monda Diwaniyyas’ primarily aimed to revive citizen representation and political participation through the return of the National Assembly, which was unconstitutionally suspended at the time. Between December 1989 and January 1990, “public gatherings were held every Monday night in the private diwaniyya of a different member of the dissolved assembly to discuss the restoration of the constitution and the National Assembly” (Al-Nakib 2014, p. 731). Security Forces used various methods of blocking entrance to these diwaniyyas as detailed above. At the end of January 1990, then-Amir Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah gave a speech where he criticized the “confrontational” manners of protest the opposition was engaging in. He called for formal negotiations with the opposition, who then responded by halting the gatherings.

\textsuperscript{9} The term ‘secular’ here is a recognition that religious spaces, i.e. mosques, are recognized by the state to be spaces that are not subject to state violence.
The Amir’s proposed solution was in allowing a National Council, which would lack executive power. Elections were held in June of 1990, and were widely boycotted. Kuwait was invaded in August of that summer, and that put an end to the movement.

The 1938 merchants movement, the Monday Diwaniyyas, and other key social movements throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries in Kuwait remain present in people’s memories and recollection of Kuwaiti history. Both the losses and the successes of each respective movement are remembered, but perhaps the main takeaway is that in periods of political repression and during events where economic and political interests are threatened by the state, collective action is taken. This vibrant history of social movements is important to keep in mind as a defining characteristic of Kuwaiti history and identity. Thus, while the Karamat Watan movement and the subsequent expansion of cultural activities are also significant moments in Kuwaiti history, the willingness to challenge state policy and sociopolitical realities is not a new aspect of Kuwait.

Faith in Political Institutions

With the change of the electoral system from four votes to a one-vote law, the National Assembly lost much of its previous power. It became easier for the government to pass its desired legislations through this new National Assembly that was largely compliant, compared to the previous 2012 National Assembly that was comprised of a majority of opposition members. The government cabinet, comprised of sixteen members who vote as a unified bloc, from that point on became the “most influential political body in parliament” (Albloshi 2018, p. 2). Thus the National Assembly was no longer the channel through which citizens would try and instigate change or convey their discontent. A notable loss of faith in political institutions can be seen among Kuwaiti citizens.
To briefly illustrate the loss of faith and disenchantment with Kuwait’s political institutions that led to the intellectual migration to creative spaces, I have included two charts based on a survey that I conducted over the summer of 2018. In these questions, I asked participants to rate their levels of satisfaction with both the performance of the National Assembly as well as the government. 77.32 percent out of 1177 respondents rated their responses as “deeply unsatisfied” with the National Assembly’s performance, compared to only 1.1 percent being “very satisfied”. In the second chart, 71.74 percent out of 1177 respondents rated their responses at “deeply unsatisfied” with the government’s performance, compared to 1.87 percent being “very satisfied”.

Figure 5: “How Would You Rate Your Satisfaction With the Performance of the National Assembly?”
In their responses, participants further elaborated on their answers and mentioned various reasons for their dissatisfaction with the government’s performance. Among their reasons for being dissatisfied with the government’s performance, respondents cited that the government is disconnected from people’s “real issues”, citing:

- The suffering of the Bedoon
- The lack of a vision for the future
- Turning a blind eye to corruption
- An excess of financial capabilities with minimal accomplishments (particularly in comparison to the Amiri Diwan projects)
- Its attack on citizens’ political and civil liberties by arresting individuals because of political opinions on Twitter
- Censorship of the media and press, and lifting subsidies.

I allowed survey participants the option to write in their own comments to elaborate.
on their choices. In their elaborations on their dissatisfaction with the National Assembly’s performances, participants cited inaction on the suffering of the Bedoon, the Assembly contributing to the curtailing of freedoms rather than protecting them, an impression that it is a “puppet Parliament” guided by government orders, and lack of oversight and accountability over the executive branch. I will discuss each of these in turn.

The suffering of the Bedoon community emerged as a recurring concern whether among the average citizen or by cultural producers who have shed light on the subject through their cultural platforms. With the creation of the Central Apparatus for Illegal Persons in November 2010, the Central Apparatus was granted significant autonomy as opposed to the past when it would report to the Ministry of Interior (Country Information and Guidance: Kuwait Bidoons, p. 21). This essentially meant that elected bodies such as the National Assembly, as well as the court system, could not intervene in or challenge any of the Apparatus’ policies. As one might expect, this led to numerous instances of exploitation of power. For example, one of the Bedoon individuals I had interviewed described how the head of the Central Apparatus threatened the man who wanted to marry her, telling him that if he marries her, he would lose any right to citizenship. Both of them were and remain stateless, and given her past as an activist, she said she believed that the head targeted her personally (interview on July 17, 2018). This incident is one of many that has bred a sense of frustration and anger among Kuwaiti citizens.

Second, respondents cited a “lack of government vision for the future”, with many referring to Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 as well as the United Arab Emirates’ diversifying its economy, coupled with providing high quality public services and education as a contrast. This can be analyzed in conjunction with the third reason, that being the inaction on corruption issues. When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman detained senior
government officials and billionaires under accusations of corruption, many in Kuwait saw it as a firm step towards tackling corruption, although there was skepticism around the method of tackling the issue. While Kuwait has its own ‘Vision 2035’, it seems that it does not resonate with Kuwaiti citizens the way that the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 resonates with Saudi citizens.

Fourth was the repeated comparison between the “minimal/nonexistent” government accomplishments versus the “efficient and fast” Amiri Diwan projects. In several instances throughout the post-2012 period, government projects which were delayed well beyond the initial timeframe would be transferred to the responsibility of the Amiri Diwan, who would finish the project in record time, including the Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Centre, Al Shaheed Park, Al Jahra Hospital, the Palace of Justice and others still in progress (“Masharee’e Al Diwan”). The disparity in quality and time efficiency is often attributed to allegations of corruption.

Fifth, and last, was the repeated reference to the government’s curtailing of citizens’ political and civil liberties, with a clear pattern specifying the arrests of individuals over opinions posted on Twitter, censorship of the media and press, and the lifting of subsidies. It was in reaction to popular and vocal demands during the series of Karamat Watan demonstrations of 2012, that the government began to systematically restrict freedom of expression in Kuwait, and formally regulated the limits on what can and cannot be said through a cybercrime law legislation that it introduced in 2014 (Amnesty 2015). Consequences included arrests, prison sentences, and in some cases, even revoking citizenship (Babar 2017, p. 525). In light of all of the other aforementioned grievances, the

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10 The Amiri Diwan serves as the royal palace of the Amir of Kuwait, and it carries out projects in its name. It is a sovereign arm of the state, meaning that it does not have to submit financial reports to the State Audit Bureau, and MPs do not have the power to question them about their actions or projects. Some have argued that as a result of these shields, this allows the Amiri Diwan to function in a manner that allows it to dodge the bureaucracy that lags all other government entities.
right to critique seemed to strike the most painful nerve; one of the Bedoon activists whom I had interviewed described feeling “like [she] was suffocated; not being allowed to at least talk about [her] suffering hurt” (interview on July 17, 2018).

The described results are indicative of the feeling of disappointment and disenchantment that many of the interviewees from within the creative community who I had spoken to over the summer of 2018 echoed. Feeling that both the system and the people within the system were not going to address their concerns, these individuals took matters into their own hands and chose to start their own initiatives and creative projects.

Freedom of Expression, Social Media, and Twitter

In 2017, Freedom House ranked Kuwait’s press freedom as “Partly Free”, and Kuwait’s Internet penetration rate at 82.1 percent. In Freedom House’s 2016 report, it stated that in 2015 and 2016 social media users who were deemed to have insulted the Amir of Kuwait or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s leadership faced prosecution, and in June 2015, lawmakers passed a cybercrime law that “includes restrictive measures for freedom of expression on the Internet” (“Kuwait 2016: Freedom of the Press”). While Article 36 and 37 of the Kuwaiti constitution protect freedom of speech and the press, it is only “in accordance with the conditions and the circumstances defined by law”. The law in turn prohibits the publication of material that insults God, the Prophet(s) and his companions, and Islam; it also forbids criticism of the Amir, the disclosure of secret or private information, and statements calling for the overthrow of the regime. While privately owned newspapers generally abide by these regulations in order to avoid the risk of having their license revoked and the newspaper shut down, social media, at least in its initial stages, proved to be an open space that was free from such shackles. By 2013 the government began an aggressive pursuit of
critical voices on social media. At this point, a common joke amongst Kuwaitis is that their ‘riskier’ opinions and thoughts are stored away in their Twitter drafts, never to be published out of a fear of facing legal repercussions.

Given the widespread following of the events of the Arab Spring via Twitter, the majority of Kuwaitis at that point also had profiles on Twitter and were active users. According to a 2013 study at Northwestern University, Kuwait had the highest Twitter users per capita by 2013.

![Figure 7: 2013 Twitter Users Per Capita](Mocanu 2013)

The majority of interviewees mentioned creating Twitter accounts in 2011 in order to follow the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, and later, the rest of the Arab world. Activists believe the rapid popularity of Twitter can be read as an indication of mistrusting state-sanctioned (private included) media, whether in Kuwait or otherwise (interview with Athbi Al Mutairi, July 28 2018). Twitter in particular and social media more broadly played a
defining role in shaping the events of 2012 and onwards in Kuwait, and later disseminating a
cultural movement via social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. While Kuwaitis
who were born in the 1970s and early 1980s were already present and interacting with one
another on blogs, which played important roles in earlier movements such as Nabiha Khamsa
in 2005, Twitter’s influence in comparison was revolutionary and unprecedented. The
democratization of social media and its widespread accessibility greatly contributed to this.
During the ‘blog period’, access to the Internet and a private computer was limited. The
majority of interviewees who were born in the 1970s and early 1980s mentioned their
families acquiring PCs in the early 2000s; the boys, prior to this step, were regular visitors of
Internet cafes. The girls were not as privileged as it was socially frowned upon to leave their
homes alone.

Social media is an element that plays a significant role in the discussion on the arts
and culture, as well as its interrelation with political movement. A democratization of social
media has taken place, in the sense that everything has become accessible online, allowing
users to evade censorship and, at least in its early stages, rendering the purpose of censorship
null. Additionally, it creating a virtual space that allowed all to participate in events when
they were unable to attend physically; several survey responses from Kuwaiti females, for
example, cited their families being conservative as an obstacle to being able to go out and
partake in cultural events. Instead, cultural platforms have made a routine of live-streaming
events, and/or uploading footage later on via YouTube. Social media certainly plays a pivotal
role in cultural activities, but truly began its spread in earnest with the events of the Arab
Spring. It was utilized as a tool to mobilize people later in the Karamat Watan movement.
Among its benefits was that it ‘introduced people to each other’, as app developer Athbi Al
Mutairi described it. Al Mutairi stated, “I think that prior to Twitter, Kuwait was comprised
of two totally separate communities [the Badu and the Hadar]…two communities that did not know each other, and man is the enemy of that which he does not know. They met each other on Twitter” (interview on July 28, 2018). It thus not only created a sense of solidarity, but bridged a gap and created a path for understanding and learning about one another in a way they did not have the chance to in the past.

Twitter debates are organized through hashtags (Nordenson 2017, p. 299), creating an online sphere of discussion and engaging in ideas. The closest real-life space that resembles this is the *diwaniyya*; what distinguishes Twitter from the *diwaniyya*, aside from it being a virtual platform, is that it is a space that is open to all without any preliminary requirements, and is more inclusive and diverse as a result. There is also room for anonymity, if one chooses to create an anonymous account. Men and women can participate, and Kuwaitis and *Bedoon* users are present and vocal. There is a sort of organized, collective planning taking place ‘behind the screens’ via WhatsApp – as app developer Athbi Al Mutairi described, prominent Twitter users would discuss in their Direct Message Twitter groups to coordinate a prime time and hashtag under which to discuss a subject, in order to make it a trending topic and attract the desired attention (interview on July 28, 2018).

Due to existing limits and legal boundaries set by state authorities, social media was an innovation of the new movement to express political opinions and network with one another. In Charles Tilly’s description on the adaptability of repertoires and tools of contention, he says,

> Repertoires vary from place to place, time to time, and pair to pair. But on the whole, when people make collective claims they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair. Thus social-movement activists in today’s [European] cities adopt some mixture of public
meetings, press statements, demonstrations, and petitions, but they stay away from suicide bombing, hostage taking, and self-immolation. Their repertoire draws on a long history of previous struggles. (Tilly 2006, p. 46)

Dissidents in Kuwait had to work in the Kuwaiti contextual repertoire, within a set of laws and structures that already restricted which methods of protest they could use. For example, newspapers could not be used to promote the movement’s ideals, and therefore activists decided that social media was the alternative. The Karamat Watan Twitter account would announce the time and location of protests, and when Special Forces would arrive, the account would tweet a redirection or relocation of the protest in order to avoid further clashes (Al Mutairi 2016, p. 374). Social media allowed participants of the movement to exchange opinions and ideas through hash tags, and to connect with one another through Profile badges – simply by looking at a profile, one would see an orange flag installed on the avatar and know that this user is a supporter of the movement (Al Mutairi 2016, p. 374). However, Tilly points out the importance of not attributing the success of claims to technological innovation due to the assortment of factors that go into the success of claims. He argues, “mobile electronic communication makes possible the formation of ‘smart mobs’ – that is, groups of people who act together without even knowing one another” (Tilly 2006, p. 54). Such was the case with the role of social media in the case of Kuwait and throughout the Arab Spring.

‘Smart mobs’ are one factor that may have contributed to the impact of Kuwait’s contemporary social movements, but they are not the sole factor as Tilly points out. Given the existing institutional, political, and social constraints that dissidents in Kuwait have to function within, it is not surprising that some individuals and communities turned to creative spaces as well as social media to convey their discontent, as these were platforms that offered them more freedom than others.
Despite the reality that creative spaces and social media offered activists and other individuals more freedom than other spaces and platforms, these spaces were still subject to challenges, different forms of censorship and policing. Two of the key obstacles that citizens in these creative cultural spaces faced were the ongoing proxy battle of cultural activities between the state and the MPs, as well as having to navigate their own familial and societal expectations of what forms of cultural production were and were not acceptable, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

The Obstacles to Creativity

The arrests of individuals posting dissident opinions on Twitter marked the beginning of the tense political period in Kuwait post-2011. With the violence and repression individuals witnessed from the state – from arrests over protests, to arrests over tweets, and even revocation of citizenships – coupled with the disappointment many felt from the opposition itself, many young Kuwaitis lost faith in political reform and chose to instead direct their efforts and attention to the arts and culture sector, hoping to invest their energies towards social change instead.

Shurooq Amin, an artist and a writer born to a Kuwaiti father and Syrian mother, opened her highly anticipated exhibition *It’s a Man’s World* on March 5, 2012 at 8:00 PM. Two hours later, local police arrived and began to question both Amin and the gallery owner Khalid Al Asfour, saying they had been tipped off to her artwork being of ‘pornographic nature’ and therefore inappropriate for public display in Kuwait. Her exhibition was consequently shut down. More officials arrived soon thereafter and took photos of her artwork, to be sent in to the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Commerce. Below is a sample from the exhibit, taken from Amin’s website:
The shutdown of Amin’s art exhibition sparked a lot of controversy, and started an online debate via Twitter under the hashtag #PaintToFreedom. While Amin’s exhibit being shutdown was one act of censorship, the “Paint to Freedom” online movement addressed the subject of creative censorship at large, rather than restricting the debate to this one incident. The debate was inclusive of visual artists, poets and writers, filmmakers, dancers, and musicians. Writers, artists and activists from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt partook in the Twitter hashtag, sharing their own experiences of state censorship and conveying their solidarity.

Amin, however, did not view the state as the driving force behind censorship. Rather, she argued that her battle is against the “repression [of the] fundamentalist parliament” (Manjal 2012). She said in a March 2012 interview that the newly elected parliament – which had achieved a majority of opposition members and would later be dissolved – “wants to get
rid of the constitution and put *shari’a* law instead….because they can use it as an excuse to kill the art movement, to kill all forms of free thinking” (Manjal 2012).

![Figure 9: “What Factors Play the Biggest Role in Censorship in Kuwait?”](image)

Amin’s perspective, which places blame on religious groups and values for Kuwait’s “regression to the dark ages” and “oppression of freedom of expression” appears to be the perspective among those who self-identify as the ‘liberals of Kuwait’, which, according to my survey responses as detailed above, is not the perspective of the majority. The majority of survey respondents cited the laws as a key factor to censorship.

In a 2018 interview with Kuwait TV, Fareah Al Saqqaf, founder and board member of the Lothan Youth Achievement Centre (LoYAC), said that those who oppose the arts and culture are exercising a form of “intellectual terrorism”, a loaded term that prompted
polarized reactions on social media. The video of Al Saqqaf making this particular statement was circulated via Twitter. Some agreed with her characterization of censorship as “intellectual terrorism”, sharing her sense of frustration with being told that creativity must be modified to fit what is “religiously acceptable.” Others took offense at the use of the term ‘terrorism’ over a disagreement in values. In an article Al Saqqaf wrote titled “The Plot of Attacking the Arts and Culture”, she says, “Nationalism is when you fight to preserve a beautiful, honorable image created by the noble people of this country, to preserve it from a systematic, planned attack from the malicious and the manipulative” (Al Saqqaf). She subsequently called for resisting the “[attempts to] abort the cultural scene, enshrined in their fight against those devoted to the arts and culture.” Al Saqqaf, and others who make similar arguments, never explicitly say who is this ominous force making their work in the cultural sector a challenge, nor do they specify who the “noble people of [Kuwait]” are. Al Saqqaf and other prominent figures in the cultural sector have called for a separation of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) from the Ministry of Information. Based on this, there seems to be trust in the NCCAL from this group of individuals, and a lack of trust in the perceived politicization of the Ministry of Information in light of conservative MPs putting forth interpellations\(^\text{11}\) of Ministers because of cultural activities that are deemed to be inappropriate. Bedoon poet Mohammed Salem, Takween bookstore owners Bothayna Al Essa and Mohammed Al Attabi, as well as previous NCCAL employee Shurouq Muzaffar shared this opinion that the NCCAL would reach its full potential if it were allowed to function independently rather than under the umbrella of the Ministry of Information. Interestingly, Shurouq Muzaffar mentioned that the NCCAL’s work did not feel subjected to the same level of scrutiny or politicization after the Parliament got weaker, i.e. after switching to the one-vote system (interview on June 25, 2018). When NCCAL falls under the

\(^{11}\) An interpellation is an official questioning submitted by a Member of Parliament to question the policy or decision of a Minister, and can lead to his removal.
Ministry of Information, it is subject to the scrutiny, questioning, and monitoring of Members of Parliament, who can and do threaten to remove ministers because of activities organized by the NCCAL deemed to be inappropriate. This would not be the case if the NCCAL were allowed to function independently, as it would not fall under a minister, but would be an independent entity.

Drawing on his research in Iran, in much the same vein as Al Saqqaf and Amin, Bayat addresses the influence of conservative groups and their attempts to shut down cultural activities they consider to be inappropriate. He defines fun as, “an array of ad hoc, non routine, and joyful conduct…where individuals break free temporarily from the disciplined constraints of daily life, normative obligations, and organized power” (2007, p. 434). He critiques the contemporary phenomenon of institutionalizing fun and joy, defeating the necessary element of spontaneity that is required for an act to be truly fun. A recurring statement in response to any censorship of cultural activity as a result of religious figures’ objections is “they ban everything that makes you happy” (Tan). Nadia Ahmad, who was a founding member of LAPA (the LoYAC Academy for Performing Arts, under the umbrella of Al Saqqaf’s LoYAC organization), described the frustrating bureaucracy involved in getting a flash mob approved by various government entities. Part of the reason for the institutionalizing of such activities is being attentive to possibly negative reactions from conservative MPs. For example, in one flash mob, Nadia Ahmad, as the choreographer behind the dance performance, decided to do away with one part where “the boys would lift the girls on their shoulders” (interview in July 2018). Demerdash describes the prevailing forms of censorship in the Middle East, two of them being relevant to this particular context: moral censorship and self-censorship (2018, p. 29). While the moral censorship may not be a reflection of Ahmad or the dancers’ own morals, it is still a choice of self-censorship that is
done in awareness of the collective moral values of the society in which they live. These values are often allegedly reflected through and upheld by Members of Parliament, who can and often do interpellate the Minister of Information based on cultural activities they deem to be inappropriate and unbefitting of Kuwait’s identity and values.

Demerdash discusses the impact of censorship on the arts and culture in the Gulf, and how various structures such as the state, political systems, and cultural and social values integrate in instances of censorship. In particular cases it is the state which explicitly intervenes and imposes censorship, such as the case of Shurooq Amin’s art gallery being shut down or the more recent spike in banned books from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information. In others, self-censorship takes place out of fear of facing repercussions from non-state authorities and actors, such as family and larger society. Demerdash explores how artists of the Gulf “engage with the region’s religious customs and everyday politics” (2017, p. 30) and “wittingly self-censor, thus effectively depoliticizing their practice” (2017, p. 31). In the case of Kuwait, the state intervenes in forms of censorship, such as shutting down an art gallery, banning a book and not allowing it to be legally sold on the market, but it does not reach a point of facing a prison sentence. Still, thinking of the long-term consequences of constantly abiding by restrictions in order to ‘play it safe’ rather than pushing against them and challenging their premise, the artist risks becoming a tool in the hand of the state. As Harastzi described it, “the state is able to domesticate the artist because the artist has already made the state his home” (1987, p. 5).

Non-state consequences of rebellious cultural production come from individuals’ families or the society at large. An unintended but inevitable consequence of censorship is that it becomes a “fruitless and defective weapon whose use would promote what it was intended to prevent” (Harastzi 1987, p. 5); evidence of this can be found in the proliferation
of a black market of banned books in Kuwait, with a high demand for books that were banned out of a curiosity over what could have been so controversial. The act of censorship, while limiting, never erases the circulation of the product altogether, but can actually offer it more exposure than it originally had.

The Politicization of Cultural Institutions and Activities

The NCCAL (National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters) was founded in 1974 under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, which oversees all matters relating to the media (Roberto 2018, p. 268). The NCCAL organizes, sponsors and hosts a variety of different festivals, competitions, and events every year, including the annual book fair, the Kuwait Theatre Festival, the International Music Festival, the Children’s Cultural Festival, the Summer Cultural Festival, the Arab Festival for Children’s Theatre, the Kuwait Film Festival and others. It also produces several academic publications in Arabic, which are distributed and available both in Kuwait and throughout the region. An important and defining feature of NCCAL events is that they are free, and therefore economically accessible to all. The previously mentioned Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah is one institution that falls under the umbrella of the NCCAL and has particular popularity amongst the public. Fatima and Aiman, two married Egyptian artists living in Kuwait, have been regular attendees of DAI’s weekly concerts and talks since 2003. Fatima moved to Kuwait in 2010 and began to attend from that point on. Aiman, who was born and raised in Kuwait, found that it contributed to the creation of a community, a familiar crowd who would attend these free, weekly concerts and then go out together for dinner afterwards. Back then, they say, DAI was the only venue in Kuwait that even offered the option of going to a concert. Fatima felt that it allowed them a chance to meet like-minded and friendly people, whom they are still friends
with until this day, and enjoyed the fact that DAI would make the effort of bringing good musicians from abroad. The fact that it was free made it continuously accessible to them. DAI, they say, started a ripple effect of cultural activity in Kuwait. Therefore, the central role that the NCCAL plays in both societal and political impact in Kuwait must be acknowledged here. Its social impact is widely perceived as positive, helping to build friendships and community, while its political position continues to fluctuate. While other institutions have come into play since 2016, Aiman and Fatima’s description of their experience with DAI and DAI’s audience reflects the ability of cultural spaces to expand their influence by embedding an appreciation and passion for culture and the arts as a mission to their participants, who then end up pursuing independent projects by establishing their own cultural platforms. For example, Fatima and Aiman were both regular attendees at the NCCAL’s events, and went on to establish their own projects: Aiman through a folklore podcast, and Fatima through art exhibits.

The NCCAL has older, more historic roots compared to the newer institutions that have been established post-2012. Some of the institutions established in what appears to be a reaction to the political tensions between 2010-2012 include the National Fund for SME (Small to Medium Enterprises) in 2013, the Ministry of Youth in 2013, Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Centre (JACC, informally known as the Opera House) in 2016, Al Shaheed Park in 2016, and Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre (ASCC) in 2018. Al Shaheed Park, An Amiri Diwan project, aims to “help cultivate and nurture the arts, history and culture through a year long calendar of events” and has a “vision of becoming the leading cultural platform in the country” (“About the Park”). The Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre, also an Amiri Diwan project, aims to “support the development of local talent through organized educational initiatives that include workshops, events and publications” and “introduce the artistic work
of Kuwait’s creative community to both local and international audiences” (“ASCC – Mission and Vision”). While the policy goals behind the establishment of such institutions are certainly diverse, including encouraging citizens to pursue entrepreneurial paths in the private sector and diversify national income, improving Kuwait’s image in the international sphere, and offering public spaces for entertainment beyond the redundant consumerist mall culture, some analysis of the effects of these spaces and how they have been received is required.

The introduction and presence of these institutions, on the surface, have introduced new creative spaces to the public. They offer alternative forms of entertainment and leisure, and create a platform for creative expression. However, closer analysis reveals selective targeting of an elite audience, as opposed to other cultural platforms that are more accessible and more inclusive such as Takween bookstore. Furthermore, not all of the cultural organizations fall under the same jurisdiction. JACC, ASCC, and Al Shaheed Park are all non-governmental but not private sector; the projects are carried out in the name of the Amir, rather than in the name of the Prime Minister’s cabinet. The Amiri Diwan is royal, while the government is not, as the government is inclusive of non-royal ministers. Al Humaidhi, director of Nuqat¹², referred to the distinct status of the Amiri Diwan cultural projects as,

. . .finding a loophole to the bureaucracy and the politics of the executive and legislative branches, which is a broken system. The Diwan projects are not under any government body, not even the State Audit Bureau of Kuwait. So they get to do things that move fast, without needing the approving vote from both branches. Having worked with JACC directly, it was a good productive relationship. (July 26, 2018)

¹² Nuqat is a nonprofit organization based in Kuwait that aims to make creativity “a main pillar in educational institutions” and “discuss entrepreneurship, fine arts, technology, culture and every aspect of life that creativity permeates” (“Nuqat – About”).
In essence, the level of scrutiny and accountability that the Amiri Diwan projects are subjected to vary greatly from the projects under a government umbrella or under the private sector. There is no cabinet Minister to be interpolated for an Amiri Diwan venue that hosted a concert or other cultural activity that MPs did not approve of; nor would MPs, I would speculate, be bold enough to question a project carried out in the name of Amir. Additionally, it does not have to go through the strenuous bureaucratic process of approval that other projects which fall under the private or governmental sector do. Because a private sector cultural project is licensed by the Ministry of Trade, and a public sector cultural project would fall under the Ministry of Information, their activities as well as their finances are subject to accountability and scrutiny by both the National Assembly as well as the State Audit Bureau. This is not the case with the Amiri Diwan projects, which in turn have a lot more leeway and freedom to execute their projects compared to other non-Amiri projects.

While the Amiri Diwan projects have more financial leeway, there are political restrictions on the nature of cultural events that can take place under an Amiri Diwan umbrella; for example, one of the cultural organizations I had spoken to who shared this under condition of anonymity, said that “prior to formally organizing an event at Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Centre, we have to sign a form agreeing to not bring up politics, religion, or sex” (interview on July 14, 2018).

I found much evidence that the ‘broken system’ of checks and balances Al Humaidhi described has posed a major obstacle to cultural activities. In 2015, the NCCAL announced the opening of Abdulhussein Abdulredha theatre, named in honor of a Kuwaiti television giant. Their first theatrical performance in March 2015 was a play titled Amal, which aimed to highlight the plight of Syrian refugees through a joyful Syrian child named Amal, whose ensuing struggles in the war are ignored by the international community and she is left to die.
This performance took place right before Kuwait’s Syria crisis meeting in 2015 (Rifai) and the attendees were diplomatic and government representatives of the pledging nations who were participating in the conference. The Amal play did not create the kind of political strife that, for example, Marcel Khalifa’s concert in Kuwait did shortly thereafter in April, perhaps because of its humanitarian theme but more importantly because it was a closed performance for a small, selected audience. Both of these events took place under the NCCAL. When news of Khalifa’s concert spread, there was much excitement amongst both Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis to see him perform after twenty-seven years since his last concert in the country. Days before his announced concert date, news spread that he would not be allowed to perform; the concert was cancelled, allegedly due to logistical problems. This stirred a strong reaction from both the press and the cultural community in Kuwait, who perceived the cancellation as yet another example of the government relenting to pressures from Islamist MPs, who posed religious objections to the concert, and appeasing their demands in an effort to avoid ministerial questioning and removal (Al Hendal 2015). This is something that has certainly happened in the past. At some point in the late 1990s, Islamist members of Parliament interpellated then Minister of Information, Saud Al Nasser, for permitting the sale of Ghassan Kanafani’s love letters to Ghada Samman. They objected arguing that his line, “My dear Ghada…damn your religion” was blasphemous and insulting to Islam (Bothayna Al Essa wa Tatalu’at Al Mubdi’een, 2016”). Both these examples point to ways in which government censorship can be interpreted as preemptive rather than just reactionary. In other words, predicting objections from members of Parliament, they choose to avoid it. Rather than waiting for MPs to voice their criticism and threaten a removal of the Minister of Information after a cultural activity takes place, the Minister of Information chooses to be on
the safe side and bans any activity that he thinks might lead to him having to answer questions from the National Assembly (interview with Saud Al Sanousi, July 29 2018).

Struggle and controversy over Khalifa’s concert, particularly after he posted a statement on Facebook condemning what he described to be “ politicized Islam’s hatred of joy” was widely circulated, continued behind the scenes as well as on the front pages of the press and trending topics of Kuwaiti Twitter. Victoriously, Khalifa did end up performing at Abdulhussein Abdulredha theatre on the 20th of April, 2015. The theatre was overflowing with Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, who cheered and sang along, with the Palestinian kuffiyeh waved all throughout the theatre. There were so many people that the theatre could not accommodate everyone, and the hall had completely filled up a full hour before the concert even began. Once again, the NCCAL was able to bring together people of different national and socioeconomic backgrounds in a celebration of music, joy, and perhaps most importantly, in a fleeting moment of Arab nationalism. In a country that witnessed a huge
shift in attitudes and sentiment towards Arab nationalism in general, and towards Palestinians in particular after the Iraqi invasion, this was no small development on a social level.

![Figure 11: Marcel Khalifa 2015 Concert](Photo from Instagram account of @waleedov, April 2015 post)

Cultural activities and institutions have also become a site of proxy contestation between the executive and the legislative branches, a push and shove sort of war in which, if the activity takes place, it is seen as a victory for the executive branch and a defeat of Islamist MPs. When the activity is banned, it is seen as a victory for the Islamist MPs and an act of submission and cowardice from the Minister of Information, as demonstrated in the Al Jarida newspaper clipping above. In Bothayna Al Essa’s 2016 speech to the National Assembly, she states, “We want laws that will protect our freedoms [as creative individuals]. We want our freedoms to stop being a proxy tool for the power play between the government and the MPs; and if the National Assembly will not exercise its role in protecting citizens’ freedoms, then, at the very least, do not fight our freedoms” (Bothayna Al Essa wa Tatalu’at Al Mubdi’een, 2016).
Given the nature of Kuwait’s political system and a society with diverse religious values, this proxy war is deeply felt by the creative community and is likely to persist in the coming years.

However, it is important to question the rather cliché dichotomy of the ‘enlightened government’ combatting the ‘dark religious forces’. Power dynamics are more complex than the state narrative makes it seem, and more complex than how those who critique the stance that Islamists have towards cultural activities make it sound. As I demonstrated earlier, in the early twentieth century it was actually religious figures that were the strongest advocates for integrating cultural activities into mainstream public education. What has changed between then and now are two things: first, the version of Islamism that these MPs choose to adopt, and second, the form and shape of cultural activities. Furthermore, objections to certain cultural activities are not only exclusively from Islamists. Many average citizens who do not identify as Islamists, also object to the idea of cultural activities such as mixed dancing taking place in public spaces; it comes off as uncomfortable and transgresses on what they deem to be appropriate and in line with the society’s traditions. For example, in February 2019, a traditional dancing competition took place as part of Kuwait’s *Hala February*\(^{14}\) celebrations. The competition took place at Souk Al Mubarakiya, the main local Souk that is close to a hundred years old and is considered a key element of Kuwaiti heritage and identity. It was met with negative reactions from Islamist members of Kuwait’s National Assembly, who once again threatened to interpellate the Minister of Information. As such, the remaining dance activities taking place at Souk Al Mubarakiya were called off for the rest of the month. Calling off the dance activities was seen to be an act of “stealing the joy of *Hala February*

\(^{14}\) *Hala February* is an annual month of activities meant to commemorate Kuwait’s independence from the British in 1961 and liberation from the Iraqis in 1990.
celebrations” (Al Jassim), a sentiment that ordinary citizens repeated on Twitter during this debate.

In an attempt to steer away from the clichéd interpretation of ‘Islamists wanting to steal our joy’ versus ‘liberals wanting to promote dance and corruption of morals’, I want to put forth an alternative interpretation: the issue may not be so much an issue of cultural activities in and of themselves, but rather a question of *where* the cultural activities are taking place and in what context. In the case of a concert taking place at JACC or any other cultural venue, an individual would need to go through the logistical steps in order to attend: go to the website, book a ticket, pay the required fee, plan out his schedule so that he is able to attend on the date of the concert, and then drive to the said location. The individual therefore *chooses* to go to a venue on a day and at a time that he knows a musical concert or a dance performance is taking place. In the case of an incident such as that of Souk Al Mubarakiya, on the other hand, people who were present there were not present for the purpose of attending a dance competition or otherwise. It is a traditional site that has been a place of gathering for families, and for men and women of all age groups. When a dance competition takes place at a location where this has never happened before, it is understandable that it may feel like an infringement of space and the right to choose what you want to witness and where.

There is evidence of contemporary Islamists not only endorsing, but also engaging in their own forms of cultural production across the region. While there is still moral ambiguity surrounding music, “Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world, who previously held hostile attitudes toward musical entertainment, have increasingly started to accept and incorporate music as long as it abides by and propagates Islamic virtues and morality” (Laan 2016, p. 87). One prominent example found in Morocco, Kuwait, and several other Arab
countries is that of *anashid*, or “recitations”, which are not considered ‘music’ because “[they] distinguish [anashid] from profane music in that it does not use melodic instruments and only refers to Islamic tropes” (Laan 2016, p. 87). The JBA Moroccan Islamist movement propagates Islamic ethics through the medium of *anashid*, and an earlier example would be during the Islamic Revival movement in 1970s Egypt (Laan 2016, p. 88). The premise is to offer an alternative to secular forms of art and entertainment, and to be able to reach a wider and younger audience. Therefore Islam and cultural production are not sworn enemies as the state and its media likes to propagate, but rather Islamist movements and politicians believe in and advocate for different forms of cultural production that they believe falls in line with Islamic values.

The Manifestation of the Bedoon Cause in Cultural Spaces

One of the key issues that has been continuously raised in recent years through creative spaces and activities in Kuwait is the subject of *Bedoon* children’s access to education. One of the most detrimental consequences of the state’s discriminatory policies has been increasingly restricted access to education for *Bedoon* children. In November 2014, the Ministry of Education and the Central Apparatus for ‘Illegal Residents’ decided that children who did not possess birth certificates could no longer attend private schools. Somewhere between 600-1000 children (Elgayar) were affected by this decision and were stopped at their school gates on what was supposed to be their first day of school. The

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15 With the exception of children of Kuwaiti women married to *Bedoon* men, along with children and grandchildren of *Bedoon* men who are in the military, stateless children are already deprived of the right to access public education. The great majority is enrolled in low quality private schools. With their families’ already low incomes and struggle in making ends meet, the 2014 decision meant that even if the financial amount for tuition were available, *Bedoon* children would still not be allowed to go to school because they did not possess birth certificates.
National Assembly had no comment to make. Instead, a group of activists, led by Khadeija Al Shammari, decided to take advantage of the NCCAL’s annual book fair to highlight this issue.

The status of the Bedoon emerged as a key issue in November 2014, as the timing of the decision aligned with the timing of the annual Kuwait book fair. The annual Kuwait book fair, also sponsored by the NCCAL, is an event that has great popularity and annually attracts thousands of visitors. Given the large number of visitors every year, it is a cultural space that is often utilized to convey powerful – albeit unprecedented – messages. In 2014 a group of young men and women decided to take advantage of this large audience to highlight a cause that they considered to be important and relevant to people who were coming to the Mishref fairgrounds to buy books. News circulated that the Central Apparatus for ‘Illegal’ Persons instructed the Ministry of Education to ban children without birth certificates from attending school (Elgayar). With the exception of children of Kuwaiti women married to Bedoon men and children and grandchildren of Bedoon men who are in the military, stateless children are already deprived of the right to access public education. The great majority is enrolled in low quality private schools. With their families’ already low incomes and struggle in making ends meet, this new decision meant that even if the financial amount for tuition were available, the children would still not be allowed to go to school because they did not possess birth certificates.

Khadeija Al Shammari, a twenty-nine-year-old stateless woman from Kuwait, experienced the struggles of growing up stateless in Kuwait from every angle. She was a human rights activist during the Taimaa protests; although, she says, she does not support protesting as a constructive way forward, nor does she identify as someone with a political

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16 Quotations are used here to indicate that “Illegal Persons” is the official term used by the Central Apparatus to refer to the Bedoon community, and not mine. I consider the apparatus, its actions and the term used to refer to this community to be racist and immoral.
agenda. A feminist, an individual who plays an active role in community projects, and a former activist, she remembers what it was like when she and her four siblings had to stay home from school for a full year as children because their father did not have the money to put them through school, and because they did not have access to public school education. When she learned about this new development in 2014, she took it upon herself to launch a campaign in cooperation with others who were strong supporters of the cause. In coordination with the Kuwait Teachers Society, an improvised alternative form of schooling was set up at the Kuwait Teachers Society headquarters, with volunteer teachers who would give classes to the same children who were now no longer allowed to go to formal schooling. The initiative was dubbed ‘Katateeb Al Bedoon’.

As part of an effort to gain exposure, Khadeija designed a number of yellow t-shirts that asked [in Arabic, pictured below], “Did you know that there are children who are deprived of education in Kuwait?” along with the Twitter hashtag of Katateeb Al Bedoon for people to type in to get more information and to interact with the subject. Twenty people wore these yellow t-shirts and silently marched around the annual Kuwait book fair on the opening day. Khadeija described it to me in a conversation over the summer of 2018, and said that they specifically chose the NCCAL book fair because it was an event that attracts a large crowd who values reading. Since their subject of activism was children’s right to education, they chose to start the silent march in the hall that was designated for children’s books, which elicited shocked reactions from the parents who were present.

People joined the silent march in solidarity, and it continued to grow. Others were surprised at this information, and could not believe that there are children in Kuwait who were not going to school. Others still, accused the marchers of “distorting Kuwait’s reputation”, an accusation that Al Shammari says she has grown accustomed to hearing.
whenever she tries to highlight some form of injustice taking place in Kuwait. Once the
group became visibly large, the management team of the book fair politely asked them to
leave and notified them that such activities were not permissible.

![Image of Bedoon Silent March, 2015 Kuwait Book Fair](https://twitter.com/saadiahmufarreh/status/536207592070971392)

**Figure 12: Bedoon Silent March, 2015 Kuwait Book Fair**
Source: [https://twitter.com/saadiahmufarreh/status/536207592070971392](https://twitter.com/saadiahmufarreh/status/536207592070971392)

To attempt to impose a universal definition on what it means to resist is to disregard
forms of struggle that arise “in situations where suppression rules” (Bayat 2013, p. 42) and
where groups or individuals have to resort to alternative means or forms of struggle in order
to convey their message. Traditional ways of defining “real resistance” define it as
“organized, systematic, pre-planned or selfless practices with revolutionary consequences”
(Bayat 2013, p. 43). The reality is that large-scale organized collective action is not possible
everywhere, and in 2011 when the Bedoon community attempted to resort to the
aforementioned form of “real resistance” they faced dire consequences that have persisted
until this day. Thus, what arises in politically repressive contexts are “expressions [of popular
culture] that qualify as acts of resistance, [and] create power to resist power” (Fabian 1998, p. 69). The defining feature of such acts is what Bayat describes as the “art of presence”, whereby “the courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds, to circumvent constraints, utilizing what is available and discovering new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized” (2013, p. 28). The simple act of silently marching while wearing yellow t-shirts asking a seemingly innocent question, which, as desired, shocked people who could not imagine children being deprived of education in a country as wealthy as Kuwait, affirmed the art of presence that Bayat described. The existing space within the NCCAL annual book fair was utilized to highlight this cause and make the thousands of visitors aware that these children are as real as the visitors’ children, and that they, too, needed to be heard.

That same year in 2014, Kuwaiti author Abdullah Al Busais published a novel called ‘Stray Memories’. He tells the story of two young boys who go to school together in the 1980s in Kuwait; one is Kuwaiti, and his next-door neighbor is Bedoon whose his father is an active military man. They lose touch after the Iraqi invasion in 1990, and the Bedoon family seems to have moved; they reunite twenty years later at a police station. The Kuwaiti, who as a child had a sadistic hobby of torturing and killing stray cats and dogs, grows up to join the interrogation unit at the Ministry of Interior. The Bedoon character – who as a child was gifted, polite and sensitive, performed well in school, and collapsed on his knees, weeping, when he saw his neighbor stabbing a puppy – grows up to be a con artist whom the police had been trying to catch for years. Al Busais eloquently and powerfully highlights the plight of the Bedoon community in Kuwait, whilst simultaneously shedding light on the troubled backgrounds of some of the MOI men who essentially use violence and torture in their interrogations. It was banned on the basis of ‘distorting the
image of the men of the Ministry of Interior’ (Fakih) but many within the creative community believe it was a combination of that along with the bold narration of the difficult childhoods that Bedoon children are forced to cope with. Demerdash describes censorship to be a phenomenon with fundamentally disciplinary tactics that aim to “preserve a moral or political order” (2017, p. 29), and such were the allegations made by entities that supported acts of censorship.

In later years, with rising numbers of Bedoon children being deprived of the right to access education, Takween bookstore organized charity reading marathons that served dual purposes: encouraging a culture of reading, whilst simultaneously giving the incentive of contributing to aid in the tuition fees of underprivileged children in Kuwait through the very act of reading. ‘You read, a child learns’, was their slogan. For every ten pages that each individual read, the sponsors of the marathon would donate one Kuwaiti Dinar. A total of five marathons have been held since 2016, the last one in 2019 resulting in 1326 readers, 72,030 pages read in total, leading to 7203 KWD that was than fully allocated to cover the tuition fees of primarily Bedoon children.

Censorship and the Creative Community’s Countering of Censorship

“The role of the creative [individual] is to cause disruption.” – Saud Al Sanousi, interview in July 2018

So many books became victims of state censorship that it was described to be a “massacre of books” (Majdi). Abdullah Al Busais, Saud Al-Sanousi, Bothayna Al Essa, Dalaa Al Moufti, and countless other Kuwaiti writers had their works banned in Kuwait, while they were freely distributed in Saudi Arabia, the rest of the Gulf and across the Arab region. By 2018, 4390 titles were banned from distribution in the Kuwaiti market (Amer)
including non-Kuwaiti works.

Censorship grew significantly in 2014 and has continued until this day (Majdi). However books are not the only sites to be censored. Artworks were not spared, as demonstrated in the case of Shurooq Amin’s exhibit, in addition to TV shows. When Saud Al Sanousi’s novel The Bamboo Stalk was made into a Ramadan TV series to be aired in 2016, Kuwaiti TV channel Al-Rai chose to omit the only scene in the entire series where one of the main characters talks about his life as someone who is Bedoon (“Aqwa Mash’had le Qathiyyat al Bedoon”). Al-Sanousi, along with other Kuwaiti authors, went on to challenge the Ministry of Information’s decision to ban their works in the administrative courts of Kuwait. The administrative courts overturned the Ministry’s decision, but the process was tedious and the damage had still been done.

Al Sanousi’s novel, Mama Hessa’s Mice, was banned by the Ministry of Information on the grounds that it “stirred sectarian sentiments”. Al Sanousi’s lawyer, Bassem Al Asousi, challenged this decision in court on the basis of three articles: Article 14 of the Kuwaiti constitution states, “The State shall promote science, letters and the arts and encourage scientific research therein” and Article 36 states, “Freedom of opinion and scientific research shall be guaranteed. Every person shall have the right to express and propagate his opinion verbally, in writing or otherwise, in accordance with the conditions and procedures specified by law” and Article 37 states, “Freedom of the press, printing and publishing shall be guaranteed in accordance with the conditions and manner specified by the law” (Kuwaiti Constitution). The final court ruling was announced on April 22, 2019, whereby the court stated: “The novel carries purposeful meanings that call for unity, a commitment to genuine values and heritage, and a rejection of sectarianism. The way it was written and the way the ideas flowed is telling of a deeply creative mind. Disagreement over the events depicted in
the novel is not something that the author should bear responsibility for, for it remains a
depiction of a reality that he believes is true” (Suwaidan). Following the court decision to
remove the ban and permit the sale of Al Sanousi’s novel in Kuwait, Al Sanousi described he
felt an “incomplete sense of joy” after three years of court proceedings, because his case was
an individual one and there were many of his colleagues whose works remain banned. He
pointed out that the court ruling is indicative of a disparity between how the judicial system
examines works of literature, versus the ambiguous and random grounds on which the
Ministry of Information decides to ban a book (Suwaidan).

Kuwaiti novelist and Takween bookstore owner Bothayna Al Essa, who had some of
her own works banned by the Ministry of Information, gave a speech before the National
Assembly in December 2016 on the concerns and ambitions of the creative community in
Kuwait. She asserted that, in light of various political and social constraints, the creative
individual begrudgingly adjusts in accordance with the boundaries set before him in order for
his/her work to survive. She said,

Art is a free being, a rioter, a source of disruption for all forms of authority:
political, social, and religious. Art is like a child that asks adults annoying
questions. It exists in society in order to agitate, in order to pose questions, in
order to address that which is overlooked, in order to confront that which is
considered taboo and question that which is considered sacred. (Bothayna Al Essa
wa Tatalu’at Al Mubdi’een, 2016)

This is akin to what Nawal El Saadawi refers to as being marked on the “gray list” of
the Egyptian regime, the gray list being “a nether space where artists, writers, and
intellectuals are neither actively imprisoned nor entirely free to circulate their work”

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17 The speech given was a part of a session called Sahim fe Al-Tashre’e, “Contribute to the
Legislation Process” and Al Essa was allocated twenty minutes to present her case on Kuwait’s
legislations towards the creative community.
(Demerdash 2017, p. 29). For Al Essa and other creative individuals in Kuwait, existing in this gray list comes off as both suffocating and limiting to their creative energies.

Figure 13: Bothayna Al Essa Speech at the National Assembly, 2016

By September 2018, what began as a Twitter account with a small number of followers expanded to international headlines in a condemnation of censorship of books in Kuwait (Nordland). Initially, Kuwaiti users began posting photos of their libraries with books that were banned by the Ministry of Information, and the array of photos was astonishing: from Dostoevsky, Saud Al Sanousi, and Bothayna Al Essa to the Little Mermaid, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Mourid Barghouthi. Mourid Barghouthi himself participated in the Twitter hashtag condemning the excessive censorship.

Many called for a boycott of the upcoming annual Kuwait book fair. One man had a different idea in mind, and set up what he called a “cemetery of banned books in Kuwait” (Sharaf). Sharaf, like many other artists whom I interviewed, told me he was not someone who had political opinions or beliefs, but “supported human rights” (interview in May 2018). He wanted to create something that would reach the general public, rather than only the
“small group of people invested in the subject” (Sharaf), i.e. the creative community.

Figure 14: Book Cemetery by Mohammed Sharaf

The installation he set up outside of the fairgrounds of the annual Kuwait book fair was essentially a cemetery for the banned books, with a book-shaped gravestone, hand-written title, along with the year span during which the 4,300 books were banned (2013-2018). Although authorities did remove the installation shortly thereafter, he conveyed his message, and the photos of the cemetery had already gone viral. He said that he was happy with the result because it “created the disruption [he] intended, without actually creating a disturbance. The public art intervention was sudden and silent, yet very loud.” (Sharaf).
An interesting observation that can be a takeaway from the aforementioned events is the transformation of the creative community into a civil society force of its own; it challenges state policy, questions the performance of the elected National Assembly and holds it accountable, and steps in to take up the lobbying and charity roles that traditional civil society organizations normally take up. In Chris Hann’s description of civil society organizations in the Middle East, he explains that they inhabit the area between citizen and state, whilst simultaneously not abiding by a dichotomy of state-society, but rather comprising a “seamless field of moral interaction” (Hann 1996, p. 2). The creative community has grown to be a force of collective pressure that has organized actors, physical and cyber platforms through which to voice their demands and critiques, and created alternative – arguably more efficient – spaces for sociopolitical debate and advocacy, despite
lacking executive or legislative powers. Lacking executive or legislative powers means that the creative community is not in a position where it is able to pass laws or make decisions; it is, however, able to start debate and create pressure groups on decision makers in order to pass the desired legislations. Another interesting point is the desire to separate their activism from anything that might be associated with politics, through a relentless affirmation that it is a matter of ‘principle’ or ‘human rights’; this repeated desire to identify as apolitical is, once again, telling of the disenchantment and frustration that many within the creative community feel about the state of politics in the country.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a broad overview of the historical background of social movements in Kuwait, to situate the contemporary re-emergence of creative tools as a means of dissent in modern day Kuwait. I contextualized the political atmosphere by examining citizens’ decreasing faith in political institutions and reform post-2012, as well as detailing their grievances with both the government and the National Assembly. Both the government and the National Assembly were complicit in restricting freedom of expression, passing legislation that specifically limited and regulated what people could and could not say on social media platforms such as Twitter. This appears to be a response to the proliferation and widespread use of Twitter as, initially, a tool for organizing protests, and until today, a platform for debate via hashtags.

Creative cultural tools and platforms in Kuwait have, in adaptation to a shrinking of political spaces and rights, “become important vehicles for conveying political messages, motivating people, and creating the solidarities necessary to take on state power” (Nieuwkerk 2017, p. 14). The creative community faces the challenge of censorship as an obstacle to
being able to function freely, and this comes from the government at times, and from Members of Parliament at other times. Within creative spaces, organizers and participants have been able to utilize creative tools to highlight causes such as *Bedoon* children’s access to education, through a silent march at the NCCAL book fair, Ramadan TV series, charity reading marathons, and literature. Cultural producers have evolved into an advocacy force in their own right, taking on causes normally adopted by civil society groups or Members of Parliament.
Chapter Two: Factors of Inclusion and Exclusion of Participating in Creative Spaces

In this chapter, I examine factors and power dynamics that determine who has the right to participate in which cultural spaces. First, I discuss interactions between Kuwaiti citizens and the expatriate community, and the social segregation that exists between the two groups. Cultural spaces have offered a mutual medium for the two groups to interact with one another and build friendships. However, as I demonstrate, while this is one of the positive effects of their emergence, they are still not enough to counter what has been a strong xenophobic rhetoric towards expats that has hurt the lives of many.

Next, I go beyond state censorship and discuss the role of family and religion in dictating what forms of engagement with cultural activities are and are not permissible. Individuals who come from more religiously conservative families complain that they feel restrained and unable to openly declare their passion for music because their families believe that music is *haram*, forcing them to live a double life of sorts, constantly tip toeing in fear of being caught. While there might be religious stigma around music in general, there is stronger stigma around heavy metal music as a genre more specifically. To present a holistic image, I also discuss Islamists’ more tolerant attitudes towards different types of music. Lastly in the same section on family and religion, I briefly discuss how family members end up taking on the role of the state in censoring reading choices.

Next, I discuss the degrees of inclusiveness of different cultural spaces; so as not to fall into idealizing the influence of cultural spaces, and to critically analyze their influence. Language, identity and class all come into play in shaping who has access to these spaces, reproducing some of the same inequalities that these groups claim to be critical of in the first place. To contextualize the disparity between English and Arabic language speakers, I re-introduce the ‘McChickens’ and the ‘TKs’ or the Typical Kuwaitis, a concept that emerged in
the early 2000s to categorize English and Arabic speakers in Kuwait based on choice of spoken language, manners of dress, and lifestyles.

Nationality: Interactions Between Citizens and Expats

Demographically, Kuwaiti citizens are a minority in the country comprising 30.4 percent of the population, with expatriates accounting for 69.5 percent. Among non-citizens, 27.4 percent are Arab, 40.3 percent are Asians, 1 percent are Africans and 0.9 percent are ‘other’, including European, North American, South American, and Australian (“The World Factbook: Kuwait”). The past celebrated multiculturalism of Kuwait is no longer a source of celebration in modern-day Kuwait, but rather a source of tension, whereby “expatriates are well-positioned to be constructed as a threat to Kuwaiti identity on several levels, culturally, politically, and economically” (Demerdash 2015, p. 89). What defined this shift in citizens’ attitudes towards expatriates was the trauma of the Iraqi invasion; the perception was that nations whom Kuwait as a country and as a community had embraced and actively supported, betrayed Kuwait by choosing to endorse the Iraqi occupation. Dubbed *duwal al dhid*, these countries included Palestine, Sudan, Jordan, Yemen, and others.

Azza el Hassan, who is Sudanese, moved to Kuwait from Oman during the 1990s. She spent the first few years of her elementary schooling in a private Arabic school, as expats do not have access to public schools, and then transferred to a British school by year six once her parents were satisfied with her command of the Arabic language. She was the only Sudanese child in all of the schools she went to, “in school, kids were cruel; they made it a point to let me know that I was different” (interview on August 6, 2018). The very first time she even learned about the Iraqi invasion was when she was “being told that [she] was from *duwal al dhid*” by Egyptian kids, who took pride in their government siding with the
coalition to liberate Kuwait. She says she never had any Kuwaiti classmates, and never knew any Kuwaitis until she returned from her studies in the UK as an adult. “The only time I thought I had a Kuwaiti classmate was in elementary school, and it was a boy who would tell us that he was Kuwaiti but we discovered he was actually Bedoon” (interview on August 6, 2018).

The conversation with Azza sheds light on multiple layers of racism, as well as survival methods. As the Filipino-Kuwaiti character Jose\textsuperscript{18} wonders upon his first arrival to Kuwait at the age of eighteen, “There was something complicated in Kuwait that I didn’t understand. All the social classes looked for a lower class on whose back they could ride, even if they had to create one. Then they would climb on to the shoulders of those in the class below, humiliate them and use them to ease the pressure from the class above” (Alsanousi 2016, p. 250). The Egyptian children making these comments to Azza were, arguably, aware that their positions were inferior to that of Kuwaiti citizens, but used their Egyptian government’s alliance with the coalition to demonstrate their own superiority to a Sudanese girl. The isolation from any interaction with Kuwaitis until Azza’s adulthood is also telling of the kind of social segregation that many expats and citizens grow up with. Lastly, the Bedoon child pretending to be Kuwaiti could have been a survival mechanism, knowing that he would be the weakest link in that school if the other children discovered he looked and spoke like a Kuwaiti, but in fact was not.

At a panel discussion at the Jaber Al Ahmad Cultural Center in December 2018, Kuwaiti playwright Bader Al Muhareb spoke about theatre as a method of ‘tanfees’, or a means of healing following the traumatic events of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait (Al Muhareb). There is indeed a plethora of theatre performances, which were

\textsuperscript{18} Jose is a Filipino-Kuwaiti character from Saud Al Sanousi’s novel, The Bamboo Stalk. Upon reaching the age of eighteen, he moves from the Philippines to Kuwait, where he experiences racism due to his Filipino features and inability to speak Arabic.
widespread and popular sources of weekly entertainment for Kuwaitis at the time, that talk about the 1990 occupation in a satirical manner. An audience member at the aforementioned panel discussion, a young Kuwaiti man in his thirties, posed an important question. He asked if the stereotypical depictions of Iraqis and Palestinians in Kuwaiti plays throughout the 1990s normalized racist comedy and contributed to the plummeting of Kuwaiti theatre. He expressed the belief that this form of comedy transformed the theatre from being a source of thought-provoking depictions of contemporary societal and political issues domestically and regionally as it had been in the 1970s and 1980s, to a stage where actors are channeling their ‘creativity’ towards racism and stereotypes, therefore contributing to a general normalization of racist humor and attitudes at large.

In the 1950s oil boom, urban planning in Kuwait ended up eroding Kuwait’s historic diversity, contributing to the present-day “conditions of social exclusion and spatial segregation” (Al Nakib 2016, p. 15) between people of different backgrounds, whether that is Kuwaitis of different heritage or citizens and non-citizens. While the country’s demographic diversity has not only persisted, but also expanded, it has expanded under these new conditions of social exclusion and spatial segregation. The emergence of creative cultural spaces in the past six years has alleviated these segregations and helped build bridges of friendship and a flow of social interaction between groups who otherwise have minimal to no contact with one another.

Fatma Abodoma is an Egyptian visual artist who was born and raised in Egypt, and then moved to Kuwait in 2010 upon marrying Aiman Waked, an Egyptian architect who spent most of his life in Kuwait. Fatma’s experience is an example of how the emergence of creative spaces in Kuwait has helped strengthen community ties and break previously existent social barriers, particularly between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, commonly referred
to in local terms as ‘expatriates’, or non-citizens who are temporarily working in Kuwait. Expatriates as a term is inclusive of both professional and labor migrants. Additionally, her story is also telling of why these spaces are so important to support and preserve, particularly in the face of social tensions that can be manifested as xenophobia in the country at large in the last couple of years. Such spaces can provide avenues for dialogue, understanding, and even healing.

When I interviewed Fatma, she indicated that she had minimal contact with Kuwaitis up until 2016. She arrived to Kuwait as an art teacher, and the private school that she taught at was a school of entirely non-Kuwaiti staff. Up until 2016, she had solely dealt with Kuwaitis on a formal basis via official government circles when she needed to have official paperwork processed, or through the parents of the Kuwaiti children whom she taught. Dealing with Kuwaitis in government circles was intimidating for her, as she found that they were often unfriendly or spoke to her with a tone of arrogance. Her husband Aiman, who has lived in Kuwait since the 1970s, remembers his experience being similar. He said he often felt a sense of social isolation. When living in Salmiya in the 1980s, he remembers that he and other kids in the building where he lived were amazed that a Kuwaiti had moved into their building – only to discover that the family was actually a family of Iraqis, not Kuwaitis. In the entire time he lived there, up until 1989, he did not have a single Kuwaiti neighbor. This is telling of the kind of social segregation that has long existed in Kuwait, where there are neighborhoods for citizens, and neighborhoods for non-citizens, and neighborhoods for particular groups of Kuwaitis distinct from neighborhoods for other groups of Kuwaitis. Kuwait’s housing policies and geographic distribution of various groups reflected on the community’s social relations, or lack thereof (Al Nakib 2016, p. 20).

Fatma arrived in Kuwait at a time that was politically charged, but, as the couple says,
they were not really keeping up with the local Kuwaiti politics because they were busy following the events of the Egyptian revolution in January 2011. She recalls that on February 11, when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was ousted by the Egyptian people, she and her husband went grocery shopping. A Kuwaiti couple overheard them speaking in their Egyptian accent by the cashier, and said to them, “Mabrook, mabrook!” This was a recurring incident in 2011, where Kuwaitis would congratulate them for their revolution; Aiman and Fatma felt proud to be Egyptian, and appreciated how happy Kuwaitis were for them.

“It was Through the Music.”

Fatma and Aiman remember the turning point in their state of social segregation as expats happening “through the music.” Towards the end of 2015, there was a proliferation of music concerts across Kuwait. Many of the musicians performing and organizing these events were regular attendees of Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah’s concerts in earlier years. With the opening of new venues supported by the SME fund, there were new spaces created that would not only allow for musical and artistic activities to take place alongside their food and coffee services, but some spaces were solely dedicated to this, such as Art Space Q8, Wejha Art Workspace19, Den Gallery, and others. The one that most stands out in Fatma’s mind is the ‘Jam Kuwait’ concert on the Contemporary Art Platform’s rooftop in 2015. They also attended the Marcel Khalifa concert at the Abdulhussein Abdulredha theatre. They were so keen to attend that they walked from the hospital, where Aiman had done a minor operation at the time, to the theatre.20

19 Wejha is the first co-working art space in Kuwait that exhibits galleries, has studios for artists to work together and give each other feedback and ideas, and is open 24/7. Wejha is an example of the SME-funded creative initiatives.
20 Fatma does not drive in Kuwait and Aiman’s post-operation instructions were for him to avoid driving for a few days. Walking on the streets of Kuwait is not common, and this detail is indicative of their enthusiasm and commitment to attend the concert.
According to Fatma and Aiman, from that point on, it seemed that more and more opportunities for expats to have social, friendly interactions with young Kuwaitis opened up. Indeed, many of the non-Kuwaitis who I interviewed described how post-2012 cultural events and gathering points changed the perceptions and stereotypical images they held about Kuwaitis. It gave both groups a chance to befriend one another and get to know each other as human beings, who did not share the same nationality or even the same legal rights, but had a mutual passion and appreciation for the creative arts.

Mark LeVine in his research on artists and musicians in Arab and Muslim societies, describes this disruption of the status quo by engaging in creative activities in a context that actively discourages the form of creativity they choose, as, “secular and religious [artists] alike….devoting their lives to creating an alternative system that builds an open and democratic culture from the ground up, against the interests of both the political, social, economic and religious elites of their countries” (LeVine 2009, p. 19). By virtue of creating bridges and building friendships and safe, diverse spaces in the face of xenophobic rhetoric and a reality of segregation, creative individuals create this alternative system that contributes to building an open and democratic culture that pushes back against the existing status quo. They challenge the existing status quo and work to build a community that is what they envision it to be.

Building Bridges and Breaking Barriers

Fatma finally had friends who were Kuwaitis, and finally had a social life beyond that which her husband Aiman included her in. Prior to this point, Fatma often felt depressed, lonely, and would travel from Kuwait every chance she would get. In December 2017, she experienced a traumatic incident that she said almost led her to decide to move back to Egypt.
Fatma was the victim of physical and verbal assault at the hands of a Kuwaiti woman who, as a result of an exchange over the woman’s parking spot, targeted her Egyptian identity. Fatma felt traumatized. The only thing that prevented her from packing her bags that very same week, was that it had occurred after she was exposed to these cultural spaces and after she had built the kinds of friendships that she had built with Kuwaitis. If it had happened prior to that point, she says, she would not have hesitated to leave the country immediately. Her husband Aiman reiterated this sentiment: “If we had that same experience, without having met the nice and the majority of kind Kuwaitis who we got to know through these events, we would have left the country immediately” (Interview, May 2018).

Numerous Kuwaitis insisted that they would offer her the support needed to insure that she would be legally compensated, and that the Kuwaiti woman would be held accountable for her actions. Fatma went from being congratulated for the Egyptian revolution by Kuwaitis when she first moved to the country, to being verbally and physically assaulted by a Kuwaiti woman who specifically degraded her Egyptian identity. Between 2016 and 2017, a significant spike in xenophobic rhetoric against the expatriate community took place in Kuwait (Al Qahtani). It was by coincidence that this took place in the midst of what was already at that point an active cultural scene, which provided safe spaces for people to create different realities and bases for interaction, as evidenced in the experiences of Azza and Fatma. A new National Assembly was elected in 2016, and the only female Member of Parliament elected, Safaa Al Hashem, adopted the agenda of ‘expats taking Kuwaitis’ jobs’ as a priority, singling out the Egyptian community. The local press played the same rhetoric. Innocent people such as Fatma are often the victims of such xenophobic speech being normalized in spaces such as the National Assembly and the local press.
Figure 16: “Trumpa” by Mohammed Sharaf

At the height of Safaa Al Hashem’s xenophobic rhetoric towards expatriates, artist Mohammed Sharaf created the above artwork in March 2017, captioning it ‘Trumpa’.

The bias incident Fatma faced exemplifies two things: first, that hate speech is never just words. It emboldens people with racist ideas to act on them and target innocent people. Second, it exemplifies the power that cultural spaces possess, specifically in their ability to create meaningful connections and build bridges between groups of people who otherwise would not have gotten to know each other in the same intimate, warm manner in other spaces.

Like Fatma, Azza el Hassan, who is Sudanese and lives in Kuwait, did not have the chance to build friendships with Kuwaitis until the emergence of cultural spaces. Having previously worked at the British Council in Kuwait in their customer service department, the majority of the customers whom she dealt with on a daily basis for three years were Kuwaiti
customers. She had just returned from her studies in the UK prior to joining the British Council, and she described experiencing racism in the UK; “I’ve experienced ‘stop and search’ [in the UK] for no valid reason, just because I’m black and walking down the street in the UK. I didn’t expect I would ever see or experience racism worse than that which I experienced in the UK” (interview on August 6, 2018). When she began working at the British Council and dealt with Kuwaiti customers, Azza said it was a “mixed bag; some were very nice and very pleasant, and would engage in lovely conversations . . . and then other times when the customers would come in already angry, it would be an extreme disparity compared with the others” (interview on August 6, 2018). These experiences created a sense of prejudice on her end towards Kuwaitis from that point until she began to mingle with Kuwaitis in a social manner in the emerging cultural spaces; the spaces allowed her to “get to know Kuwaitis in a friendlier, warmer manner, minus the power dynamics that came with me working at customer service and them being the customer I was serving” (interview on August 6, 2018).

Both Fatima and Azza are Arab expatriates who lived and worked in Kuwait for many years without forming friendships or engaging in friendly interactions with Kuwaiti citizens until the re-emergence of creative cultural spaces. Prior to this, social segregation and power dynamics were obstacles that prevented such interactions. The nature of Azza’s job in particular, as someone that worked in customer service, may have contributed to an aggravation of these power dynamics. Having acknowledged this, it is still worthwhile to note that the cultural scene provided a safe space for diverse communities to mingle, interact, and get to know one another. Particularly in light of the rising xenophobic speech towards expatriates, of which Fatima was a victim, such spaces provided relatively neutral ground for building bridges, and the power dynamics that were so heavily enunciated outside of these
spaces were semi-absent. Nevertheless, even in these cultural spaces, other power dynamics prevailed, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Family and Religion

The state and societal prejudice are not the only forces of authority that limit people’s access to art and creative cultural spaces. Individuals’ nuclear families or extended communities and their respective degrees of religiosity also play significant roles in the extent to which an individual can enjoy the right to access and participate in such spaces. There is usually an assumption that the lifestyle imposed by the family is also chosen by the individuals, and therefore the struggle that individuals who have a different set of values or prefer a different lifestyle often goes unnoticed. I found throughout my research that factors such as family and religious values have substantial influence in creative individuals’ lives, demonstrating that censorship is not only exerted via the state.

Flash\textsuperscript{21} is a twenty-five-year-old Kuwaiti musician who plays electric guitar in a band called ‘Iridescent’, made up of ‘Flash’, another Kuwaiti musician who goes by the name ‘Blue’, and Salim. Flash’s introduction to music was both unconventional and defiant. He went to a public all-boys school in Surra, a fairly affluent neighborhood in Kuwait. He comes from a religiously conservative family who enrolled him at the Islamic Heritage Revival Society\textsuperscript{22} at the age of eleven, which offers a variety of different religious and athletic activities for young boys. He left at the age of fifteen, and his family was unhappy with his decision.

\textsuperscript{21} Flash is the individual’s music name. He chose to abstain from including his name for personal reasons.
\textsuperscript{22} The Islamic Heritage Revival Society is a non-governmental, Muslim Brotherhood-leaning organization in Kuwait.
Flash and Blue shared a mutual love for rock and metal music, and in the school they went to, and in Kuwait more generally, metal was a very unpopular genre and had negative religious associations tied to it. “At that age, you start looking for like-minded people, and that place did not give me what I needed. So when I met Blue [who went to the same high school] we started connecting, mainly over the music” (Interview June 30, 2018). Metal-lovers and music players are often dubbed “devil worshippers” by conservative factions of society, with a close link assumed between metal music and worshipping the devil between 2000 and 2010 there have been several police raids of metal-themed parties (Fakih 2018). While that stigma has significantly dropped, it still exists in the minds of many.

In politically and socially restricting contexts, particular music genres can be a force of liberation, if ever so momentary. When metal music is played by young people “trying to resist or even transcend oppressive governments or societies, its power and potential are much more positive, reverberating far outside the scenes in which the music is embedded” (LeVine 2009, p. 4). As we will see in the case of Flash, his family, who he lived with, expected him to follow a particular religious lifestyle at an early age. He had to tiptoe around these expectations in the years to come. For many Muslims, metal music and Islam are deemed to be in contradiction with one another. Heavy metal, however, does not only have negative connotations in Muslim societies; average Americans or Europeans, too, tend to “conjure an image of a group of slightly deranged-looking white guys with long, crimped blond hair and leather outfits, whose primary talents are sleeping with underage groupies and destroying hotel rooms” (LeVine 2009, p. 8).

On Flash’s seventeenth birthday, he and Blue met up in public and Blue gave him a big box. Upon opening it, he discovered that it was an electric guitar; he decided to learn how to play guitar at that point. He had always wanted to play guitar but was afraid of his family’s
reaction, as they believe that music is *haram*. For a year, Flash kept the guitar at Blue’s house, who lived in the same neighborhood. He would use YouTube to learn the techniques, try and memorize them and then go to Blue’s house to practice. He says that progress was slow because he couldn’t practice whenever he wanted to; “it was frustrating at first, but I loved it so much that I didn’t think of quitting” (June 30, 2018). His progress began to improve shortly thereafter:

At some point, my parents traveled. The house was empty. So I thought, maybe it's time. So I did that, I took it home, I had a blast. For the first time, I could play guitar in my bedroom. So I practiced until they came back, and then I kept hiding it under my bed. And I would only play [my electric guitar] without an amplifier so for the next year I didn't play with an amplifier; I didn't want them to hear me playing the guitar. I would only play when it's late at night, or when they're out or when they're sleeping. My progress started to pick up a little.

Flash was able to join a music club after graduating from high school and joined the Australian College in Kuwait\(^{23}\). He described his experience playing at ACK, where he still performs at their concerts that are open to the public, as enjoyable. Since then, he has played at Al Shaheed Park (an Amiri Diwan project), some of the local start-up cafes that were funded by the SME, and private universities.

Flash’s experience sheds light on various kinds of censorship that appear self-imposed, but are actually what El Saadawi describes as a “gray space”, or “. . . spaces where the lines of transgression are muddled and the discourses are rendered mutable…. [There is] a complex fabric of actors beyond the state apparatus [which endorses and accepts, or

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\(^{23}\) The Australian College in Kuwait is a private university.
scrutinizes and rejects]” (2018, p. 31). In other words, Flash did not hide his guitar because he could be legally persecuted for possessing one, nor would he have hidden it if it were entirely his choice. He hid it out of a feeling of familial and religious pressure that perceived guitars in particular to be sinful. He hesitates to participate in performances that have larger crowds than he’s used to – an average of two hundred people, often from the same social circle – because he might risk being exposed to his extended family. While Flash playing heavy metal music does not necessarily achieve the attempt to “[resist] or [transcend] oppressive governments or societies” (2009, p. 4) as Levine described, it does afford him and others what Johannes Fabian describes as “moments of freedom.” Freedom, as he describes, “cannot be anything but contestatory and discontinuous or precarious. Freedom, in dialectical terms, comes in moments” (Fabian 1998, p. 21). In essence, what examiners of cultural production should pay attention to are “moments that [provide] insight rather than cases [that are] systematically collected” (Fabian 1998, p. 21). Drawing on this theory enables us to recognize that an instance of a young man picking up a guitar, or a young woman dancing, or any other form of creative expression does not equal ultimate and irreversible liberation from oppression, but offers the oppressed individual a means of momentary freedom and of communicating his or her frustration or grief. For example, when LeVine interviewed Moroccan metal scene founder Reda Zine about why he plays heavy metal and wanted to introduce it to Morocco, he responds, “We play heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal” (LeVine 2009, p. 14); Levine explains that the “harshness, angry tone, and lyrical content – are enmeshed with the quality of life in contemporary Muslim societies” (LeVine 2009, p. 14) particularly in regards to corruption, governmental oppression, limited economic development, and societal intolerance that makes it difficult for young people to be optimistic about their futures (LeVine 2009, p. 15).
The role of the family extends beyond musicians trying to make forbidden music. Families also have a role in dictating what forms of cultural production – and even ideas – their sons and daughters may and may not engage and identify with. Jasmine, a young Kuwaiti woman who I spoke to, said that she identified as a feminist, but “knew better than to say so in front of my family anymore” (interview on July 9, 2018). She discovered the works of Nawal El Saadawi when she was still in high school, and came home one day to discover that her older brother had found the El Saadawi books in her bedroom and lost his temper. “He asked me if I was an atheist and a lesbian like her, if I knew how reading ‘garbage’ like her would corrupt my mind and my morals” (interview on July 9, 2018). He confiscated the books and then went through the rest of her library, confiscating other books that had feminist themes or questioned God or religion. The paternal rhetoric of Jasmine’s brother is not all that different from that of the state, which claims to be preserving and upholding a moral order by preventing access to books and other material it deems to be a potential source of moral corruption. The arm of censorship goes beyond the state, and influences whole communities so deeply that family members begin to censor one another and take on the role of the authoritarian state within the walls of the household itself.
Who is Allowed to Participate?

Whereas individuals like Flash and Jasmine may lean more towards the nonreligious or secular attitudes of the creative community and hesitate in openly and completely immersing themselves due to the described social and familial restraints, others from outside the “creative community” have expressed feeling rejected and unwelcome based on presumptions held by the creative community itself. The question of inclusion and exclusion is an important one, and we cannot presume that these spaces are necessarily producing open, inclusive social interactions. While cultural spaces can challenge many of the existing status quos that they consider to be problematic or counterproductive, many are also engaged in reproducing or producing their own problematic status quo. By welcoming some and not all Kuwaitis, these mediators of cultural spaces, ironically reproduce the problem that many had with larger society to begin with.

Some of the methods of filtering out social groups start with social media that then determines accessibility and turnout. For example, casual art and dance events take place at one of the private sector art spaces in Salmiya. Often, these are not announced on social media, but are rather circulated via WhatsApp among particular social networks of people. While there are no tickets sold and no RSVP required, this method of advertisement assures that a specific group of people will attend, and more importantly, a larger group of people will not. WhatsApp in this particular context keeps these announcements and events semi-private, which a public post on the venue’s Instagram account for example would mean that it is open to all. I asked one Kuwaiti woman, Mona, who is a regular dancer and performer at these kinds of events, why the organizers choose to adopt this method that evidently excludes particular people from attending. She explained,

Because if we do allow them to attend, they’ll ruin the event for us. They’re
closed minded, they won’t like seeing women dancing in tight clothing, and they won’t like seeing men and women dancing together, and we also have a lot of people from the LGBT community who they will be hostile to” (Interview, June 2018).

In the course of my research, I found evidence that suggests refusal to accept one another’s presence and lifestyle from both ends – the more conservative factions of Kuwaiti society and the liberal-identifying groups. An incident occurred in March 2018 that was mentioned to me by several individuals in the music scene during my interviews. At one of the new SME-funded local restaurants, a pizza place called Barba, a Kuwaiti band held a mini concert that attracted many of their friends and started a domino chain effect that then attracted a much larger crowd. The concert took place at the restaurant itself, so people were eating pizza and the band was playing. At some point, everyone got excited, got up and started dancing together. Someone took a video on his Snapchat, and one way or another, the video ended up going viral on Kuwaiti social media in the following days. The backlash and critique at the sight of young Kuwaiti men and women dancing together to rock music was very strong. The restaurant even lost the right to hold musical events from that point on, by MOI orders; they could only serve food after that. Mona’s earlier statement on the ‘other’ group’s likelihood of being unhappy or judgmental at the kinds of events that her own crowd organizes and participates in may not be very far from the truth, and it can and does at times reach a point that transgresses on their own right to joy.

Social media, of course, has certainly put a lot of people’s behavior under scrutiny and a public spotlight of sorts on even average individuals who are not necessarily famous or celebrities. It has also eliminated any real concept of ‘private’ acts or events, so long are they are taking place in public spaces. As a result of this, more conservative groups feel upset at
what some of the ‘liberal’ creative groups are engaging in, particularly if it involves dancing or music. Literature and poetry come off as more socially acceptable, but dancing and music are more controversial and elicit stronger reactions when they do go viral on social media. Thus, while conservative groups complain that liberal groups are unwelcoming of them in their own creative spaces, liberal groups in turn complain that conservative groups will object to the nature of their creative activities and will impede them rather than partake in them (Al Jassim).

Language Politics

Another basis on which marginalization takes place within creative spaces is language (use of English or use of Arabic). A disparity between the survey responses that I received in English and the ones that I received in Arabic was glaringly obvious and must be addressed within the context of internal contestation within the creative spaces themselves.

Out of a total of 1384 responses, 1209 of the received responses were in Arabic. While I initially intended to combine them and had created and distributed both English and Arabic surveys for the sake of inclusion and accessibility, the discrepancy between the responses made me reassess and I decided to instead address what these differences could mean. Many of the respondents made references to the ‘other’ English/Arabic group; the Arabic comments said that there were too many English events that did not cater to the needs and preferences of the majority, while the English comments said that the Arabic events were unwelcoming of their appearance/choice of dress. Ironically, both the English and Arabic comments said that they would feel judged by the other group if they did venture out and participate in an event that took place in the language that was not their usually spoken language.
Appearance seemed to be another recurring factor that would elicit sentiments of being discriminated against or feeling unwelcome. One of the survey responses described, “Because I wear an abaya and a hijab everywhere, people [at English-speaking events] assume that I am conservative and religious, and that I think everyone has to agree with me. People at these events are not typically religious, and they would be surprised that we have more in common than they think” (May 31, 2018, SurveyMonkey.com). Another said, “I dress modestly and people make assumptions about my level of openness, education and my fluency in [English] language” (May 31, 2018, SurveyMonkey.com).

A total of 58 percent of respondents answered that they were better versed in Arabic, with 46 percent responding that they are bilingual. The majority of the Arabic respondents said that they went to public schools, while the majority of English respondents said that they went to private Western schools. Recently, many cultural events are adopting English-only conversations, with no translation option available; there is no clear number on how many are doing this, but it was a recurring comment in my survey responses, indicating that it is widespread enough to be noticeable, but likely not widespread enough to constitute a majority. While this has been appealing for groups who prefer to speak English and are usually graduates of said private Western schools, generally these events have been met with criticism from the larger society that prefers to speak in Arabic. One English-language respondent commented that “public events feel like they are catered to Arabic audiences only”, and therefore it is possible that the purpose may have been to create an equivalent for the English-speaking groups. Several of the respondents held the perception that English events still do not dominate the cultural scene, but their presence has been significant enough to initiate online debate on the use of English or Arabic in cultural events (May 31, 2018, SurveyMonkey.com).
Abdulrahman Al Subaie, a twenty-five-year-old sociology student at Kuwait University and founder of a book club called *Al Fikr Al Arabi*, raised this issue with me. He said that English-speaking cultural activities imply that there is a small, niche group of people who are only interacting within their own group and are “distant from real society” (August 2018). He believes that such activities are for the sake of entertainment, not change, because they are not targeting the majority of society, who does not speak English (August 2018). The limitation of such a statement here is, of course, the question of who determines what “real society” is, and on what grounds English speakers are dismissed as part of “real society”.

The increase in English language events could in part be attributed to globalization at large, the proliferation of social media and increased access to English popular media. The precise motivation behind the spread of English language events remains unclear, although proportionally speaking Arabic events continue to dominate the cultural scene. If we are to equate English with ‘global influence’ and Arabic with the identity of ‘local agents’, one would find that initiatives such as Al Subaie’s, Takween bookstore, and many other influential Arabic-speaking platforms serve as demonstrations of local agents and platforms not being passive recipients of global influence, but are “actively engaged in shaping and modifying them” (Elsheshtawy 2008, p. 969), pushing back against elements that they perceive to be problematic to the local narrative and identity, and drawing from tools and concepts that can be utilized in order to further local narratives.

The use of English as a spoken language in daily conversation is growing more prevalent amongst young Kuwaitis. English in Kuwait is now becoming the “most prestigious language, not only for educated people but also for those who show a poor command of the language….in media, technology, and business” (Dashti 2015 p. 30). Entrepreneurs are giving their businesses English names, and TV shows that are primarily done in Arabic have
English names with sprinkles of English words during the conversation. The proliferation of technology is a key factor that has contributed to this widening spread and normalization of the presence of English in Kuwaitis’ daily lives, given the fact that Kuwait is a wealthy state and “the majority of Kuwaitis from the new generation, if not all, own a PC, and an iPad and iPhone” (Dashti 2015, p. 31). Dashti claims that, “Kuwaitis perceive people who extensively use English in their everyday conversation as highly educated and socially more respected” (Dashti 2015, p. 31). However, I believe that Al Subaie’s thoughts and opinions push back on this claim. When one consciously chooses to speak in the language that he knows is not the choice of the majority, he is not attempting to appeal to the general public, and therefore it is open to questioning whether Kuwaitis do perceive English-speaking Kuwaitis as “highly educated and socially more respected”, or, as Al Subaie had described, whether they come off as elitists who choose to stay in their own social circles.

There are more critiques of the use of the English language by Kuwaitis than there are appraisals. Azza el Hassan, upon first beginning to immerse herself in cultural events, found that within the circle she was engaging with, the Kuwaitis she was meeting spoke English with her and with one another. She said:

There’s a sense of snootiness…it’s already a luxury to have the opportunity to be able to sit down and think of an artistic project that talks about your angst, as a person…to be able to afford the time to think, and then create. When English is your means of communication, and communicating your work and your thoughts, that narrows down your pool even more” (interview on August 6, 2018).

She did not find that they spoke weak Arabic – the “gossip would always take place in Arabic” – but despite being bilingual, they would still choose to speak in English and had
what she felt was a sense of “intellectual superiority and entitlement” (interview on August 6, 2018). This therefore suggests that the use of English is not necessarily a choice as a result of not having a strong command of Arabic, but is often a conscious choice to give off a specific impression of class, intellect, and lifestyle.

Marginalization within creative spaces is taking place on the basis of both language as well as appearance. The disparity between the English and Arabic survey responses I received alludes to the existence of non-state factors that are part of the creative community’s ongoing contestations and internal to this community. Appearance, choice of dress and spoken language are associated with a set of beliefs, a lifestyle, level of education or ‘intellect’. Attitudes toward people are determined on that basis. This leads to feelings of being discriminated against, judged and unwelcome, thereby aggravating social segregation and preventing possibilities of breaking barriers among different groups. Technology, globalization, and a sense of prestige are all possible factors that could explain the increase of English-speaking cultural events. However, while there is certainly more criticism than praise over the use of English, it is important to also push back on the claim that these are groups or events that are unrepresentative of or detached from “real society”. Despite being a smaller portion of Kuwaitis, this is still a group of people that is present, and has an equal right to participation. Simultaneously, insisting on upholding stereotypical beliefs on one another will continue to pose more barriers rather than building bridges of understanding and possible cooperation.

The ‘McChickens’ vs the ‘Typical Kuwaitis’: Language, Identity and Dress

For Arabic-speaking groups of Kuwaitis, English-speaking events appear elitist, arrogant, and isolated from broader society. For one Kuwaiti who I spoke to that prefers
English, she associates the English language with “knowledge, enlightenment, and education” and was “surprised to learn about Takween bookstore; [I] didn’t know that there could be intellectual events and conversations that would take place in Arabic” (June 2018 conversation), a statement that is telling of the described elitist attitudes that many English-speaking Kuwaitis have towards Arabic. While perceptions of English-speaking Kuwaitis, locally dubbed ‘McChickens’, being elitist is a prevalent perception among non-English-speaking Kuwaitis, it’s worth examining the correlation between preferred spoken language and positionality in Kuwaiti society.

The term ‘McChickens’ emerged in the early 2000s, and was used to refer to teenaged Kuwaitis who studied in private American or British schools and often chose to speak English even when they were not required to. They usually spoke and wrote weak Arabic, if any. Derived from the McDonald’s meal, it is a reference to American imperialism influencing Kuwaiti identity, particularly the post-Gulf War generation. Younger Kuwaitis who were in middle and elementary schools and fell into the same category were called ‘chicken nuggets’, i.e. a miniature, younger version of the McChickens. The term was used in a derogatory manner to describe what was, and perhaps continues to be, a distinct and often privileged demographic that comes off as linguistically, socially, and culturally distant from larger Kuwaiti society. McChickens might smoke, dress in a less conservative manner, go out with mixed gender groups, etc. For the larger Kuwaiti society, they are considered too Westernized. In reaction, the ‘McChickens’ coined the term ‘TK’ to describe the other demographic group – the Kuwaitis from public schools who labeled them McChickens in the first place. ‘TK’ was an abbreviation for ‘Typical Kuwaiti’, someone who thinks and acts in a traditional manner, has studied in a public school, speaks fluent Arabic but rarely any English, is usually from a wealthy Kuwaiti family who values their culture and tradition and
has no visible ‘Westernized’ traits. The quality of public schools in Kuwait varies depending on which neighborhood a Kuwaiti lives in; therefore those who live in affluent neighborhoods have access to good quality public schooling and do not need to resort to private education. Both groups are economically comfortable, but it is likely that the McChickens are wealthier than the TKs.

I had a conversation with Yasmine, who was labeled a ‘McChicken’ when she was in an American high school in 2004. She emphasized that ‘TK’ was always used in a negative context. The group she came from perceived ‘TKs’ to be “closed minded, judgmental, racist, and sexist” (September 8, 2018). By the time she got to university, where the private school and the public school kids were merged for the first time at Kuwait University, the term was used to be able to differentiate and filter out potential marriage partners. Before getting married to her now ex-husband, she remembers sharing her hesitance with her friends and saying, “but he’s a TK” (September 8, 2018). Later, during the tense periods before their divorce, he would call her a McChicken.

While these terms today are only used by that generation, specifically Kuwaitis born in the 1980s, the concept itself which ties preferred use of language to a set of beliefs, values, and behaviors still exists. In essence, the spoken language of an individual is tied with a perceived identity. It breeds a sense of resentment from both groups, who insist that the other is marginalizing and excluding them from each other’s respective cultural activities on the basis of language, and a sense that the language that they use – and in turn, their style of life – is superior. There has been some demonstrated efforts from both groups to attempt to be inclusive of both languages by providing translation headsets, but this has yet to spread widely and the sentiment of marginalization based on use of language persists.
Chapter Two: Conclusion

The re-emergence of creative cultural spaces in Kuwait has taken on an interesting form. With the presence of social media, the availability of funds through the SME, and creative producers’ newfound roles as advocates and even lobbyists at times, these are spaces that pose significant opportunity for growth, interaction, and questioning. The purpose of this chapter was to interrogate the idealistic image of these spaces as inclusive and welcoming, and to recognize that like the state itself, these spaces are also engaging in their own discriminatory and exclusionary practices. Simultaneously, they can be safe spaces for many people – providing a medium for expatriates and citizens to interact with one another in a friendly manner, distant from the xenophobic rhetoric and behavior that was dominating the National Assembly, the press, and other aspects of daily life.

While recognizing that these spaces have been a positive addition to many people’s lives, it is also important to be conscious of the different factors that lead to the exclusion of others, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Some of those who I interviewed had to tiptoe around their own family’s restrictions whilst trying to strike a balance with their own creative passions and family expectations. They ended up living a form of self-censorship, a double life of sorts where caution would dictate their actions. Language choice and appearance are two important factors upon that shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Because they are associated with a specific socioeconomic class, an assumed set of beliefs and a lifestyle, individuals may be welcomed or rejected based upon these factors. These counterproductive attitudes replicate the same discriminatory policies that these groups claim to oppose, and limit possibilities for meaningful interaction, cooperation, and breaking barriers. This is something for cultural producers to consider in the future.
Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine creative cultural spaces as sites of contestation, and illustrate the sociopolitical impacts and narratives that have emerged as a result of an expanding creative cultural scene in reaction to the shrinking of political spaces and liberties in Kuwait post-2012. With young people in Kuwait losing faith in political reform and growing disenchanted with the country’s political institutions at large, the country witnessed a migration of intellect and energy from political spaces into creative spaces.

Interestingly, as I have demonstrated, many choose to identify as apolitical, despite the obvious reactions to political realities that their cultural productions are based on. This choice to identify as apolitical, in and of itself, further affirms the disenchantment with the political realities, voices, rhetoric and figures around them. In other cases, it can be indicative of a feeling of intimidation and knowing what happened to others who did choose to take on explicitly political activities. In the case of Kuwaiti citizens, protests were quelled with violence, citizenships were revoked, and many served prison sentences because of Tweets. In light of a compliant National Assembly, Members of Parliament aided in passing legislations that restricted freedom of speech, rather than defending those rights. In the case of the Bedoon community, security flags imposed on collective families as a result of one individual’s political activity or participation in a protest meant they would be left without a source of income, and in some cases would not be allowed to renew their own identification documents. In the case of the expatriate community, despite carrying with them the concerns of their own countries that witnessed revolutions, publicly expressing political opinions or showing political solidarity with their people was too risky and meant possible deportation. For all communities in Kuwait, politics either failed to protect their rights, or grew too ugly for them to choose to continue to engage with. We do, however, see various forms of
advocacy and mobilization that are not taking place on the streets or explicitly calling for a change in figures of authority. This mobilization is not necessarily contentious as was the case with Karamat Watan or the Taimaa protests. It “[expresses] cooperative community engagement whereby people work together to improve their lives and communities with a degree of control over their decisions and their outcome” (Bayat 2009, p. 73). There is first a recognition that there is some sort of public concern, and individuals band together to forge an event or activity that sheds light on this issue through the creative platforms they have established and through the creative tools they have a strong command over.

Between 2013-2016, a plethora of grassroots, non-governmental creative initiatives swept Kuwait, effectively replacing what political spaces in the past used to offer young Kuwaitis: a place to debate, exchange ideas, challenge and contest realities and narratives, network with one another, and interact with groups whom they would not have had the chance to interact with otherwise. In the past, political spaces existed through officially licensed civil society organizations, legal political blocs, election campaigns, or parliamentary committees. In the contemporary context, political spaces include bookstores, art galleries, theatres and dance studios. During those years, the state’s heavy hand in censorship impeded their activities. Thousands of books were censored on vague, ambiguous grounds that contradicted with the principles of the Kuwaiti constitution, as evidence by the Kuwaiti courts overturning the Ministry of Information’s decisions to ban numerous books and ruling in favor of intellectual freedom and the freedom to publish. The creative community utilized several tools and spaces to shed light on this pressing violation of intellectual freedom, including taking to Twitter, challenging decisions in courts, and setting up an art installation at the annual Kuwait book fair.

The creative community evolved from being a seemingly apolitical force, to a semi-
civil society force that pushes back against state policy and questions both the executive and the legislative branches. They challenged decisions of censorship in court, lobbied Members of Parliament, and presented speeches calling on MPs to pass legislations protecting the freedoms of creative individuals. In the creative spaces themselves, they especially highlighted the plight of the Bedoon community, by creating literature that depicted their struggles, staging a silent demonstration at the NCCAL book fair, reflecting the plight of the Bedoon community through a TV series (Saq Al Bamboo), and organizing charity reading marathons where the donations would be allocated towards the tuition fees of children who needed financial assistance.

While the creative community seems to collectively agree there is an ongoing censorship problem, there is internal disagreement over the source of the issue, or who to pin the blame on. As I illustrated, there is a perception that the arts and culture have become a proxy issue between conservative MPs and the Ministry of Information. There is another perception which solely holds conservative MPs and Islamist groups accountable for what they consider an objection to acts of joy; this perception often has full faith in the fairness of the state, and believes that if the arts and culture sector were allowed to function independently from the Ministry of Information, it could reach its full potential. Others still place blame on the state itself, and believe that it has the upper hand in matters of censorship.

In the second chapter I demonstrated non-state challenges to participating in the creative scene; family and perceived religious values have been shown to pose an obstacle to creative individuals. The aforementioned factors are non-state-imposed, and fall into more of a “gray area” as Demerdash describes it. I also examined vectors of inclusion, namely nationality and language. In the case of nationality, I discussed interactions between citizens and non-citizens and how creative communities have offered safe spaces for these groups to
interact with one another and establish friendships in manners they would not have been able to outside of these spaces. In the case of language, I examined language and its perceived connection with class and identity, namely through the ‘McChicken’ and ‘TK’ groups which have shown evidence of being unwelcoming of one another in their own respective cultural spaces.

Looking forward, continuing to observe creative spaces across the Middle East, and not just in Kuwait, will prove to be valuable in understanding the contentions within that particular country or community’s politics and changing societal values. Perhaps more importantly, studying creative spaces and the correlation between their expansion and political regression in the Middle East, and how the nature and content of creative work responds to political changes. In the case of Kuwait, it will be worth observing the evolving role of the creative community and the impact they will be able to exert on policy through advocacy and lobbying as well as societal values through the different channels of challenging existing beliefs that they currently challenge them through, including books, TV shows, literary discussions, theatre performances, and other creative mediums. A continuing struggle against censorship and other forms of silencing is to be expected, although, from my knowledge of the individuals involved in these activities, they will not go down without a fight.
Appendix: Survey Questions

1. How old are you?
   * 18-24
   * 25-29
   * 30+

2. Which gender do you identify as?
   Female
  Male

3. What is your nationality?
   Kuwaiti
   Non-Kuwaiti (Arab)
   Non-Kuwaiti (non-Arab)
   Stateless

4. Which language are you better versed at?
   English
   Arabic
   Fluent in both

5. Which governorate do you live in?
   Al Asimah
   Hawalli
   Farwaniya
   Mubarak Al Kabeer
   Ahmadi
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

(Drop-Down):

High school
Two-year diploma
Bachelors degree
MA/PhD
Did not finish school

7. What kind of schooling did you have?

Public
Private (Western: American, British, French, Canadian)
Private (non-Western: Arabic, Indian, etc)

8. Which sector do you work in?

Public
Private
Unemployed
Freelancer
Student

9. What is your monthly income?

Less than 500 KWD
500-1000 KWD
1000-1500 KWD
1500-2000 KWD
2000+ KWD
10. How often would you say you participate in or attend cultural activities in Kuwait? (Art, theatre, concerts, lectures)

1-2 times a week
2-4 times a month
Once every few months
Never
Other (please specify)

11. How do you like to spend your free time? Please check all that apply. With family or friends in a home setting

At malls/shopping
Sports
Doing/engaging with something creative
Community work
Other (please specify)

12. How many times have you been to a museum in the past six months?

1-2 times
3 or more
Never

13. How many times have you been to an art gallery in the past six months?

1-2 times
3 or more
Never

14. How many times have you been to a play in the past six months?

1-2 times
3 or more
Never

15. How many times have you been to a lecture in the past six months?
1-2 times
3 or more
Never

16. What factors determine your decision to attend or not attend? Please check all that apply.
Location
Mobility (I do not have a car/license)
Prices of tickets
Type of event (musical, theatre performance, etc)
Reputation of place or persons organizing the event
Expectations of dress
Friends or family to accompany me
Language of event
Other (please specify)

17. Do you feel that local artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers are supported by the government in Kuwait?
Yes
No
What forms of support do you think are necessary? What obstacles have you heard of creative individuals or groups facing, if any?

18. Do you feel welcome when you attend cultural events?
Yes
No

Please explain why you feel unwelcome, if you selected 'No'.

19. What kinds of exclusion, if any, do you think are taking place? Please check all that apply

Language-based
Class-based
Nationality-based
Gender-based
Ideology-based

I do not feel there is any exclusion in the cultural events

Please mention any experiences you have had or witnessed that you feel excluded others from these events.

20. Do you feel that there has been an increase in options when it comes to cultural events in the past six years?

Yes
No, it's the same
No, there is a decrease
I don't know

Please elaborate with examples if applicable

21. Why do you think this expansion is taking place, if you do think it is?

(Sentence response)

22. How would you describe your ability to express yourself in Kuwait?

I feel that I am able to express myself freely.

I feel that I am able to express myself comfortably but with some limits.
I do not feel that I am able to express myself comfortably.

23. What factors go into limitations of self-expression in Kuwait? Please rank them in order of influence (1 being most influential, 5 being lowest)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Laws</th>
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<tr>
<td>The constitution</td>
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<td>Social norms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious values</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family expectations/reputation</td>
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</tbody>
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24. Has your ability to express your opinion changed after 2012?

Yes

No

I have not noticed

25. Out of all the cultural experiences you've had in Kuwait, which one was your favourite and why? Please specify the name of the event, the organizer and the year if you remember it.
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