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Supervisor: Dr. Ruth Barton  
Project: 'Mothers of Nationality'

I've been hoping to do this Laidlaw project since the Summer of 2019, when a friend first told me about the programme. From October 2019, when I first started my preliminary research into a viable topic, to October 2020, having just finished my first Summer of research, there are certainly countless things that have changed, but the Laidlaw Programme has remained a lighthouse even in the most tumultuous of times.

I was so fortunate to have a supervisor as enthusiastic and supportive as Dr. Ruth Barton. From the outset, she has given me endless encouragement and met all my questions and needs. We arranged a Zoom meeting the first day of my six week research period, where she introduced me to some of the key aspects and concepts of long-form research, and the research cycle itself. We also discussed what I aimed to take from this research period; though my project investigates home concepts in Lebanese cinema, I also wanted to examine Labaki's role in creating these narratives and how they respond to a broader conversation around trauma and socio-political representations on Middle Eastern screens. However, from my conversation with Dr. Barton, we concluded that it would be best if I spent Summer 1 focused on the 'reading' of the films and approaching my study critically. This was due to the access of materials online, and also due to the fact that my secondary research-- about how Labaki herself conveys such issues and themes-- would be better served if I had a strong basis and understanding of these specific themes and issues. Dr. Barton and I created a rough timeline by which I'd update her and send her drafts etc., and though it seemed almost rigidly formal, in COVID-19 times when so much was up in the air, admittedly it was nice to have a set structure to follow. Throughout the six weeks we regularly virtually met up to discuss my progress and Dr. Barton challenged me to consider my project from a multitude of angles.

The idea of examining how Labaki herself responds to current events and then channels them through her films-- all while needing to balance funding and distribution-- was not an aspect I had initially put much thought into; until I met with Dr. Estrella Fernandez, a lecturer at SOAS (the university I hope to go to for Summer 2) and she spoke about her own research on Labaki, and the need for self-censorship in Lebanese cinema. This opened my eyes to a whole other aspect of my research that, in blindness, I hadn't realised. Though I didn't focus too much on it this Summer, I did write an editorial piece for the Trinity Film Review and will further my examination of it for Summer 2.

Though not always easy, I was surprised at how genuinely enjoyable I found my research to be. Previously, the longest I'd researched and worked on an essay was around two weeks (and even then felt like a lifetime!) and initially I was worried about how I'd fare with six weeks. Not only that, but to do so quarantined in my family home with my parents both working from home and our wife working three times as hard as it normally had to. However, a combination of great access to materials (courtesy of the film department and the Laidlaw grant) and genuine passion for my area of research meant that at times it felt no different to being in the BLU library. There were times, however, when it wasn't easy: collating my research into a written essay was daunting, but thanks to

Dr. Barton's help, by the end of my six week period I produced something I was definitely proud of-- though it was certainly a labour of love. I also found that at times, the research process could be very lonely. Being within the arts, with no need for Lab time etc., most of my research took place within my bedroom. Obviously this year was especially isolated, but it did highlight to me how much I valued speaking to other scholars about their experience, if only to feel a little less alone in my endeavours. Further, this showed me that while I'm good at managing teams of people and working *together* to a common goal, managing myself is an almost Herculean effort. I went between being either too hard on myself or too easy-- there were many days when my head swam with information and I had to call it a day at 2pm; there were others I worked well past 6pm. One of the most important things I learned during this Summer was self-regulation, and to a degree, self-compassion.

There was also the issue of the video essay. Video essays are becoming an increasingly popular means of translating academic debate and writing into the audiovisual form itself to further exemplify a thesis. I wanted to create a short video essay collating my research largely because during the six weeks I had focused so heavily on theme and narrative, and not the equally strong force of Labaki's visual storytelling. I also wanted to challenge myself to adapt to this form of 'writing' and to break out of conventional modes of academic essay. I focused my essay on an aspect of Labaki's films I had noticed, but had not included in my final essay due to its not being entirely relevant to home concepts. I noticed that Labaki places a huge amount of power in 'looking' and the oppositional gaze as a way for her characters-- largely those without power-- to reclaim the power that has been taken away from them by the very ones they 'look' at. I also wanted to further challenge myself to make this essay without using voiceover. Though it's not perfect, I'm proud of how I challenged myself and rose to the occasion.

The Leadership development sessions have been so valuable, as they have truly pushed me outside of my comfort zone. I, like my peers, find speaking over Zoom more anxiety inducing than in person-- for a myriad of reasons; worries my mic won't work, my dog barking, my sister will walk in etc etc. These sessions have taught me not only to be confident in my thoughts and opinions, but also to embrace every opportunity I get to share them. And though they don't always go off without a hitch, these moments of human error can actually sometimes help us feel more connected. I think this was most pertinent in our Lir workshop on communication, which was certainly not like anything I'd ever experienced before, but I found that the more I put in, the more I got out, and so a large part of my personal leadership journey was pushing myself to do these things, and do them 100%. However, I have noticed that my leadership style-- which values collaboration and communication-- does not always work well with others, who might prize results and action first and foremost. In the future, I need to work on learning to resolve the conflicts that arise when these two approaches clash, and work towards a viable compromise instead of settling for one approach over the other.

The Laidlaw Programme has really pushed me to consider not only the extent of my leadership qualities, but also how I can harness these qualities to give back to my academic and wider cinematic community, which lead me to my proudest achievement to date: setting up The Cinemagraph. Going into this project, I wanted to promote not just Lebanese cinema that often goes under the radar, but during my research I realised how privileged I was to have access to debates and material that deepens both my understanding and enjoyment of the films I watch. I felt that it was unfair that so many important conversations about the medium were taking place behind paywalls and locked

doors. Further, I found it frustrating that for many online film publications more focused on the essay and article rather than criticism, they were often closed off or had so many caveats just to pitch an article that climbing Mount Everest would seem easier in comparison. So, creating The Cinemagraph was two fold: I wanted people from a non-academic sphere to be able to engage and read about academic debate in a way that was 100% accessible, and I wanted young, emerging film scholars and journalists to have a place to publish their content.

While this Summer did not exactly go the way I had first envisioned, it was still undoubtedly a success. I learned a lot about myself, about the research process and about leadership. Considering that I'm hoping to go into academia, these are incredibly valuable things to have first hand experience so I can genuinely make informed decisions about my future. Not only that, but this Summer, though virtual, has equipped me with so many tools that I never knew I needed, and has allowed me to discover resources I had in myself, that I had previously underestimated. All this has led me to creating things I never knew possible-- from a video essay, to an academic paper to an online publication.