Identity and Formal Experimentation in Arab American Contemporary Fiction

Sabrina Attar, Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Despite the heightened attention towards Arabs in the United States since September 11th, 2001, Arab Americans are significantly absent from the American literary canon. Existing scholarship on Arab American fiction has so often reduced this body of work to ethnic, hyper-politicized depictions or fantastical, genie-in-a-bottle tales, resulting in academic discourse that vastly overlooks the Arab American writer's use of a creative, innovative form. This thesis examines how Arab American writers of the diaspora use an array of formal experiments—from unorthodox chapter structures, to postcolonial reimaginations of modernist aesthetics, to non-chronological narratives—in order to represent the complex intricacies of Arab American identity in the United States. Chapter one focuses on Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001), chapter two examines Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008), and chapter three analyzes Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017). The close-reading of each text reveals how Alameddine, Jarrar, and Alyan recast the complexities of Arab American identity into an experimental form as a way to both mirror and transcend the negatives of self-fragmentation. Although each novel deals with transnationalism, war, loss, and trauma, the analysis of aesthetics in this study highlights the benefits of a provisional, multi-faceted selfhood comprised of varying national, religious, ethnic, and racial categorizations of Arab Americans. Thus, this thesis underscores a new understanding of Arab American identity that exists in and beyond contemporary American literature.

Résumé

Malgré l'attention accrue portée aux Arabes aux États-Unis depuis le 11 septembre 2001, les Arabo-Américains sont largement absents du canon littéraire américain. La recherche existante sur la fiction arabo-américaine a si souvent réduit ce corpus d'œuvres à des représentations ethniques hyper-politisées ou à des contes fantastiques de génies en bouteille, aboutissant à un discours académique qui néglige largement l'utilisation par l'écrivain arabo-américain d'un style créatif et innovant. Cette thèse examine comment les écrivains arabo-américains de la diaspora utilisent un éventail d'expérimentations formelles - des structures de chapitre peu orthodoxes aux réinterprétations postcoloniales de l'esthétique moderniste, en passant par les récits non-chronologiques - afin de représenter les subtilités complexes de l'identité arabo-américaine aux États-Unis. Le premier chapitre se concentre sur I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters (2001) de Rabih Alameddine, le deuxième chapitre examine A Map of Home (2008) de Randa Jarrar et le troisième chapitre analyse Salt Houses (2017) de Hala Alyan. La lecture attentive de chaque texte révèle comment Alameddine, Jarrar et Alyan ont refondu les complexités de l'identité arabo-américaine sous une forme expérimentale comme un moyen à la fois de refléter et de transcender les aspects négatifs de l'auto-fragmentation. Bien que chaque roman traite du transnationalisme, de la guerre, du deuil et des traumatismes, l'analyse de l'esthétique dans cette étude met en évidence les avantages d'une individualité provisoire à multiples facettes composée de différentes catégorisations nationales, religieuses, ethniques et raciales des Arabo-Américains. Ainsi, cette thèse souligne une nouvelle compréhension de l'identité arabo-américaine qui existe dans et au-delà de la littérature américaine contemporaine.

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Introduction:

Form in the Contemporary Arab American Novel

"We are not of the East or the West
No boundaries exist in our breast:
We are free."
— Ameen Rihani (1920)

As an Arab American growing up in the United States post-9/11, I did not realize until university that, in all my years of schooling, I had never been taught or assigned an Arab American novel. Familiar with only Disney's *Aladdin*, the footage of fanatical terrorists replaying on the news, and a dusty copy of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* on my father's bedside table, my child's mind assumed—because of this absence—that there were no Arab authors in America. Or worse, that mixed-Arabs like me did not write literature worth reading. Of course, this is not accurate, but it reveals a striking absence of scholarship, academia, and public discourse on Arab American fiction. Scholars are gradually recognizing that the "quantity and quality of creative work produced by Arabs in the US exceeds the work being done by academics" (Knopf-Newman 5). But who are the Arab American writers of the 21st-century and how did they capture their own complicated and nuanced identity? This thesis seeks to join this conversation and contribute to a field of much-needed scholarship on Arab American writers in American literature.

Despite the heightened attention towards Arabs in the United States since September 11th, 2001, Arab Americans are significantly absent from the American literary canon. A search for the term "Arab American" on the MLA International Bibliography only returns 455 results, as compared to 27,579 results for "African American" and 11,847 results for "Asian American."

Additionally, before 9/11, not a single Arab American author was shortlisted for either the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award (Manshel). Data from scholar Alexander Manshel's forthcoming book *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* reveals that, even after 9/11, Arab American writers still account for less than 1% of shortlisted writers of these awards with no winners from 1950-2019 (Manshel). Critics, however, have not been silent about this blatant oversight from the canon. A 2006 *MELUS* special issue devoted to Arab American literature arose as a revival attempt in the wake of 9/11, as a call to notice the nonexistence of Arabs in a large majority of literary criticism, and a chance for writers to release their "long-fettered tongues" (Al Maleh 22). In this *MELUS* issue, scholars Salah Hassan and Marcy Knopf-Newman called out the "disabling disconnect between the political determination of Arabs in the US, their cultural production, and the academic study of Arab Americans" (5).

Further, this absence can be traced back historically to Arab immigrants' inclination to assimilate in the United States, wanting to avoid being labeled by their Arab (Lebanese/Syrian) identities or the "hardships they and their families must have suffered" (Al Maleh 427). Though, this absence is a paradox: as described by scholar Gregory Orfalea, "The Arabs are connectors of people, bridges, but they are also great hiders, vanishers" (3). Likewise scholar Mazen Naous equally explains in his book *Poetics of Visibility in the Contemporary Arab American Novel* (2020) that "Arab Americans' sense of social or cultural invisibility prior to 9/11" is in part due to "their ability to blend in or hide in plain sight" (2). How can a field of writers be both a bridge, a liaison between the Arab world and the West, and also invisible, absent and mostly unnoticed in American literary discourse? While seminal scholarship, such as Lisa Suhair Majaj's 1999 "New Directions: Arab American Writing Today," documents the proliferation of Arab

American literature after Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa's 1988 *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (126), the MLA International Bibliography results for "Arab American" clearly point to an immense lack of peer-reviewed scholarship in comparison to the other ethnic-American terms searched. I seek to examine Orfalea's and Naous's claims, and to contribute to the scholarly discussion of Arab Americans in American literary expression.

The use of literary form by Arab American writers to craft multi-layered subjectivities has over the last two decades enjoyed increasing attention from scholars. To highlight this continuing desire for more attention on form, I look again to Majaj's 1999 and then revised 2006 "New Directions" essay and her acknowledgement in the more recent edition—7 years after the original—that many areas of scholarship on Arab American writing are still lacking. She calls for both a need of "new cultural forms and genres" and for critics to "turn more consciously to literary experimentation" in Arab American writing (133). Particularly in the last five years, the field has seen an increase in scholarship on form in the Arab American novel. Theri Pickens has edited a collection of essays for her 2018 book *Arab American Aesthetics: Literature, Material Culture, Film, and Theatre* in which she "opens up the discussion about how aesthetic and artistic choices shape Arab American art" (2). Her research notes that many conversations thus far in the criticism within Arab American studies has neglected "aesthetics as a set of choices and constraints" and has rather "fixated on the political ramifications" and not the creative process itself (2). Leila Moayeri Pazargadi's essay and argument on aesthetics from chapter three of Pickens' book is engaged at length in chapter one of this thesis. Even more recently, Mazen Naous's 2020 book stakes the claim that the "classification and critical reception" of Arab American writing overdetermines the sociopolitical aspects of the novels while this classification as such "deemphasize the works' artistic significance" (3). He delves into various Arab

American novels' aesthetics of vignettes and signs, music as motif, and intertexts—to name a few—in relation to the visibility of Arab Americans.

Following the discussion of aesthetics backwards in the last ten years, we encounter Samina Najmi's chapter "Narrating War: Arab and Muslim American Aesthetics" (2015) that explores Arab American literature with a "shared aesthetic" of "smallness and connectivity" (519). Even as far back as the early 2000s, Sally Howell's 2000 article "Cultural Interventions: Arab American Aesthetics between the Transnational and the Ethnic" documents her difficulty in navigating the politics and aesthetics of the Arab community in Dearborn, Michigan when she worked for ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services). Additionally, another prominent scholar, Steven Salaita, dedicated a large part of his scholarship to conducting a comparative study between Arab American and Anishinaabe fiction, seen in *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (2015), in which he explores literary aesthetics employed by various writers. While this thesis cannot offer a comprehensive survey of scholarship on aesthetics in Arab American fiction, it is nevertheless informed by these seminal examples. What is most noteworthy about the criticism from these selected scholars, when viewed together holistically, is the repeating sentiment of a need and pursuit to discuss form. The scholars discussed here are flagging—similar to Majaj's call for attention in her 2006 revised essay—not a total oversight but a significant lack of criticism in the field of Arab American literary studies regarding aesthetics. Naous puts it succinctly: "The necessity of repeatedly reminding critics, writers, and readers that Arab American literature is a form of art that has or should have aesthetic integrity is telling" (3). To participate in this ongoing conversation on aesthetics in Arab American fiction, my thesis presents not a new argument but an argument passionate about adding my own voice to the mix and further expanding on this scholarship.

My study examines how Arab American writers of the diaspora use an array of formal experiments—from unorthodox chapter structures, to postcolonial reimaginations of modernist aesthetics, to non-chronological narratives—in order to represent the intricacies of Arab American identity in the United States. So often scholars in decades past have made "attempts to rope off fiction into ethnic pens" resulting in academic discourse devoid of the playful, mystical, calculated craftsmanship of the Arab author's form (Orfalea 119). Pickens echoes Orfalea's confrontation with other critics as well by emphasizing her work's goal is *not* to "rehearse the arguments" of Arab American studies (2). Too many critics assume that Arab writers first set out with politics, ethnographic, or historical teachings in mind when frequently this is not always the case. By conducting another search for key terms within the MLA International Bibliography, I found the top terms associated with "Arab American" from 2000 to 2022 to be 'Palestinian conflict,' 'identity,' 'diaspora,' 'racism,' 'orientalism,' 'immigrant experience' and 'Muslims.'" Simply, academics do not think of 'form' or 'aesthetics' as a top term in the same way they would for a white American or European writer. So, although some critics could argue that many Arab American novels never hyper-focused on or sensationalized the violence or conflict within many of their stories, the top scholarly discussions associated with such writing and fiction say otherwise. The MLA terms—especially "racism," "orientalism," and "conflict"—point to a trend of content related to violence in the peer-reviewed criticism. But in the case of my thesis, I chose to focus away from conversations and novels with violence as the main focus point and selected three writers who *began* with form: Rabih Alameddine states his "structure determined the story" (2001), Randa Jarrar avoided the political "self-important" rubric of her novel's decade (2009) and Hala Alyan shaped her novel "like a million little poems" (2021). By examining the Arab

American novel's form, this study contributes to a field of writing ready for more perspectives on Arab American aesthetics in contemporary discourse.

Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001), Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008), and Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017) all recast the complexities of Arab American identity into an experimental form to transcend the negatives of self-fragmentation. Certainly, these writers do not conform nor do they fit neatly into aesthetic tropes of their time, whether that be the hyper-political novel, the oppressed and redeemed Muslim woman genre, the fantastical genie-in-a-bottle *One Thousand and One Nights* storyline, or the ethnic poet-as-prophet idealism like their *Mahjar* predecessors. Instead, Alameddine's, Jarrar's, and Alyan's fiction rearranges how an Arab and American hybrid identity is understood, challenged, and experienced by Arabs of the diaspora.

Notably, all three writers in this study are Anglophone Americans of Arab descent. Each novel was published just before 9/11 or afterwards (in the case of *I, the Divine* published a few months before September 2001). I also selected these novels for their similarities in representing an Arab family or individual's displacement from their home country in the Middle East to the United States and how they grapple with depictions of fragmented identity as a result of transnationalism, war, loss, trauma, and a search for home. I chose to focus on these novels for their timeliness, their development of Arab characters over a long period (compared to poetry) and for their fascinating use of a unique form. Lastly, I focus on Arab diaspora writers who "bear the burden of a unique history in the United States" as opposed to the U.K. or other majority English-speaking countries, once again as a desire to narrow the scope of the study (Orfalea 132). And, as an Arab American myself, I am personally inspired to address, give voice, and contribute to a gap of scholarship on writers, too often either overlooked or assigned a simplified

and distorted image in the United States. This desire to seek out fiction by those who also experience the beauty and pain of existing between two cultures was ignited further when reckoning with—not a total—but significant absence of Arab American writers from the American literary canon and literary studies. To echo Salma Khadra Jayyusi: "we have a duty to stand as advocates to the truth of our cause and our culture" (2005). Although many scholars like Al Maleh credit the post-9/11 decade as a time when "Arabs at last became 'visible,'" (2) and Naous even calls it a "newly acquired hypervisibility" (2), I believe there is much more to be explored within this aesthetic visibility. This study then seeks to go beyond the "ethnocentric tunnel vision" (Salaita 3) and further shed light, not on the overstated understandings of Arab writers' loss of homeland and migratory trauma (though valuable), but rather on the creative and intricate formal choices Arab American writers made in the early 21st-century to meditate on and overcome this very pain.

Pre-9/11: From Poetic Prophets to Minorities

Once the philosophers, dreamers, and spiritual truth-seekers of the early 1900s *Mahjar* literary movement in the United States, Arab immigrants experienced a massive shift in identity by the late 20th-century. This shift would ultimately change the presence of Arab writers in American literature forever. Notable Arab writers of the *Mahjar* ("the Arab diaspora")—Ameen Rihani (1876-1941), Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), and Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988)—enthusiastically wrote periodicals, prose, and verse between the Arab world and the West, free from ethnic barriers and self-limitations. Critic Layla Al Maleh explains these early Arab writers in the United States, self-assured 'poetic prophets,' preferred "the more nebulous world of philosophical abstraction," writing English prose that "echoed Biblical narratives and Islamic

Sufism, blended with British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Nietzschean philosophy" (426). But the ensuing turmoil in the Middle East would upend this triumphant intellectual, cross-cultural movement. Al Maleh argues in her prominent 2009 anthology *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* that "political events" that Anglophone Arab writers "never solicited or condoned"—the Arab world's three wars with Israel, the Lebanese Civil War, the invasion of Kuwait, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the eventual U.S. invasion of Iraq—thrusted Arabs "out of the mainstream, marginalizing, minoritizing, and ethnicizing them" (Al Maleh 434). Yet, as we see with the pioneers of Arab American literature, it was not always like this; instead, identity represented through "Romantic principles" was prioritized over a hyphenated, ethnic, realist depiction (Naimy 125-40). By the 21st-century, however, contemporary Arab American literature appeared to be consumed with a communal politicized trauma, completely devoid of the "celebratory nature of a Gibran or a Rihani" (433). A brief glance at Arab American literature post-9/11 confirms a body of work associated with nothing but strife. Although certain scholars like Majaj and Salaita persevered in their discourse on aesthetics, Al Maleh argues the literature revealed a "curious strain of collective pain" (433) that was "becoming more and more politicized" (434). Nonetheless, this thesis looks closer at the *Mahjar* writers' aesthetic choices to transcend their immigrant identity and argues that these techniques still do echo in the work of contemporary Arab diaspora writers today. What is now the duty of Arab American writers to embrace ethnicity—in contrast to the *Mahjar* poets—and advocate for their cultural identity has become all the more vital for both defiance to the aggressions waged against them and as an expression of solidarity.

Post-9/11: The Major Turning Point

Months after the publication of Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001), Arab Americans would emerge from the margins of literary and scholarly focus to the forefront of American public attention overnight. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 incited a major turning point for the Arab individual and the world at large. The effect of 9/11 on Arab American literature cannot be overstated. Up until this point, the pervading absence of most Arab American writers (including Alameddine) from the American literary canon and university syllabi was acknowledged by scholars in the field, but not to the degree it was discussed after 9/11. The massive change brought on by 9/11 in the United States is still contested by scholars in the field, and some claim that there was no significant change to Arab American fiction after 9/11. On one side of this argument, Pickens makes a claim that the "content of Arab American writing has not much changed after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon" (5). Then, on the other side, Al Maleh opens her discussion on Arab American fiction (she speaks more broadly with the term "Anglophone Arab") claiming "the irony of Anglophone Arab literature is that it did not gain attention or gain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11" (1). While it is arguable and understood there was a thriving, if relatively small, field of Arab American studies and critical scholarship on such fiction, the following scholarship confirms a monumental change for this literature and in the field ignited by 9/11.

This thesis seeks to point out a key aspect of this debate: Pickens continues her discussion, explaining that, although she does not believe the actual content of writing changed, she does recognize that "many writers saw an increase in avenues for publication and an urgency to depict the complexity of Arab America in contrast to the flattened stereotypes" (5). Many scholars (including but not limited to) Mazen Naous, Al Maleh, Samina Najmi, and Marie-

Christin Sawires-Masseli, follow this claim regarding the "urgency" and increased "attention" garnered by Arab American literature post-9/11. Najmi has called it an "efflorescence of literature by writers who identify as Arab" expressing that the "catalyst for this literary phenomenon has been 9/11" (519). Similarly, Naous argues that since 9/11, "the past eighteen years have seen a proliferation of Arab American literature" (3). Moreover, Sawires-Masseli's book, chronicling classical Arab storytelling motifs post-9/11, explains "the largest part of novels with strong Arab American identification appeared post-9/11" (8). Likewise, Al Maleh's research situates 9/11 as the pivotal crux of her argument and details the "significant and noticeable mark of increasing interest in anglophone Arab literature" is also apparent in the growing amount of universities that included Arab American and Muslim fiction to "curricula courses" (2). Finally, several key moments of visibility in Arab American literature after 9/11, outlined below and explored more in this study's chapter two, direct my argument's conclusion to place a strong emphasis on this momentous event. Thus, in consideration of these many critical perspectives that center 9/11 as a noteworthy moment of change for Arab American literature, this thesis agrees with the preceding scholarship and affirms that 9/11 may not have transformed the field, but stands nevertheless as a major turning point for Arab American literature.

In American public knowledge before 9/11, Arab Americans were perceived relative only to the occasional Arab movie villain—think the "Arab swordsmen" in *Indiana Jones* (1981)—or orientalist quotations of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923). Several scholars agree that before 9/11, Arab Americans were largely invisible from American society, besides these racialized, stereotypes explored in the research of scholars like Ronald Stockton, Evelyn Alsultany, Michael Suleiman, and Sameer Abraham and Nabil Abraham, to name but a few. Despite Arabs living in

the United States since the 1890s, as documented in a collection of research by Abraham and Abraham in *Arabs in the New World* (1983), the negative and obscure visibility of the Arab persisted. As far back as 1999, Suleiman's *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* documents how the "American media primarily highlight the negative achievements of Arabs and Muslims" despite U.S. census data showing that "many Arabs in America have reached the highest level of their profession in almost all professions" (16). Comparatively, Alsultany's 2012 *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* confronts the early racist depictions of Arabs in which the media portrayed us as people from a place populated by "flying carpets, mummies, belly dancers, harem girls, and rich Arab men" (7-8). Connecting back to Orfalea and Naous's statements on the Arab as great at hiding, Sally Howell also recognized that Arab American artists who did appear in American mainstream media "seldom revealed their Arab background" (60). Indeed, the Arab American was a mostly invisible citizen in the United States pre-9/11. Then, in the aftermath of this horrific event, the world suddenly demanded to know, "who those 'Arabs really were'" (Al Maleh 1).

Over the last two decades, we have seen the search for answers invoke domestic violence, discrimination, war in the Middle East, and above all, fear. The American citizen's fear of their Muslim neighbor and the Arab immigrant's fear for their family's safety. Much scholarship in the field has addressed this racist, hyper-visibility of the Arab American subject. One example is scholars Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany's *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (2011) which contextualizes and examines a series of vignettes highlighting the growing tensions of xenophobia related to Arab and Arab American feminists in the United States after 9/11. Their argument shows how the "imperialist relationship between the United States and the Arab world have produced distinct forms of racism" and

violence (xxii). Similarly, another book by Naber, including Jamal Amaney, titled *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (2008) also underscores how, in the post-9/11 climate, many acts of violence and hatred continued to expand (44) while the United States was publicly distinguishing between "good" Muslims and "bad" Muslims in which Muslims were perceived as guilty until proven innocent (3). With all these grave acts of racism, violence, and hatred, the distorted image of the Arab in the American public eye was immense. But this domestic security hysteria brought, with force, an opportunity for Arab Americans to redefine the very image of their ethnic group. As Al Maleh describes, here lies the great irony of Anglo Arab literature: the writers who felt most called upon to answer questions arising from the catastrophe of 9/11 were the furthest—geographically, politically, and even culturally—to the "paradigmatic Arabs" of the MENA and SWANA regions (1). Rather, Anglophone Arab writers of the diaspora are the ones who stepped forward. This literature would serve as both the reparative bridge for the Arab American subject—a way to close the divide between the Arab homeland and America—and the tool for the Arab diasporic writer to *become* the bridge, offering a connection among writers, scholars, and stories still untold.

Immediately following 9/11, the literary world began reorganizing. Bookstores capitalized on the shockwaves of 9/11, placing books with "even the most tenuous relevance to terrorism, war, or Islam" at the literal and metaphorical front of their stores (Serageldin 437). Various voices, Arab and non-Arab, were coming to grips with this sudden spotlight. Sales of novels, some by writers not even Muslim or of Arab heritage, were catapulted in book clubs and reading lists in response to the mania. We see this with Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) which centers on the Afghanistan war. Part of *The Kite Runner*'s monumental success had much to do with America's eagerness to witness a "just war" against the Taliban (Serageldin

434). In one regard, due to this cacophony of voices, opinions, and ideas of who the 'Arab' really is, some Arab immigrants sought to hide their Middle Eastern identity. Alternatively, many perceived a far greater risk in *not* speaking up and seeking redirection of the sudden attention Arab culture and Anglo Arab literature was receiving. Thus, the largest extent of writers to claim their Arab heritage came post-9/11. Many reckoned there was now a duty, "a need to enter public discourse identifiably as Arab Americans" (Sawires-Masseli 7-8). As Majaj also writes: Arab Americans grappled with their identity and the realization of the "define yourself or others will define you" imperative (125). This then was arguably the most significant turning point for Arab American writers.

The duty to shift Arab American identity from the image of violent extremist to the humanized next-door neighbor resulted in a trend of post-9/11 novels I view as a sign of the times. This trend would come to define the majority of Arab American novels in the succeeding decade by two major themes: domestic tensions or classical Arab storytelling. Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006), Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006), and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2008) are all notable Anglo Arab novels of this decade to confront realist depictions of violence and war, domestically and in the Middle East. On the other end, scholar Marie-Christin Sawires-Masseli also looks at several of the novels of this decade, like *Crescent* and Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter* (2009) and even Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati* (2008). These novels engage "directly with Arab literary sources" such as Scheherazade and the 1001 Arabian Nights (394). The aim was to link the Arab image and identity to a "storytelling tradition," "Arab art," and "Arab civilization as opposed to the image of barbarian" (Sawires-Masseli 289). Still, while these critics recognize the complexities of selfhood that Arab

Americans endure, I seek to further pay attention to the intricacies of aesthetics in Arab American fiction. Building on these studies, I examine how fragmented identity is reimagined *through* an experimental form—lyricism, non-chronological narratives, bilingual integration, decentralized settings and more—in a new light within the Arab diaspora and American literature at large.

Benefits of Bilingualism

Beyond the *Mahjar* who embraced the prophetic poet's voice acting as a "recorder of history" and "collective memory" (Al Maleh 429), Arab American literature also traces its roots back to Arabic-language fiction that often plays with an experimental form as a kind of "edginess and sly gender politics" (Seymour-Jorn 172). But scholar Caroline Seymour-Jorn discusses the difficulty many Arabic-to-English translators have in maintaining the experimentalism of Arabic literature into an English translation suitable for the literary market. Seymour-Jorn details translator Marilyn Booth's struggle when her initial English translation of Rajaa Alsanea's Arabic novel, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), was rejected by both *Penguin* and Alsanea. Booth had tried to maintain Alsanea's "language play, use of multiple vernaculars, and gender politics," but *Penguin* and Alsanea "opted for a bland translatese to appeal to the Western reader" (172-173). For the purposes of this thesis, the erasure of Arab writers' literary experimentation is important to understand when placing it in contrast to the Anglo Arab writers of this study. While many translated novels lose their creative nuances, Alameddine, Jarrar, and Alyan all hold the advantage of being bilingual in both Arabic and English. In this way, these writers can communicate their experimentalism more succinctly by having the advantage of existing between both cultures and languages. While the publishing market forces experimental writing to conform to "immediate accessibility" and "similarity over difference," a split identity

equips bilingual authors to overcome these downfalls of translation (Booth). Ultimately, Arab American writers find strength in the "combination of literary innovation and prominent social or political engagement" without sacrificing the influence of the Arabic language in an anglophone novel (Ghazoul and Ferial 180). In this study, we can see that influence reflected and built upon by Alameddine, Jarrar, and Alyan.

Chapter Outline

In chapter one, I focus on Lebanese-American writer Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001). Alameddine's novel embraces the *benefits* of exile through a non-chronological, unfinished form. Alameddine's novel creates a kaleidoscopic look at his protagonist's varying self-aspects where such creative ingenuity can only arise from one having experienced a multiplicity of identities comprised of national, religious, ethnic, and racial categorizations. Alameddine formalizes this by structuring the novel in a series of first chapters where Arab American identity becomes contingent upon how the story begins. *I, the Divine* tells the story of protagonist Sarah Nour El-Din writing about her life between Lebanon and the United States. Raised in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, Sarah recounts her childhood, her migration to the U.S., her mixed-family relationships, and her experiences with sexual violence. Alameddine starts Sarah's memoir over at the beginning of each chapter. The first chapters begin with different typographical fonts, different settings, point-of-views, and even in different languages. Alameddine's innovative form parallels the difficulty of navigating an Arab American hybrid identity. Like the incompleteness of the novel, Sarah as a subject is never finished nor whole. "I wanted to identify with only my American half," Sarah confesses but then realizes, "like my city [Beirut], my American patina covers an Arab soul" (229). Alameddine recognizes how the Arab diaspora faces a constant negotiation of which culture and nation they

belong to and therefore which vantage of oneself they should portray. Alameddine integrates Lebanon into Sarah's past, present, and future, thus rejecting a stable selfhood, so he can privilege fragmentation over one fixed culture. Scholar Leila Moayeri Pazargadi explains exile becomes "a productive site for cultural production" (46). Alameddine transcends rudimentary depictions of Arab American women in favor of a multi-faceted portrait of identity instead.

Chapter two examines Egyptian-Palestinian-American writer Randa Jarrar's debut novel *A Map of Home* (2008) which follows the coming-of-age story of Nidali and adopts a postcolonial reimagining of classic European aesthetics to integrate representations of Arab culture, decentralization, and hybrid identity into American literature. According to scholar Ericka A. Hoagland, the "postcolonial bildungsroman" acknowledges and is characterized by its "dialogic engagement with pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history" (229). Like *I, the Divine*, Jarrar's form subverts the United States' reductive understanding of Arab identity and works to sustain her Arab culture in the literary canvas without assimilating completely. As the daughter of a middle-class family—a Palestinian father and an Egyptian-Greek mother—Nidali chronicles her family's displacement from Kuwait after fleeing the Gulf War, to Egypt, and eventually to Texas in the U.S. Jarrar's novel contains many of the typical elements found in the European bildungsroman genre like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*: a rebellious teenager, an exploration of adolescent love, and a journey of understanding the self. *A Map of Home* also accomplishes subversion by blending Arab and American influences with the use of what scholars Mohammed Albakry and Jonathan Siler call "bilingual creativity." They point out "many bilingual Arab writers like Jarrar adopt English as their primary literary vehicle" to speak "directly to Western audiences, popularize, and humanize their culture to non-Arab readers" (119-120). Jarrar italicizes the English pronunciation of Arabic words but does not always

provide the translation. This not only results in an immersive experience of Nidali's culture, but it allows her to incorporate both selves of her hybridity into the form. While Alameddine's protagonist Sarah struggles with her incompleteness, Jarrar more readily accepts how creativity can be transmuted from a shifting identity.

My analysis in chapter three focuses on Palestinian-American writer Hala Alyan's debut novel *Salt Houses* (2017) which uses lyrical techniques like repetition, motifs of fragmentation and erosion, imagery, and poetic prose, allowing the form to mirror what existence as an Arab American feels like. In other words, lyricism offers an experience closer to truth, more representative of the emotional turmoil experienced by the Palestinian diaspora than is realism. The novel is a multi-generational family saga in the wake of the 1948 *Nakba* exodus. At its center, the Yacoub family endures a series of displacements: from Palestine to Kuwait, then further to the United States and Europe. Each chapter of *Salt Houses* presents a new or returning character's point of view several years forward, the family tree forking and becoming extensive when characters marry and have children. Scholars Wael J. Salam and Safi M. Mahfouz explain the narrative creates "a thread that connects the grandchildren with their ancestral history" (305). But as each character's life unfolds, a sense of who they are in relation to their Palestinian identity continues to be eroded and obscured by time and memory decay. Alyan's lyricism enables a presence in the literary and public eye; what Edward Said described as "the greatest battle Palestinians have waged" over "the right to possess and reclaim a collective historical reality" (2000). So, while memory is being decayed by old age, the novel's backwards and forwards form recovers it into being, making Palestinian-American history more present in American literature. By engaging this lyrical form, Alyan mirrors the personal loss of selfhood

Arab Americans have endured from the Palestinian crisis while simultaneously excavating these fragmented moments into a collective consciousness.

Arab American literature has been noted in past scholarship to fixate on "nostalgia and reactiveness generated by political pressures" (Majaj 129) and has remained strikingly absent from discourse within the American literary canon. Nevertheless, this literature has begun to garner a vast variety of new criticism on aesthetics and form. In recent years, scholarship has focused on aesthetics as a site of creative vibrancy born from Arab diasporic communities and shifting identities. Turning our attention towards Alameddine's, Jarrar's and Alyan's deliberate innovation and use of a creative form in fiction further brings even more visibility and adds to this scholarship emerging on Arab American works. By examining the significance of form's ability to both mirror and make present a complex Arab American identity, my thesis brings into focus how these selected authors transcend the post-9/11 "distorted and denigrated" image of Arabs in the United States (Al Maleh 434). This will underscore a more nuanced understanding of identity that exists in and beyond contemporary American literature.

Chapter One

Kaleidoscopic Identity in *I, the Divine*

> *"Home is never where she is, but where she is not."*
> — Rabih Alameddine (*I, the Divine* 99)

> *"So numerous are [the kaleidoscope's] applications, so inexhaustible…that the observer is constantly flattered with the belief that he has obtained results which were never seen before.*"
> — David Brewster (*The Kaleidoscope* 159)

At the outbreak of the 1975 Lebanese Civil War, writer Rabih Alameddine was fifteen years old, leaving his family behind in Lebanon, and on a journey to "escape oneself" (2002). Initially, believing he was more American than Lebanese, Alameddine was struck with a discovery—central to the Arab diasporic novels in this thesis—that he was, unsurprisingly, neither. His leaving Lebanon and his eventual relocation to the United States, however, was a catalyst for his perceptive and nuanced observation of identity, what he expressed to be unattainable if he had remained "constrained in one's environment or country or family" (2002). His self-imposed in-betweenness gifted him with, what scholar Edward Said argued in "Reflections on Exile" (1984), the benefits of exile. Said explained exile affords different arrangements of living and eccentric angles of vision as the exiled individual must strive to survive and adapt in an uncertain position, leading to new thought and creativity. Such creative ingenuity can only arise *because* one has experienced a multiplicity of national, religious, ethnic, and racial identities. A wide array of scholarship has addressed the connections among the diaspora, transnational issues, and fragmented selfhood. Yet, in his own life, Alameddine is not resistant to this fragmentation: he claims his identity, both as an American and a child of the

mountains above Beirut, is an "integration that makes me who I am" (2002). This accepted integration becomes key to analyzing Alameddine's work since his writing is always a far cry from any notion of self-victimization. Rather, Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001) confronts the difficulty of navigating an Arab American identity, not by bemoaning the difficulties through narrative, but by crafting an innovative form—a postmodern story of endless, unresolved beginnings—that parallels the complexity of this selfhood. He turns to the emancipatory power of literature, its ability to mimic memory and a character's interiority, to reimagine fragmented identity and exile into "a productive site for cultural production" that, ultimately, celebrates the positives of hybridity over one fixed culture (Pazargadi 46).

I, the Divine **as Kaleidoscope**

In his novel, *I, the Divine*, Alameddine employs an experimental form of non-chronological, unfinished first chapters so that Arab American identity is determined by how the story begins. "What kind of woman would abandon so many chapters," he asked in the Norton paperback 2002 reading guide when seeking to craft a character who would extend beyond knowability and one-dimensionality. That woman became Sarah Nour El-Din, a "forever elusive, cosmopolitan, sexual, transnational, and infinitely complex protagonist," writing about her life between Lebanon and the United States (Fadda-Conrey 164). Growing up in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, Sarah recounts her childhood, her tumultuous mixed-family relationships, her refuge taken in the United States, and her experiences with men and sexual violence. Alameddine revises Sarah's memoir again and again: some chapters begin with different typographical fonts and titles, some are a first-person point of view, some third-person, some go into pages of detail, and some don't even make it to the end of one page. He explains "when we

tell our stories, we remember only peaks and valleys" and "often out of order" where there is no true "continuous self" (2002). The novel's form excels in granting a closer depiction of the diasporic self, its fluidity, and provisional nature, and suggests Arab American identity is only a construction. It cannot be constrained to a stable, chronological, and concrete narrative. Therefore, the primary affiliation of each first chapter, Alameddine's careful inclusion of specific details, shapes our perception of Sarah. At times this "scattered information that Sarah chooses to include" is "redundant," leading the reader to feel disarmed (Fadda-Conrey 170). We begin to believe we have gathered a filled-in picture of Sarah's personality and family, only for it to be upturned when Alameddine presents "wholly original" information in the following chapters which diverges and moves the narrative in a different direction (170). The following scene is a pivotal moment and an example of Alameddine's mastery—what appears to be scattered information coming together with clarity and cohesion.

Upon discovering her mother has committed suicide, Sarah searches the apartment for any remnants of her mother Janet's artwork. Dejected, she finds nothing except one central object reflective of the entire novel. Sarah is about to leave the apartment empty-handed when the kaleidoscope on her mother's living room table catches her eye, sparking a memory from just the day before when they had discussed Janet's purchase of it. "It's beautiful," Janet said to Sarah, "I love how it comes together" (264). Alameddine admits Sarah did not find the kaleidoscope to be particularly special the day before, but now it becomes a heartbreaking emblem of her mother's death. The kaleidoscope symbolizes the novel's structure of first chapters, fragments of Sarah's life story, brought together in both a beautiful and devastating way. My study places special emphasis on Alameddine's metaphor of the kaleidoscope which is largely under-discussed by scholars. I propose Sarah's shifting identity is displayed by the

book's form entirely with a *kaleidoscopic* technique: both as a literal symbol within the novel and as an overarching metaphor for the novel as a whole.

A kaleidoscope is an optical-illusion toy and, more importantly, a symbol for that which changes constantly. When physically turned, a new angle rearranges the contained collection of objects into a different pattern. Change the toy's angle again and the user will have another pattern once more. The word kaleidoscope, deriving from the Greek *kalos* "beautiful," *eïdos* "form," and *skopeō* "to view" (Britannica), was coined by Sir David Brewster in 1816 to be an "observer of beautiful forms" (Etymonline). Further, the kaleidoscope functions with two mirrors inclined at right angles so that the first image of the object in one mirror is reflected again in the other mirror. So, through the eyehole, the viewer is seeing a reflection of the first reflection. This means what the viewer sees is not the first depiction of reality—the object as is—but instead the object multiplied (creating the patterns) through multiple reflections. Like the kaleidoscope, the first chapters of *I, the Divine* present often the same events but from a different angle, thus each page turn reveals new information. Alameddine uses this effect throughout; sometimes subtlety, sometimes precisely. Inventor Brewster explained in his book on the kaleidoscope's history that the reason the kaleidoscope is special, compared to other creations like it, is due to the "positions for the eye and the objects, which are absolutely necessary to produce that magical union of parts" all of which "give to the visions of the Kaleidoscope the peculiar charm" (3). We can apply this same principle to Alameddine's novel: how the first chapter positions our viewpoint matters greatly for how we perceive and understand the overall diverse and fluctuating vision of Sarah. In the same way Sarah tries to predict her life's path while writing her unfinished memoir—"I felt my life might be going somewhere,"—we, too, anticipate a familiar ethnicized storyline, one that follows the

domestic realism tropes or exotic tales outlined in this study's introduction. Instead, in time, Sarah's expectations for her life are subverted: "It did, just not where I expected" (141).

Like the incompleteness of the novel, Sarah as a subject is never finished nor whole. Alameddine's multiple revisions of the narrative, and therefore multiple revisions of the autobiographical self, illustrate different aspects of her identity. When viewed apart, I examine what I have categorized as the following: Sarah, *as American*, Sarah, *as Arab*, Sarah, *as survivor*, and Sarah, *as lover*. When viewed together, different understandings come forth: how do these different Sarahs fit or don't fit into her surrounding world? Scholar Michelle Hartman describes this technique as one that "builds layers of competing realities" through which multiple versions of the truth emerge (346). Incompleteness as a representation of the provisional self, however, is not a new formal device nor is it entirely overlooked in criticism thus far. Although, consistently scholars like Naous, Majaj, Salaita and Najmi have argued for the lack of aesthetic conversation in Arab American literary discourse, a focus on formalism and aesthetics of Arab American novels has garnered a variety of new critical perspectives in recent years. In particular, this chapter responds to scholar Leila Moayeri Pazargadi's work on *I, the Divine*'s aesthetics from Theri Pickens edited 2018 book *Arab American Aesthetics Literature, Material Culture, Film, and Theatre*. I follow in Pazargadi's aesthetic analysis of what she notes by the term "literary cubism" which is another artistic metaphor for understanding the kaleidoscopic form (49). Examined at length by scholars like Marianne DeKoven and used by writers like Gertrude Stein, literary cubism holds a unique power in "rendering the abstract 'rhythm' or 'pulse,' the psychological essence, of character" (DeKoven 82). In the same vein as Alameddine's first chapters, cubism as a literary device works to "shatter or fragment perception and the sentence" (DeKoven 81). Notably, *I, the Divine* not only fully embraces literary cubism but references

painters of such movements also as metaphors within the novel. This chapter owes a great deal of acknowledgement to these scholars mentioned—DeKoven, Stein, and Pazargadi—whose arguments inspire a great deal of this thesis. My work here hopes to embrace the foundational ideas invoked but to continue more in depth with the specifics of how Alameddine references and uses these distinct artistic modes in the novel. And, although Pazargadi's essay discusses the aesthetics in Alameddine's work at length, a focus on specific art genres like cubism, to represent the complexity of Sarah's Arab American selfhood, has been under-discussed.

In multiple scenes throughout the novel, Alameddine describes Sarah's fascination with two 20th-century abstract artists: Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and Californian painter John McLaughlin. Alameddine's discussion of Mondrian and McLaughlin is a deliberate meta-reflection of the novel's fragmented form. On a trip to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Sarah points out to her boyfriend David the details of a McLaughlin painting, showing him "how the lines moved, how the intersections of lines changed colors as you looked at them" (103). Both painters were influenced by the cubism movement and explored the use of "multiple perspectives" and "abstract arrangements," believing that "abstraction provides a truer picture of reality than illusionistic depictions of objects in the visible world" (Chadwick). Similarly, Sarah continues to change and unfold in her first chapters; likewise, these paintings "brought different views of subjects…together in the same picture" (Chadwick). Alameddine never gives us one whole, solidified image of Sarah. Her identity at different angles, like the vertical lines in the painting, move and change colors, new spatial depths of herself come forth where "meaning is present, but it is multiplied, fragmented, unresolved" (DeKoven 83). In response to Pazargadi, I offer a closer look at how Alameddine engages this idea of literary cubism with his novel's kaleidoscopic form and creates a multi-layered portrait of Sarah.

Looking at Sarah, not as separate selves, but in relation to all those around her, an amalgamation of East and West, and a conscious narrator in the details she chooses to share in her unfinished memoir, reveals a larger picture of what's at stake for the diasporic subject. I argue we cannot understand Arab Americans without viewing them through the kaleidoscope. The inverse of this is exactly why so much of literature, media, and the American public's perception has misrepresented individuals from the Arab diaspora. They are not perceived as fluctuating and diverse with consideration of the vastly varying cultures from the Levant to the Gulf to the North African regions. Rather, as described in "Common Arab Stereotypes in TV and Film" (2021) by writer Nadra Kareem Nittle, stereotypes are projected onto individuals, perceived by a public that is not necessarily even ethnically or culturally *of* the diaspora. Gregory Orfalea also underscores the risk of assumptions in which the Arab American "novelist's aim is revelation" whereas, on the contrary, those who stereotype ethnic groups want "to blur" and "shoot for contempt" (117). "Their greatest damage is that they achieve it often" he explains, until "the contempt has been taken, whole, into the body and the life-view, not only of an individual, but a country" (117). Identity, then, becomes determined by a narrator in a limited vision, a diluted and incomplete picture. *I, the Divine* illuminates the danger of these kinds of assumptions by portraying all the pieces and patterns of a person, not just from one vantage. Alameddine's form proves that identity is contingent upon the surrounding relationships, environment, and events that interact with and shape each individual.

It is noteworthy, in comparison to what Orfalea described as well in his seminal work *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006), that Alameddine, too, calls upon the Arab to be a "bridge" between the Middle East and North America. This is referenced when Sarah writes a first chapter from the imagined point of view of her mother Janet. In this account, her mother visits a

Lebanese fortune-teller during her stay at the American University of Beirut and hears the prediction that she will marry a Lebanese man, have two daughters and a son. All of it comes true except, ironically, the son is her daughter Sarah. The fortune-teller warns Janet that the traditional Lebanese family will "swallow her" (225) but then stresses, "tell her the son will carry her. He'll know how to float between two worlds someday. He'll be the bridge" (226). It is not an Arab person or an American person who can be a bridge, but only the child of both, the in-between subject, an individual from the Arab diaspora. Here lies Alameddine's position on the important benefits of fragmentation, exile, and transnationalism. Sarah was predicted to "carry" and support her mother because she is a symbol for the beauty of the interpersonal, the interrelated, the in-between.

Sarah, as American

Sarah writes her memoir from San Francisco, although the details of her first chapters rarely take place there. The first chapters reminisce frequently on Beirut, on the shenanigans of her childhood, on the death of her sister Rana and the lasting traumas on her friends from the civil war, and on the highs and lows of her relationships in New York. Living as an American, Sarah has distance from these events; she is able to recall them for the reader and yet she can never seem to stick to one storyline, one opening. "She must learn to complete her projects," she writes in the third person (241). Alameddine connects this line as a thread to the startling realization Sarah has two chapters later. In the aspect of Sarah *as American*, we observe the burden that befalls her, even with the privilege of living in the United States.

Towards the end of the novel, Sarah is alerted by a concierge that her mother Janet has committed suicide. What Alameddine reveals in this moment, through Sarah's heartbreak and

grief, reframes the preceding chapters of the novel so extensively that we are granted an entirely new perspective on a story we thought we knew by now. First, Sarah learns from the apartment's concierge that after thirty-five years of separation from her father, her mother had kept the family last name Nour El-Din, despite being ex-communicated by him and exiled back to New York. Considering this scene is so late in the novel, Alameddine shocks the reader with this revelation. So much in Sarah's life has changed but conversely, her mother has never moved on. All this time, Sarah has been ignorant to the depth of Janet's trauma, from losing her first, and worse, her *only* family. We witness Sarah's experiences kaleidoscopically come together into different images and identities as she journeys from being an Arab in Lebanon to an Arab American in the USA. Many of these life events—the death of her sister Rana, the hospitalization of the other sister Lamia, her numerous heartbreaks, and tensions with her stepmother—all shift extensively when placed into this new pattern that integrates her mother's depression and inability to let go of her Lebanese family.

Further, Sarah is allowed access to her mother's Upper West Side apartment to gather any items she wishes to keep, but she does not claim any materialistic possessions. Instead, she searches frantically for remnants of Janet's artwork, propelled by the memory of her mother who "always talked about being a painter" (263). The parallels come forth: Janet has always claimed to be a painter; Sarah has claimed to be writing a memoir all these years, yet with nothing ready to publish. At first with relief, Sarah discovers a small stack of her mother's paintings, only to soon realize that "all of them seemed abandoned after a couple of strokes. Some were left in mid-stroke. So many false starts. I began to cry" (263). The false starts mirror the novel's form meta-textually: after Sarah has spent a lifetime attempting to complete her own memoir, she finds out her mother, too, has never finished a project. In earlier chapters, Sarah describes her many

inherited traits from her mother, like "her exotic looks, her artistic tendencies, her mood swings, her Americanness," with curiosity and pride (149). She chooses to stay in the United States to be closer to her mother and to rebel against her Lebanese family and identity. Still, this moment in the novel brings forth unbearable realizations. First, her mother never let go of her Lebanese inherited identity or family, never reclaimed back her "Americanness" that Sarah so desperately wants to mimic, leaving Sarah's own American identity to be almost a facade, built on half-truths and a projected image she had of her "American mother" in her mind. And even more, Sarah has inherited her mother's artistic failures as well. Alameddine's deliberate and only mention of the kaleidoscope in this scene underscores the kaleidoscope—to be the central theme of the novel—in which a whole new perspective can emerge when shifting the view on the subject and the event. As readers think they have clarity on the story's pattern, assuming the mother has surely moved on from the heartbreak, a wholly new point of view suggests Sarah knows nothing about her American mother, and by extension, her American self.

Sarah, as Arab

Scholars have noted at length that *I, the Divine*, with its non-chronological blend of past, present, and future events, does not prefer the West over the East or vice versa. Pazargadi explains that the text "refuses to provide simple resolutions" or conclusions (43). I follow this critique by calling the emphasis on American life as a "preference" for the West because many Arab American novels, like Moja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, engage with the expectation of the all-too-familiar American dream and the better life that exists away from the Arab world. The common depiction of this trope, such as in Kahf's novel, is a Muslim woman fleeing the Middle East to build a new life and family in the United States. By contrast,

Alameddine rejects such simplicity: Sarah is not Muslim or religious, she returns to see her family in Lebanon, and she has relationships with both Arab and American men. Alameddine "restores authorial agency to the Arab female subject" where Sarah does not have to sacrifice her Lebanese identity to exist as an American as well (Pazargadi 55). Rather, Alameddine suggests Sarah looks back to her Lebanese heritage as a kind of touchstone. "I wanted to identify with only my American half" she confesses then realizes "like my city [Beirut], my American patina covers an Arab soul" (229). If Sarah's Americanism is just a patina, in other words, an impression or appearance, does this suggest the homeland is the one and only "true" aspect of her identity? And does that trouble ideas of second or third-generation Arab Americans, born in the U.S. but with Arab grandparents—are they, too, wearing an American mask or will their Arab ethnicity categorize and define them always as Arab first and American second? Before Sarah's confession, Alameddine highlights the hypocrisy of the West which favors Beirut, a city hiding "its Arabic soul" behind a Las Vegas atmosphere with Arabian spices, "but not too spicy" (228). With a tongue-in-cheek tone, these pivotal lines reflect how the West wants a little exoticism but not too much, and by extension, a little of Sarah's exotic Arabic heritage is accepted, but not too much. And yet, this idea of the homeland's soul is a feeling many subjects in the Arab diaspora (and arguably in all diaspora communities) can recognize and relate to. Even if physically and culturally we assimilate—does that not come at the cost and denial of our heritage, a significant shaper of who we are as a people? Sarah is the figure, the "example" Michelle Hartman describes for "how many elements compete for preeminence in each of us simultaneously" (342). The dilemma of being Arab or American is a decades-old question for Arab Americans. Michael Suleiman's 1999 writing chronicles that even the earliest Arab Americans struggled: "the search for an adequate or comfortable identity for Arabs in America

has been guided and perhaps complicated by the need to feel pride in their heritage and simultaneously avoid prejudice and discrimination in their new homeland" (15). Referring back to the kaleidoscope is useful in understanding that Alameddine is not asking us to decide what perspective, impression, or reflection is the right one, but making clear that all these are pieces of the same object, all valid identities of the same individual, that come into focus with different shifts of view. Alameddine as writer and, evidently, Sarah as protagonist, wants to reconcile the two identities but in doing so, her Arabness cannot be forgotten.

Throughout numerous first chapters, Alameddine's aspect of Sarah*, as Arab* is at the forefront. Each desire to be Sarah*, the American* threads back to Beirut, back to her Lebanese family, ultimately, back to Sarah*, the Arab*. We see this inability to fully sacrifice her Lebanese self, despite choosing to remain in New York when her first husband Omar and their son Kamal leave her and return to Beirut. She faces what becomes the predominant "here and there" theme of the novel: "these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion" (229). The drafting of Sarah's memoir takes place while she lives between New York and San Francisco, yet her first chapters integrate Lebanon as though she never left. Details of her homeland permeate the page: her childhood swing-set in Beirut, the sounds of shelling as her family sit together on their apartment stairwell, the "unearthly intelligence" in her first lover Fadi's eyes (6). Like Alameddine described, "starting over" as humans is not always possible because the "past continues to influence us" and he sought for his novel to integrate the past with the present, not throw it out completely (2002). Notably, the memories of Beirut encapsulate the Arab soul and the dichotomy of never being fully present in the U.S. because Sarah exists simultaneously in Lebanon. She wants to identify with American pride, yet her PTSD is triggered by the 4th of July fireworks and so she retreats "under the covers, just like she used to

do in Beirut" (92). She wants to find success in her romantic relationships but was brought up by a divorced and remarried father, in a family that believed "love, like religion and politics, was to be avoided" (46). Even more, Sarah wants to embrace the United States' sense of independence and individualism, but once again is confronted with the realization that she is "the black sheep" of her family "yet an essential part of it" (229). Sarah's attempts to fully exist as American cannot be without her ties to her Arab heritage. Alameddine characterizes these realizations through a sense of acceptance. What he makes clear is one city is not preferred over the other; Sarah enjoys her life in the U.S. because "in New York, she can disappear" compared to being watched by Beirut's "unwavering gazes," whilst she recognizes "her heart remains there [Beirut]" (99). The love and hate she has for Beirut, the constant fluctuating she feels, and the unsettledness of her heart, portrays her forever suspended identity that will not be able to release her Lebanese self.

At times, this Lebanese identity aids Sarah in excusing—albeit sometimes funny and confessional—flawed behaviors. Upon recalling arguments with her white American boyfriend David, she admits "I can be happy one minute and angry the next" (118). Ironically, Alameddine draws a causal relationship, as a kind of reasoning, between her ethnicity and her inclination for mood swings. "Hell, we're Lebanese" she humorously defends her family's temper. Then, she reasons David left her because she "wasn't just a foreigner, but an Arab" (118). This is a notable line where Alameddine posits Arabs as an even more troublesome foreigners compared to others. It is the clash of Arab American identity at its most potent. How does one live as an American when their roots from the MENA region are represented as *incompatible* with the United States? Even before 9/11, to be an Arab in the West invoked many racial stereotypes in American public perception long before the novel's publication: terrorists, savages, belly dancers, oil sheiks,

misogynistic villains, barbaric rituals and "heavily accented foreigners with strange customs" (Nittle). Indeed, the Arab subject cannot avoid all sweeping prejudices, but, as writer, Alameddine provides nuance to these problematic notions by crafting Sarah to be self-aware of her Arab image.

Nevertheless, the kaleidoscopic form rearranges Sarah's Arabness from reductive stereotypes to positive attributes. Sarah, as an Arab, can disassociate from aspects of American culture she finds tasteless and instead can proudly embrace her unique Lebanese side. Again, we can look to the history of the kaleidoscope as a metaphor: though originally invented by Brewster to scientifically experiment with "the polarization of light," (1) over time his invention has become more associated with being a children's toy and an "instrument of amusement" (154). The way the toy is used—the act of closing one eye so that one's vision in the other eye is fully immersed in the beautiful, patterned image—symbolizes an *escape* from or *distortion* of reality. Alameddine's form in the novel replicates the kaleidoscope's visual escape for the viewer in the same way he uses Sarah's writing to grant her an escape from stereotypes or labels.

Alameddine accentuates this escape when Sarah accompanies her second ex-husband Joe to his company's reception in Dallas, Texas. She makes fun of the Dallas crowd, calling the women "plain," dressed in garish "prom dresses," while noting "there was not one nonwhite person in the room" besides the reception's servers (19). Her ex-husband Joe, a Jewish American man, invites her despite their separation. Sarah reckons, "I had always been his defense against American gentiles, the country club set" (20). The similarities between them create feelings of closeness and safety. Sarah and Joe, both sharing "Semitic features," have more in common culturally than the American-raised, white, and southern crowd (23). Thus, Alameddine emphasizes they have a connection that positions Sarah apart from the others for Joe. The

country club set indicates a class differentiation with such clubs being typically closed off to those who do not have a form of wealth, status, or even ethnic homogeneity. As refugees and descendants of the respective diaspora, Sarah and Joe have identities—though fragmented and torn—that bond them closer together. Joe wants Sarah by his side at the party *because* she is Arab. The disassociation from the "gentiles" that Sarah exhibits is a result of the form distorting what is perceived in the outer world. Rather than giving readers a dismal perspective of Sarah's bitterness and sadness, accompanying a man who is now an ex-husband, Alameddine writes a playful (here through the toy-like form), biting, and funny critique of absurd class mannerisms. The conventional form would only provide us with a realist take, the pity of the ethnic Arab woman, too "exotic" to be considered classy among gentiles. Instead, the experimental take is one of subversion, where the Arab woman gets the upper hand by disassociating and having a laugh at the (ironically) bad taste of the wealthy people around her. Though dealt with humor in this particular scene, Alameddine depicts a noteworthy ideal on a deeper level: the advantages that diasporic communities can have when we turn our focus towards the positive connections emerging from the vast richness of cultural exchange and mixed identities.

Sarah, as survivor

Lebanon, historically colonized by France under what was an oppressive regime of mandatory French instruction in schools, represents another complicated dimension that Alameddine transforms into a positive aspect of Sarah's fractured identity—a linguistic one. Sarah, a speaker of Arabic, French, and English, and a subject of "physical and emotional transnationalism" oscillating between Lebanon and the U.S., is equipped "with the critical powers to assess each of the two cultures from a removed, more objective standpoint" (Fadda-

Conrey 166). The first chapter form uses French, English, and Arabic, as well as a first-person and third-person voice, to narrate her experiences, so that she can mentally distance herself from her traumatic memories. Scholar Carol Fadda-Conrey explains further that the English chapters interspersed with "the same chapters rewritten in French" end up "multiplying the narrative articulation of one experience, rendering it more linguistically nuanced" (171). Again, Alameddine's form transcends Sarah's split self and affords her a privilege over it.

Most significantly, the power of this objective standpoint is conveyed when Sarah retells her experience of rape at sixteen years old by a group of men in Lebanon Alameddine introduces the fragment of this memory in first-person voice—a stifling hot day in Beirut, Sarah in a French dress, dizzy and waiting on the sidewalk for a taxi—but then the chapter ends there. The reader at the outset does not know why the scene has ended so abruptly or what more we have learned about Sarah from this chapter. Then, several pages later, a chapter titled simply "*Premier Chapitre*" begins recalling the same details from before, yet this time in French and using the third-person *elle* (192). Although this chapter does not make it to the end of the page and ends abruptly as well, it reflects Sarah's dilemma of trying to confront such a traumatic event, yet not be reduced by its psychologically diminishing nature. Similar to what scholar Saidiya Hartman asks in her essay "Venus in Two Acts" (2008) regarding the presence of the emblematic Venus and the violence of the archive of Atlantic slavery: "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (4). Alameddine poses a similar question: how does an author write about and portray a scene that, through retelling the violence, ends up giving further time, space, and presence to it? To write about something, emphasizes it. In the following chapter, Sarah revisits this experience once more, this time in English and third-person voice, and this time she recalls the horrific moment in detail. Two men (in what she believes to

be a taxi) pick her up, drive her to an abandoned area, both precede to rape her and when a third male joins the act, she becomes disembodied. “Where was the sky? It had disappeared…” she recalls, losing consciousness (196). Pazargadi explains the disappearing sky is a metaphor for her condition, where the tragedy causes a piece of herself to fall away, her identity blurring to mimic the trauma that has now scarred her for life. Eventually, the men abandon her there outside. Alameddine writes “in only one hour, her life had come to an end” (199). By framing the scene in the third person, Sarah suspends her already fragmented self so that she can remove her identity from the subjection of violence. The person being raped is not the intimate “I” but another character, a different woman. Alameddine concludes the chapter with a time jump of six months later. Sarah is playing a French Pictionary card game with her friends and best friend Dina when, to both of their horrors, Dina must draw the word *rape*. Alameddine asks us in the chapter’s concluding line, like Saidiya Hartman questions the impossibility of writing about the enslaved woman, “how does one draw rape?” (201). We can read this line as how does one *write* about rape? Through the filter of third-person narration? One’s second language? He asks and does not answer, because although the novel’s form cannot ever reconcile such violence afflicted onto an individual, it can at least empower them with the agency to write the experience as they choose. Pazargadi, too, reads this line the same way, but she also argues Sarah confronts her rape so she can “move past it” (53). Instead, I find Saidiya Hartman’s stance more helpful here as Sarah’s tragedy is not something she can ever move past. But by writing it, she at least has autonomy over the story. Alameddine’s choice for Sarah to re-draft the scene over and over signals the impossibility of recuperation, yet the freedom to speak as much or as little about it as she wants, in what language she wants, and in what narrative point of view she wants.

Alameddine's choice of form gives Sarah objectivity, separation from the act, and an identity that rejects association with one body, one selfhood.

Sarah, as lover

As Alameddine's first chapters begin and end, mirroring Sarah's "false starts" like the strokes of her mother's paintings, Sarah's romantic relationships act as parallel too: beginnings that lead to separations but never have any true closure (263). *Sarah, as lover* cannot commit to or find peace in her first two marriages, yet she maintains friendships with both Omar, her first ex, and Joe, her second ex. When she finally meets David, the third partner of her adult life, he ends up leaving her and later she learns he was hiding his homosexuality all along. "The reasons for these failures continued to elude me," Sarah puts it directly, "but the resulting feelings did not" (142). This word "failure" recalls her inability to complete her memoir, just as her mother failed to complete a painting. On the other hand, Sarah's failures in love could be considered as more of an exploration or experimentation that reflects the complexities of her existence, in which we address what feels more aligned with Alameddine's choice of the experimental form. It speaks to the literary cubist's ability to have meaning in their work, while simultaneously leaving it unresolved. Sarah's sexual relationships unveil truths about, and beyond, the assumptions made of her and the Arab American woman at large.

Further, her numerous relationships, the aspect of Sarah as lover, add another paradox to her identity: just as she is both Arab and American, she is both a heartbreaker and heartbroken. To some extent, she "bears the rare privilege—and challenge—of being a favored female among the company of men" within her family and at the all-boys school in Lebanon (2002). The opening first chapter of the novel recounts how Sarah's grandfather named her after "the great

Sarah Bernhardt," a French actress, nicknamed "the Divine Sarah," and who he appears to hold in high esteem (3). Thus, Alameddine's Sarah calling herself the "Divine" is based on what a man has given to her. Even as a child, Sarah is 'chosen.' In 1973 Beirut, 14-year-old Sarah arrives at the all-boys' school and fits right in: she is short-haired, "mischievous" (11), rebellious, a soccer player, and a "true poet" (7) of Lebanese curses. Even before her more feminine best-friend Dina helps transform her "into every schoolboy's fantasy," Sarah is accepted by the boys and specifically her first boyfriend Fadi (59). Fadi resembles her first, and perhaps only, 'real' love as their relationship is rooted in trust and "welcome-to-my-world" companionship (7). Fadi is significant as a character. Alameddine mentions Sarah meeting him in the opening pages of the novel so that Fadi symbolizes Sarah's innocence. As this youthful, romantic friendship deteriorates over time, so does her identity, fragmenting from loss, war, sexual assault, and fleeing her home country. Alameddine describes how the intelligent mischief shining in Fadi's eyes would eventually become "dull" with one eye covered by an eye patch when the "gendarmes beat him senseless" during the civil war (6). In the same way Fadi loses a part of his vision (losing one eye could again resemble closing one eye to escape into the kaleidoscope), he and Sarah lose the vulnerability and clarity that we have in childhood before the world becomes distorted by our trauma, pain, and heartbreaks, ultimately transforming our personal identities. Her first boyfriend eventually becomes "a shell of his former self," and Sarah, too, relates her broken selfhood to the memory of this first love and how she has lost it over time (6). Why does Alameddine structure this as one of the very first chapters of the novel, one of the first presented patterns of the kaleidoscope? Because the rest of Sarah's ruminations and first chapters are patterns almost entirely devoid of this childhood innocence, in which Alameddine depicts Sarah spending the rest of the novel attempting to trace back to this once

'pure' identity. So, despite being favored in love, this aspect of male attention on Sarah could not save her from the realities of life that come to bear on her in later years.

In contrast to favoritism, women in the novel shame Sarah for perceived promiscuity, such as in the eyes of her sister Lamia, who calls Sarah a "sexmachine" that "opens her legs to any man" (154-155). The image of an unchaste Sarah, described in Lamia's discovered unsent letters (that read more like delirious diary entries), is shattered in later chapters when the reader learns of the rape committed against Sarah. Lamia lamenting Sarah for not being a virgin before marriage is deeply unsettling: her assumptions that Sarah "lost" her virginity to her childhood boyfriend Fadi during their youthful rendezvous in Beirut is cut down with our new knowledge that Sarah was violently raped at the age of sixteen. Alameddine illuminates the dangers of making assumptions and of having a limited perspective on an individual. Instead, the novel's fragmented form, the kaleidoscopic shift of viewpoints, demonstrates the value of viewing different vantages of a person, where misconceptions of another's identity are exposed and more nuanced understandings are recuperated.

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Through various viewpoints of the Arab American subject—dividing Sarah into independent selves—we witness the experimental nature of the novel's form redeem truths of her identity. The meeting point where these vantages clash and contradict is, evidently, also the liberation from assumptions and expectations about Arab American women. As an American, Sarah is free to pursue her artistic ambitions, to date non-Arab men, to live between New York City and San Francisco, and above all, to be distant from a war-torn childhood in Beirut that "holds terrible memories" for her (272). As Lebanese, Sarah's loneliness in the U.S. never lasts

for long because her heart is connected to another family and heritage she can visit and call to whenever she chooses. Beyond nationality, her perseverance as a survivor of rape, the civil war, familial tensions, the death of her mother, the hospitalization of her sister, and her romantic heartbreaks disrupt the sterile and self-victimizing tropes from post-9/11 Middle Eastern "misery memoirs" (Pazargadi 47). And lastly, Sarah in romantic relationships is a woman of both arresting magnetism for men but also someone with great "sensitivity and need" (2002). While the dividing up of Sarah through each of these lenses provides a closer look into her life, Alameddine ends each first chapter abruptly and interlaces past and present. If he wanted to tell us a story of an Arab American individual in a chronological narrative—one bound to the traditional novel format—then Sarah would not be an authentic representation of the livelihoods of Arabs in the U.S. Instead, Alameddine's use of an experimental and formal aesthetic is a "means to undermine dominant perceptions of Arab Americans" and "imagine new transcultural possibilities" (Naous 5). Alameddine reclaims the narrative *because* he wields the kaleidoscopic form. What's important is knowing how to read it: the "difficulty" to "look at (read)" the fragmented subject is alleviated when we embrace "the unfamiliar mode of vision they require" (DeKoven 93). In order to see the subject as a truer depiction of reality, we have to put the different pieces together.

In the last first chapter, Sarah realizes she has tried to write her memoir, to tell her individual life story, until it becomes clear she has no story without a relationship to her lion's "pride", a metaphor for her family. "But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life?" she asks (308). We understand who Sarah is because we understand she grew up in a tumultuous family dynamic—the clashing of her siblings, the chauvinism of her grandfather, the discipline of her stepmother—

all under the threat of the Lebanese Civil War. We understand her because of her American mother's dismissal, from the Nour El-Din family back to the U.S. This dismissal became a wound that could never be healed, not even by Sarah's pursuit to be close to her mother in New York. And finally, we understand Sarah because of her marriages and lovers, with Lebanese and American men, who unveil aspects of both her desirability and her vulnerable fear of abandonment. The novel follows a protagonist who upturns what would have been the rudimentary, one-dimensional Arab figure in the United States in 2002. Its ability to "destabilize fixed and static notions of truth" confronts a readership that may also have assumptions about what an Arab American woman looks like, acts like, thinks, and feels (Hartman 341). Alameddine also confronts a body of scholarship, too focused on visibility in the violent sense, to notice the flourishing, innovative aesthetic choices Arab American authors are incorporating in their work. Those who are refugees, immigrants, or from diaspora families have the distinct capacity to "reshape and redefine selfhood" (Pazargadi 47). In *I, the Divine*, Alameddine amplifies the transcendent power behind a transnational Arab American identity.

Chapter Two

Identity without a Center in *A Map of Home*

> *"Didn't he know that any point could be the world's center?"*
> — Randa Jarrar, (*A Map of Home* 223)

The beginning of the 21st-century saw Arab American literature reach an aesthetic intersection, oscillating between experimentalism and conventionality. Chapter two is positioned between chapter one and chapter three, both historically and aesthetically. As an important connection between Rabih Alameddine's radical form in chapter one and Hala Alyan's contemporary lyricism in chapter three, this chapter presents an exploration of a novel during a pivotal historical moment when the future of Arab diasporic literature was still uncertain. What followed in the wake of 9/11 was a disruption: Arab American literature was propelled forwards with such "unprecedented, breath-taking rapidity" that these writers had no choice but to channel the sudden attention into a newly understood identity (Al Maleh 21). Central to this chapter, Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) is a notable example of an Arab American book stylistically caught between the Middle East and the United States. While Jarrar seeks a center from which to position herself—geographically, nationally, and in literary form—evidently, she finds there is none.

We see this lack of centrality portrayed when the family in *A Map of Home* has been displaced several times. Before their migrations, the father 'Baba' proudly teaches his daughter Nidali that Palestine has faced such turmoil because it is "the center of the world," but Nidali questions, "wasn't the world round?" (223). Not only does the novel reject centrality,

aesthetically and thematically, Hasnul Insani Djohar explains in "'The Crossroads of America' and Bildungsroman in Mohja Kahf's and Randa Jarrar's Fiction" (2021) that Jarrar also "underscores the dangers inherent in claiming" it for "any space" (Djohar 71). Jarrar asks us to consider that any point, within and beyond the Middle East and North America, could be the world's center. Jarrar is not the first Arab author to do so: scholar Sawires-Masseli notes how Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) also "casts doubt on the concept of neutral geographical space" to better represent how Arab American "identities are forever fluctuating" (104). Importantly, this study hopes to build on the previous scholarship in the field with a deliberate focus on Jarrar's form, one that reflects this oscillation between Arab and American influences, this 'centerlessness.' Like Sawires-Masseli points to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the act of naming from *Language and Symbolic Power* (1992), where a group must have symbolic capital to give a name with staying power, ultimately "the fight for name is a fight for power" (104). Later, in chapter three on Alyan's *Salt Houses*, we witness a similar struggle for the claiming of names and lands in Palestine and Israel. But, in chapter two, Jarrar refuses to conform to one name, and therefore, one center altogether.

Post-9/11: Redefining the Arab Image

In redefining the Arab image, one is faced with grotesque prejudices often depicted in films and cartoons dating decades back. Ronald Stockton's research in "Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image" (1994) documents a U.S. public opinion poll's determination that Arabs are perceived as "rich," "swarthy," and "treacherous" (127). Additionally, as recognized by scholar Shelly Slade in 1981: "The Arabs remain one of the few ethnic groups who can still be slandered with impunity in America" (143). By the beginning of the 2000s, unfortunately, we can

recognize that this claim still stands. Egyptian-Palestinian writer Randa Jarrar began writing her debut novel, *A Map of Home*, in 2000 and, similar to Alameddine, she was confronted with the reality of the following year. Still, Jarrar faced her fear of prejudice with perseverance. On her website's autobiographical timeline, she writes under 2001: "9/11 happens. I decide no one will read a novel about an Arab-American Muslim girl. I decide yes they fucking will. I keep writing." There is a certain agency Jarrar exhibits here, different from her contemporaries, when declaring she will keep writing despite the unknowns faced by Arab Americans within the literary market. At first, Jarrar's 2001 statement comes across as though no one will have interest in relating or emphasizing with an Arab girl because of the West's ethnic prejudices mentioned above. And yet, her decision that "yes they fucking will" suggests further her knack for attuning to a future outlook. This blinding spotlight shined onto Arabs—what most Arab diasporic writers perceived as a negative force to counter against—is, on the contrary, a way in for Jarrar. For her, the spotlight will eventually compel Americans to seek out stories about normal Arab Americans, not political strife or thieves on flying carpets. As Jarrar puts it in her usual humor, "we're obviously all human, what did you expect, a story about being a donkey or some other beast?" (*Zócalo*). Then, by 2008, her timeline reads: "Novel is released to huge acclaim and gets picked up in 6 countries."

What happened then between 2001-2008? As outlined in the introduction of this study, post-9/11 saw the American reading public hungry to know more about the "sudden (if problematic) visibility of the Arab 'other'" (Ball 153). With the winter 2006 *MELUS* Arab American special issue, the creation of RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers Incorporated) joining together writers, scholars, and critics, and the establishment of the Arab American Book Award in 2008, it is no surprise that Al Maleh claims the "whole literary scene was thriving for

Arab Americans" (22). This literary scene relied mostly on the post-9/11 political format detailed in this project's introduction. The other category used classic Arab storytelling motifs that scholar Sawires-Masseli's investigates as a mediation between "Arab and American literary contexts" (9). Interestingly, Sally Howell also confronted this issue of being pigeon-holed into one style or the other: when working for ACCESS, she was urged to "present the most traditional forms of Arab expressive culture to a larger society that already considered Arabs backward or worse" (62). For Howell, it was being trapped between representing 'ethnic heritage' and a stigmatization of "all things Arab in America" (62). But, despite this binary of identity politics, Jarrar fits into neither category. Quite notably, Sawires-Masseli references *A Map of Home* as a worthwhile novel but incompatible candidate for her research as she claims the novel does not contain the traditional storytelling themes and motifs in question (13). This is an important aesthetic distinction between Jarrar's debut and the post-9/11 novel and is what, ultimately, sets Jarrar apart. She is not the 'other' American or the Arab, she is the in-between. Not in-between as a center since she disputes this; rather, she has the capacity to fluctuate in-between geographical, literary, and stylistic space. In this post-9/11 decade, the image of the Arab was very contested: Alsultany explains that, on one end, American media and TV tried justifying the "denial of rights to Arabs and Muslims" (16). On the other end, nonprofit organizations, sitcom writers and producers, and civil rights groups made efforts to challenge notions that Arab culture is "incompatible with and oppositional to the United States" (17). But Jarrar's Arab American identity gave her an opportunity as author to resist this binary or conventional Americanness and the West's persistence for one image of the Arab. She chooses to portray a multi-faceted depiction instead.

A Map of Home (2008) experiments with a postcolonial reimagining of classic Western aesthetics to integrate representations of Arab identity, culture, and decentralization in American literature. Jarrar integrates this Arab culture through bilingualism (Arabic and English) and the "postcolonial bildungsroman," which according to scholar Ericka A. Hoagland is characterized by its adoption of the European form and its "dialogic engagement with pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history" (229). Jarrar decentralizes the position of the Arab subject in the literary landscape by incorporating both Western and postcolonial influences. Further, she observed her "space of possibles," for an Arab American writer within the literary field post-9/11 (Bourdieu 1993). Jarrar does take on this role as a mediator. In a 2009 online interview with *Zócalo Public Square*, Jarrar was aware of the "preferred stories that are expected" by Arab American writers during this time period, many of which are outlined in the introduction of this chapter: "the oppressed woman, the ornate magic story" and "a third strain would be the hyper-political novel." But the form of *A Map of Home* is not, what Jarrar sums up to be, the "hijab-to-freedom story" or an "Arabian Nights, genie-in-a-bottle sort of stereotype." On one hand, some critics of Jarrar, like Lynn Darwich and Sirene Harb, have argued that Jarrar's form "re-centers middle-class whiteness" (306) in their 2018 essay "Violent Intersectionalities and Marked Arabness in Randa Jarrar's A Map of Home." They ask an important question: "why Arab American experiences, such as those described in *A Map of Home*, in fact need to be validated by Western audiences" (305). But, in contrast, I argue Jarrar avoids conforming aesthetically and oscillates in between because it gives her the advantage to push boundaries while still speaking to an American audience. At first reading, Jarrar doesn't appear to experiment with form to the extent that Alameddine does in *I, The Divine*. Her novel, following the coming-of-age story of Nidali, adheres to many of the traditional elements of the Western bildungsroman genre found in

the likes of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951): a misfit teenager, early explorations of youthful romance, and a psychological journey inward. As the daughter of a middle-class family—a Palestinian father and an Egyptian-Greek mother—Nidali chronicles her family's displacement from Kuwait after fleeing the Gulf War, to Egypt, and eventually to Texas in the United States. The bildungsroman provides a structure for Jarrar to write about a refugee family, displaced time and again throughout the Middle East, while still incorporating the universality of humor and adolescence. While the bildungsroman does trouble certain concerns such as the ethnic author continuing "endorsement of Eurocentric dominance" (Stein 23), I agree with Stella Bolaki who argues for its, "usefulness for the representation of American and postcolonial subjectivities" (9). Jarrar's reimagining of postcolonial elements, like the Arabic language and inclusion of Arab culture like Quranic verses, Levantine food, and strict parents, within a traditional European form, works as an invitation for readers and a recognition that the "Other with a capital O" is not "so other" (Jarrar).

"A Blank Page, Save for the Galilee"

From chapter one to chapter two, we notice a continuing trend between the two novels: Alameddine's experimental form reflects Sarah's disruption in working through her trauma, as does Jarrar with her protagonist Nidali. Both forms are created as a result of the protagonist's pain and Jarrar uses it as an apparatus to incorporate the trauma of Arab American identity into the literary landscape. Her form deliberately serves as an intentional tool to *mediate* the instability of this identity. In *I, the Divine*, we witness Sarah's struggle to complete her memoir in the form of never-ending first chapters, leaving her Arab American identity open, unfinished,

malleable, too complex to reduce to one vantage. Her interchanging aspects and surrounding relationships manifest a selfhood contingent to where she is and who she is with, leaving her to never find reconciliation with her incompleteness. On the contrary, Jarrar more readily accepts how creativity can be transmuted from an unfinished identity into a form both digressive and universal for a wide scope of readers. The first-person voice of Nidali addresses her fragmented identity to us early on: "I was Egyptian and Palestinian. I was Greek and American" (8). Jarrar calls attention to how strange Nidali's multitude of ethnicities is but cherishes her difference. She distinguishes her Arab protagonist enough for Nidali to stand out and entice readers with her difference but not enough to stray too far from the bildungsroman's spiritual and psychological tropes of a child coming of age in their world. It is not until Nidali's family settles in the United States, a country of immigrants and refugees, where "everyone here was half one thing, half another" that she realizes, "I was no longer special" (219). Jarrar is pointing out that although Nidali has come to the U.S. from the 'controversial' and misunderstood Middle East, she is now just like any other American child, a descendant of various cultures and ethnicities. Once again, Jarrar contests centrality in her novel, preferring a balance of the East and West over choosing one side or point of most importance. As we saw with Alameddine, he too blended Sarah's experiences of Lebanon and the United States without clear preference over the other. His form "tears apart the two cultures, Arab and Lebanese, not to pronounce the one superior to the other but to chart out the predicament of the diasporic existence of his characters" (Al Maleh 36). Thus, Nidali takes on Jarrar's objectivity, expressing an omniscient narrative voice, a wisdom we see unfold throughout the novel.

What Al Maleh calls a "predicament" for Sarah can also, alternatively, be viewed as an advantage granted by the form's resistance to one identity or style. Both Sarah and Nidali find

liberation at the point where all their aspects, identities, and relations to a 'home' clash. Nidali, although of Palestinian descent, cannot claim Palestine as her homeland because her father, displaced and exiled from his country, cannot claim it either. Home, as a central place then, is nonexistent in the novel, and this troubles Jarrar's characters until they eventually come to a point of acceptance. This search for home that can never be resolved is summed up in scholar Marta Cariello's 2014 "Coming of Age in the Solitude of the Lost Land: Randa Jarrar's A Map of Home" when she states, "Jarrar's entire novel is…a search for the cartography of home" (276). At first, to preserve the memory of his homeland, Baba teaches Nidali to draw a map of Palestine. Then years later, when she asks him if her drawing is still accurate, he tells her in tears, "There's no telling where home starts and where it ends" (193). The lack of a beginning or end, like Sarah's first chapters in *I, the Divine*, is a lack of hegemonic, totalizing oneness, of one true center in the novel's form. It is reflected further when Nidali erases the drawing, leaving "a blank page, save for the Galilee." We can read this line as significant in understanding Jarrar's stance on decentralization. The blank page resembles Jarrar contesting centrality. The sea of Galilee, a symbol for Nidali's selfhood, is not a man-made construct, but a natural body of the earth at the ancient historical intersection of three major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As scholar Hasnul Insani Djohar explains thoroughly, Jarrar "rejects a monolithic vision" since the holy sites near this region—the Jewish Western Wall, the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Muslim Al-Aqsa mosque—have "existed and stood together for centuries, regardless of conflicts and wars" (71). Thus, Nidali, erasing everything but the Galilee, allows her to be *free* from any one political, religious, or national affiliation. She stares at the white page, "'You are here,' I thought as I looked at the page and all around me. And oddly, I felt free" (193). The emptiness of migratory loss provides a blank page, a fresh start, a new

beginning. Only in this space of 'nothing' can Nidali be untethered from the expectations of the Arab image, like the "war-loving, terroristic" cartoons or the victim of xenophobic tensions (Stockton 126). Similar to Abu-Jaber's motif of the Nile in *Crescent*, the elusive source of the Galilee with no "single origin" and that which "cannot be grasped, be it physically or verbally" parallels Nidali's shifting identity (Sawires-Masseli 140). She is not limited to one national, religious, or political identity in Jarrar's novel.

"A Doctor of Words"

Education is the one stable and "only constant" in Nidali's life, as opposed to her identity and culture, that is always shifting and open-ended (257). Jarrar's ability to mediate between contrasting world views is arguably, due to and informed by, her own education in Kuwait and the U.S. along with her eventual MFA in Creative Writing (2008). Being semi-autobiographical, Nidali's life reflects Jarrar's: a mixed identity, a childhood in the Middle East and the U.S., and an eventual turn to academia and writing as a career. For both Jarrar, as writer, and Nidali, as protagonist, school is a safe, neutral space. Towards the end of the novel, Nidali recognizes: "Mother, homeland, self, that could all be taken away, but school? School remained. It's why I loved school" (257). Therefore, like Jarrar, Nidali's identity by the end of the novel develops from Arab to Arab-American, granting her the ability to share her culture and heritage within the American sphere. Indeed, education—specifically *literature*—manifests meta-textually in the novel's form in various ways: creative writing compositions, epigraphs from classic literary figures, Qur'anic verses, song lyrics, and letters. For Jarrar, education is a tool for freedom, the antidote to the West's negative stereotype of the oppressed Arab woman. Even Baba heeds warning against this dismal future, as he explains to Nidali that her aunts "all raised babies and

cooked and cleaned for their useless husbands" (23) and further emphasizes, "You don't want to be like them. You want to be free…to be free, you must be educated" (24). The high standard Baba holds Nidali up to is reflective of many Arab American families and first-generation immigrant parents who pressured their children to "uphold their idealized demands of Arab culture" (Naber 2). In her book *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (2012), Nadine Naber recounts similar sentiments growing up Arab in America in which she asks, "why were the stakes of [Arab] culture and family respectability so high in America" as opposed to her counterparts in Jordan (5). Additionally, in Naber's introduction for *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* with Abdulhadi and Alsultany, she discusses Jarrar's argument against Arab cultural notions who states that Arab families "pressure daughters into conformity more than they do sons" (xxvi). Jarrar articulates that pressure to learn and achieve a high education through her characters Nidali and her parents.

Moreover, the importance of literature and language is voiced clearly throughout the novel by Nidali's parents: Baba insists Nidali gets a Ph.D. and her mother encourages her daughter to continue writing, saving "every single thing" Nidali had "written for *imla* or composition" and stressing, "You must keep all of this for posterity. I want you to write" (289). Jarrar's choice of the word 'posterity' is notable and suggests a forward-thinking outlook on the role Arab American writers will continue to play for future generations of Arab writers and readers. Besides her parents' encouragement, Nidali has a natural inclination toward the liberation that creative writing gives her, narrating "school was my true escape" in the first chapter and later applying to creative writing programs for college (10). We understand that she is escaping from the domestic turmoil between her parents, but also the feeling of uprootedness and loss of selfhood she feels with her family's migration from Kuwait to Egypt and to Texas.

And still, Nidali is all the wiser to question her Baba's declaration of centricity, as stated earlier, due to Jarrar using the knowledge gained from academia to reject "Anglo-American hegemony" (Djohar 70). Indeed, Jarrar places such emphasis on a worldly education and the influence of writing because it is exactly this that grants her the ability to be a mediator between the Middle East and America. She is aware of the post-9/11 political climate she finds herself in as a writer, but instead of assimilating into American literature only, she chooses both an Arab viewpoint and an American one.

The novel's epigraphs each reference a classic piece of literature to decentralize Nidali's ethnic identity within a Western sphere and "challenge the idea of American selfhood and exceptionalism" (Djohar 79). Jarrar deliberately chooses epigraphs that symbolize the contents of their following sections: she includes Franz Kafka's letter addressed to his father (preface), Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Pessoptimist* (1), C.P. Cavafy's "The God Abandons Antony" (146), and John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (211). In summary, Kafka confesses to tensions with his father, reflecting Nidali's troubled relationship with her own father. Habiby's quote is from a social satire that alludes to the tragedy of Zionism on the Palestinian people, where Nidali's family is a product of this trauma. Cavafy's farewell to "the Alexandria you are losing" symbolizes Nidali's loss of her home in Kuwait. Finally, Steinbeck's witty "some people never make it" out of Texas is a great reflection of Nidali's new life in Texas, one that will change her and make her an American forever. Beyond the specific contents of each epigraph, Jarrar employs these classic pieces of literature strategically within the form to structure and enhance her own writing. Surely, it is subversive for an Arab writer to enter into dialogue with classic European and American voices, since by combining Arab and American identities "their work transcends Othering, offering a

chance to change public discourse" (Sawires-Masseli 291). An Arab author's writing paralleled next to that of a classic writer from the West places her, not subjected to or as a student to the Western writer, but as an equal, in conversation. While we saw earlier how many post-9/11 novels turned to classic Arab literary tales to re-associate the Arab individual with the rich and artistic history of the Middle East, Jarrar makes a different choice within Bourdieu's space of possibles. She heads in a direction toward what would have been more relatable for the average American reader in 2008. Like Djohar points out, Nidali's "school library is dominated by European literature" (72)—*A Tale of Two Cities* (168), *The Decameron* (223), *A Passage to India* (238), to name a few—and so she engages with a typical reading list of the general American high-schooler. Jarrar's move says 'I am like you. I read what you read,' with there being no exceptionalism for the American kid compared to the Arab immigrant child. The meta-textual inclusion of literature is what contests stereotypes of Arabs as a "distant menace" (*Zócalo*). Instead, Jarrar creates an identity of an Arab who reads European literature and also is a young girl who eats "Oreos" (248), listens to Jay-Z (254), and partakes in buying a Christmas tree (251).

Looking closer at the content of the literary epigraphs, Franz Kafka's piece stands out. As the preface to the whole novel, I read Kafka's quote to be indicative of Jarrar's dismissal of centrality and, by extension, a dismissal of the limiting perceptions of the Arab American. The epigraph reads: "Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it." Kafka's imagined father lying 'diagonally' not only visually connects one point to the other, but also infers Nidali's selfhood has no center or point of most importance on a map of identities and nationalities. The Arab American is a connector of peoples and Jarrar parallels the sentiment with the voice of a classic literary figure to exemplify this more directly

for American readers. In the same way Kafka's letter is addressed to his father, Nidali readdresses her father's belief that Jerusalem is the "center of the world" to be false by reminding us the world is round and full of intersecting diagonals of selfhood.

Creative Bilingualism

Arabic, even before 9/11, was viewed by the American literary market and publishers as a "controversial language" (Said 2001). Nada Elia describes a situation from 1980 between a New York publisher who denied Edward Said's suggestion to translate and publish Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz's books into English for this reason of controversial bias. Despite its beauty and rich history as the language of pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur'an, and some of the earliest civilizations in Damascus, the "third world" nature of Arabic poses it as a threat to Americans (Sawires-Masseli 18). After 9/11, the use of Arabic would only become riskier and yet Jarrar includes it frequently, italicizing the English pronunciation of Arabic words and not always providing the translation. The result is an immersive experience of Nidali's culture, allowing her to incorporate both sides of her identity. Scholars Mohammed Albakry and Jonathan Siler explain in "Intro the Arab-American Borderland: Bilingual Creativity in Randa Jarrar's A Map of Home'" (2012) that "many bilingual writers like Jarrar adopt English as their primary literary vehicle" in order to speak "directly to Western audiences, popularize, and humanize their culture to non-Arab readers" (119-120). They call this "bilingual creativity" and define it by its use of code mixing, eye dialect, and shift of view in the narrator's voice. Jarrar employs the stylistic use of Arabic phrases in varying ways, from humor that differentiates the quirks of Nidali's Arab family to more serious inclusions from the Quran. The humor persuades the reader that Arab families have arguments like any family of another ethnicity or race. Take

Nidali's retelling of her birth in a Boston hospital when her mother Fairuza begins cursing at Nidali's father for his choice of their daughter's name. "'*Kussy ya ibn ilsharmoota?*—My pussy, you son of a whore?'" her mother exclaims and Baba tries to calm her down, "'enough, have you gone mad cussing in public that way?'" The irony, of course, is that they are in an American hospital, dominated by white and English speakers, and thus the people around them don't "'understand a word'" the parents are saying (5). The scene hilariously continues as the mother swears in Arabic at the English speakers around them and these people smile, not understanding. Although Arabic differentiates the parents as outsiders in the hospital, the humor allows Jarrar to remove the filters of this 'Other' world for American readers and "convey an open enthusiasm of cross-cultural interactions" (Albakry and Siler 119). Thus, Jarrar's use of Arabic in this way repositions power away from the English language as the 'center' or the dominant language. This scene invokes the postcolonial bildungsroman's inclusion of "master codes of imperialism into the text, to sabotage them" (Vázquez). The birth of Nidali—a conventional element of the "Bildungsroman protagonist" (Lima 441)—is subverted by the majority of English-speaking people in the hospital not understanding Nidali's parents and not the other way around. Ultimately, Arabic becomes the dominant language and an integration of creative bilingualism is achieved through Jarrar's suspension between both languages.

"Who's You and Who's Us?"

As there is no center, there is also no one distinct 'you' versus 'us' in *A Map of Home*. In a time of post-9/11 mania, this chapter explores Jarrar's deliberate decision to position her novel between formal experimentalism and classic Western aesthetics, therefore refusing one central idea of Arab American identity. She writes a coming-of-age story about an Arab American girl

who experiences "growing pains" just like any other American teen (*Zócalo*). Yet, like we saw in chapter one with Sarah, Jarrar's protagonist Nidali cannot forget her Arabness. Rather, Jarrar turns Nidali's fractured identity between the two cultures, Arab and American, into a creative form integrated with bilingualism, Arab culture, and political and historical experiences of the Middle East. She wields Nidali's education and creative writing to provide a decentralized perspective within American literature. Jarrar doesn't pick sides or adhere to one 'truth,' as in a set of political or religious beliefs, but acts only as a mediator.

Nidali reflects Jarrar's objectivity during a scene when Nidali's Christian friend Linda gets kicked out of their Islamic religion class in Kuwait. At first, Nidali feels bad that Linda will not learn about the stories from the Qur'an, but Linda informs her many of the same stories—like the "big ship with animals on it" and "Adam and Eve"—are in her Christian religion too (20). "You stole that story from us," Linda tells Nidali and Nidali responds, "Who's you and who's us?" At first reading, it appears Nidali is just a child confused by the differences and similarities between the Muslim and Christian faith, however, Jarrar is asking us as readers something much larger. Is there really a differentiation in the groups, a you versus them, if so many ideals and beliefs *intersect*? Where is the line drawn between what separates and defines Muslims and Christians—despite some clear differences like Muslims not believing Jesus is the 'Son of God'—when there are also so many similarities? The question of 'who are you' and 'who is us' is a larger parallel for the varying complexities of Arab American identity, meaning there is no simple way to define an Arab versus an American versus an Arab-American. Jarrar rejects centrality in her novel, preferring neither side, but claims that the truth is "something too big for everyone to agree on" (18). Instead of rejecting Linda as wrong, Nidali accepts and finds comfort, saying "I liked that Linda and I could be different but still believe in so many similar

stories" (20). During the post-9/11 period, when varying opinions and claims about the Arab subject were circulating, Jarrar urges readers to consider that though Arabs could be quite different in culture and language, many still share similar beliefs, dreams, and hopes like any other American girl coming of age, searching for herself, and a place to call home.

Chapter Three

Poetics of Palestinian Family Identity in *Salt Houses*

ELEGY FOR RETURN NO. 2

Everyone says it is about land, but
I believe it is about time. What are
seventy-some years in the grand
kaleidoscope of sunsets? And, if three
thousand years are what is noted,
then certainly every rotation between
that moment and this is noteworthy.

— Zena Agha, "Objects From April and May" (44)

At all times, the Palestinian collective consciousness is threatened with total erasure. With every inch of land that is lost—either from illegal Israeli settlements, houses confiscated, olive trees chopped down and fields sprayed with pesticides to be made inhospitable, or the forced fleeing of Palestinian families from the violence in the West Bank—colonization and apartheid enacted by the Israeli state threatens a wipe out of all memory and all presence of Palestinians and Palestine. In British-Palestinian writer Zena Agha's poem, she claims that "everyone" mourns the loss of the land, but for her, it is the loss of time that is more detrimental to the Palestinian cause in the long run. Though, it is impossible to directly compare the more abstract understanding of time with the immediate and long-standing effects of colonialism and apartheid, I interpret her poem's discussion about time to be reflective of the ensuing intergenerational trauma in the Palestinian diaspora and occupied territories that only worsens as the years go by. Chapter three centers this theme of time with its discussion of family intergenerational trauma and an exploration of memory decay from old age (the passing of time). As Agha so beautifully puts it: each moment lost, each setting sun, between the time Palestine

was documented some "3,200 years ago" till this present day is valuable (Masalha). For this study, the term 'collective consciousness' is used in reference to a worldwide, collective memory of Palestine, as a homeland, and Palestinians, as a people from this homeland. We intend to keep the memory conscious or *present*, beyond just historical documentation and museums but also within contemporary discourse, art, and literature. Like Agha writes, time—now and decades already lost—threatens to bury all remaining memory of the Palestinian homeland and people. Artists of the Palestinian diaspora have turned to different mediums for years as a way to resist this time ticking away. Joseph Massad writes, "to insist that the *Nakba* is a present, continuous, unfinished act of destruction is to acknowledge that its work continues apace" (191). By confronting the issues regarding Palestine, Arab American writers have struggled to separate politics from poetics. Take, for example, Salaita's recount of notable Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's claim on this matter: Darwish admits reluctantly that "no matter how much the author or critic admires poetics, explicit political discourse permeates all aspects of the Palestinian literary tradition" (7). Whether Arab American writers and poets do dwell on realistic portrayals of politics in their works, it is evident that politics always will influence some aspect of the writing. Further, what is deemed by scholars to be a novel of "realism" is contested and debatable, but the purpose of this study in chapter three is to turn our attention towards the experimentalism of the Arab American's poetic form which mirrors these complex stories of the diaspora and intergenerational trauma.

Palestinian-American writer Hala Alyan's strength as a poet is finessed in her debut novel *Salt Houses*. Her novel's form does not dwell on gritty reportages of war; instead, her prose resembles poetry, leaning on techniques like motifs of erosion and fragmentation, imagery, repetition, and the lyrical narrator as a way to focus on the intimate inner life of each character.

She embraces a lyrical form to mirror the beauty and devastation of the ongoing crisis in the Israel-Palestine region and beyond. Lyricism is defined in this chapter by numerous techniques including a focus on the characters' emotional (rather than narrative) subjectivity, anaphora with the repetition of specific phrases, narrative spontaneity as the characters recall their memories and more. Scholar and theorist Jonathan Culler's book *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) defines the use of lyric as an "imitation of the experience of the individual subject" where "the lyric poet absorbs into himself the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness" (1-2). Alyan's writing calls for an understanding of the individual and infinitely complex "I" in contrast to the homogenized, contemptuous stereotype that the West aims for the world to take into our "life-view" and accept (Orfalea 117). Similar to Culler, Majaj also credits lyric for its effectiveness in "articulating moments of intensity and illumination" (127). As we examined with Alameddine and Jarrar in chapters one and two, there is great danger in having assumptions about the Arab American subject without considering their multiple aspects and a great risk in assimilating to one conventional form. Hala Alyan does not assimilate and welcomes all vantages of her characters, while relying on lyrical techniques, tried and tested, for their ability to represent the inner consciousness. Historical events, too, are crafted impressionistically by Alyan so that the emotional details more readily come forth: beautiful imagery, love in relationships and friendships, characters' memories and desires. Her approach is deliberately gentle with no hint of the politicized, overwrought drama, the on-the-nose, played-out xenophobic tensions akin to the post-9/11 novels at the start of the 21st-century or the 'Us' versus 'Them' mentality that Jarrar and Alameddine also readily reject. Similar to what the character, Manar, observed upon her first visit to Palestine, "the awful facts—checkpoints, soldiers, camps—are often softened by captivating landscapes" (278).

Lyricism thus enables the text to allure readers without sacrificing the poignant theme of the Yacoub family's intergenerational pain. The motifs of erosion range from varying metonymic images of water and nature as both destructive and redemptive elements to hold memory. Fragmentation is communicated meta-textually by an 'echo' from past generations of Palestinian family members throughout the novel, seen by letters, parallels between younger and older characters, and repetition of collective ideas about the homeland. Evidently, the novel's form mirrors what existence in the Arab diaspora truly feels like. Alyan's lyricism is more representative of the inner, catastrophic emotional turmoil experienced by the Palestinian diaspora than structured, conventional, linear realism. By engaging with this lyrical form, Alyan mirrors the personal loss of identity Arab Americans have endured from the Palestinian crisis while simultaneously excavating these fragmented moments into a collective and present consciousness.

Hala Alyan is no stranger to displacement and dispossession. When planning for her marriage, she discovered the absence of a valuable ancestral marker of time: she has no family heirlooms. "Lost in the rubble," she tells Steve Inskeep in an interview with NPR, "We don't have heirlooms." Her life story is not far from her characters of *Salt Houses* but there is one distinct difference. As the daughter of a Lebanese mother and a Palestinian father, possessing only travel documents, Alyan's mother realized if her daughter was born in Kuwait then, due to Middle Eastern law where children receive what their father has for a passport, Hala would have been stateless. So, Alyan's mother made plans to avoid this issue by visiting her brother living in the U.S. Thus, baby Hala was born with the privileged possession of a United States passport and American citizenship. Still, this 'privilege' is not all-encompassing, because, like the Yacoub family, Alyan endures the loss of ancestral history and the right to call her ancestors' origins her

home. “And it took me a while to kind of put it together and be like: You’re putting together a fractured history” Alyan describes to Inskeep, “You’re trying to start over again.” Fiction, for Alyan, serves as a powerful tool here in recovering history. As explained by Sawires-Masseli in chapter two, to give a name is to give power. By giving names and stories to the people, events, and places of Palestine, Alyan’s writing keeps the memories alive. The writing process behind her debut mimics, if not *is*, the threading back together of images, places, and moments. Scattered, like the Palestinian diaspora of “7 million” people across the globe, these historical moments experienced by Alyan’s family need to be re-linked together to remain intact in the collective consciousness (Awad). Alyan tells Kailey Brennan Dellorusso in another interview, “By the end, I had hundreds of Microsoft Word documents that were just different scenes and I had to go back, collect them all, stitch them together, and try to make a coherent whole narrative out of all these bits and pieces” (2021). *Salt Houses* represents, quite consciously, Alyan’s own grappling with starting over, threading together scattered remnants of her family’s history whilst incorporating these fragments of her family’s past into her *present*—her life, marriage, and writing.

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On the opening page of *Salt Houses* (2017), Alyan hints at where the story will end: matriarch Salma Yacoub reads in a tea leaf ritual what will become her family’s lifetime of removal, migration, and erasure. In the wake of the 1948 *Nakba* exodus (Arabic for ‘catastrophe’), Alyan introduces the Palestinian Yacoub family, displaced from their native home of Jaffa. As the siblings grow, get married, and have children, the family tree expands following each character’s point of view and turning into a multigenerational family saga. The Yacoub family endures a series of displacements: to Nablus then Kuwait, and further to the United States

and Europe. Alyan's adoption of the family saga genre is a conspicuous decision, enlivening Palestine's past and present in contemporary American literature. Alexander Manshel sheds light in his chapter "Reading the Family Tree" on how the rising phenomenon of the multigenerational family genre "*teaches well*," with its vast scope of the historical past and its tendency to be written by ethnicized and women writers (7). His data proves that "historical fiction now stands at the very center of the American literary canon" (4). But although Alyan tracks an extensive and well-researched historical period covering the *Nakba*, the Six-Day War of 1967, the Lebanese Civil War, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and the 9/11 attacks, her focus is less on historical information and more on the intimate perspective of the Yacoub family. Each chapter of *Salt Houses* follows a different family member's narrative point of view, several years forward, with the family tree expanding as characters have children. As each character grows older, their personal Palestinian self continues to be obscured by time and memory decay. The self, referred to in this study, can be defined as an individual's distinct identity but cannot be understood without considering the intersection with familial identity. An individual's family identity, belonging to an ethnicity, lineage, and culture, all interplay to create a collective identity representing the homeland. In *Salt Houses*, this homeland of Palestine has been perpetually reduced of its native homes and inhabitants since 1948, creating a diaspora of thousands. Further, Palestinian state papers hold no citizenship status to Israel which causes multitudes of Palestinians in the diaspora to have no legal right to visit their ancestors' homeland. Many second or third-generation Arab Palestinians get turned away by Israeli inspectors at the airport if an individual has any Palestinian heritage or ties to politically-opposed ancestors. Even Randa Jarrar, whose father was Palestinian, describes on her website's timeline under 2013: "I try to visit Palestine and am denied entry." Alyan depicts this erasure and denial of existence early on

in the novel, narrating, “they came over the past two decades from villages, the ones soldiers set fire to or sowed with salt. They came from cities like Haifa and Nazareth. Their villages are lost, the names already eroded, replaced with new, Hebrew ones” (33). The erosion of names is an erosion of the memory of the people and culture. Thus, this creates a paradox: Palestine’s status is not considered legitimate, and still Palestinians are discriminated against for being exactly that—Palestinian.

No matter what other country they flee and migrate to, Palestinians cannot remove themselves from their heritage and identification. Like Sarah in *I, the Divine* and Nidali in *A Map of Home*, the characters of *Salt Houses* do not want to extricate their Arab identity altogether. But they do feel lost because they are neither here nor there then in definition and face the same crises of fragmented selfhood that the preceding chapters’ protagonists dealt with. As chapters one and two discussed, scholars like Said, Pazargadi, and Al Maleh argue for the experimental form’s ability to showcase the positives of hybrid identity, but this evolves into a challenge when the Israeli government and legislation deny such cultural existence altogether. How does one *not* become disembodied when their family identity, and so their personhood, memory, and heritage, is being buried under future generations? Such political, societal, and cultural denial creates a fracture in the mind and in the existing identity of an individual. *Salt Houses* responds with a communal outlook: when an ongoing group of people share the same erasure of being, it transcends the personal—that which gets lost in time, memory, and death of an individual—and instead becomes the collective consciousness. When considering personal selfhood, we cannot detach it from the collective identity. Yet, the right to name and embody this identity is a struggle in contemporary society, discourse, and politics. As Edward Said explained, “the greatest battle Palestinians have waged as a people has been over the right to a remembered

presence and, with that presence, the right to possess and reclaim a collective historical reality" (2000). Most notably, Joseph Massad argues that the loss of Palestine is not "final" or "dead," it has not been wiped out by some kind of natural disaster, but "has been stolen, taken by force, and the Palestinians are barred from recovering it" (188). Rather than accepting that Palestinians will have to mourn "their losses quietly and move on" (188), this chapter will explore how Alyan's form engages Said's "remembered presence" and recalls, retells, and reshapes Palestinian history into present day. "Presence" in the novel manifests by reflecting the trauma felt by Palestinians and the Arab diaspora through lyricism and claiming a spot for Palestinian American writing in the American literary market.

The Echo from Past Generations

At first, Alyan's fragmented storyline reads like hundreds of puzzle pieces, pushing us to mentally travel back and forth among the characters' lives, countries, and children. She intends for the text to engage readers as we sift through what is a memory and what is present day. Similar to *I, the Divine*, the novel follows no strict chronological order within the sections which makes placing the events on a cohesive timeline to be no easy task. In her interview with Dellorusso, Alyan explains, "it felt like I was writing a million little poems…they're just an amalgamation of a ton of tiny moments" (2021). The medium that she knows best—poetry—adds significant weight to every tiny moment in the novel, from sentence to sentence, encouraging us to read with her prose with metaphors in mind. Additionally, the non-chronological technique forces us to constantly recall and be reminded of each character's loss, so that the more the story moves forward, the more the losses accumulate, and the more the past chapters form a clear picture. Again, Alameddine's kaleidoscopic technique from chapter one

resounds here, similar to how his novel brought together new events to fragment and complicate further our understanding of a character's identity. In *I, the Divine* we are left with the unreliability of Sarah as our only narrator. Comparatively, in Alyan's novel, several characters of the family tree repeat and, what I call, *echo* the same ideas and emotions. Echo can be understood as not just repetition since these moments do more than parallel each other, but repetitions that reflect or remediate moments from earlier chapters and in different contexts. The technique of echo is the poetic representation of intergenerational trauma where the scope of the family tree highlights the significance of the Palestinian devastation over time. Alyan traces such an extensive line of generations forward and back to prove how detrimental the loss of belonging and selfhood can be. Within the first few pages of the novel, patriarch Hussam Yacoub cries out, "They took my home, they took my lungs. Kill me" (3). Hussam's sickness represents the first fracture his Palestinian family echoes for the next several generations. He does not see his life worth living without his home in Jaffa, imagining his physical pain is directly connected to the loss of his home. Homeland, for many Arab American diasporic writers, is where the soul resides. So, without this homeland, many struggle to reconcile their purpose to exist. Alyan narrates, "Hussam fiercely believed his illness was tied to the occupation of Jaffa, the city with the peach-colored house they'd left behind," (3). A lost, picturesque image of Jaffa is only the beginning—the third page of the novel—as its narrative form then follows the displacement like "a thread that connects the grandchildren with their ancestral history" (Salam and Mahfouz 305). Alyan's thread is an interconnected loop without beginning or end: she takes us forward to the present-day family members and then backwards to understand the past.

Salt Houses begins with Hussam grieving his loss of Jaffa, and therefore his identity, and ends with his great-granddaughter Manar—four generations forward—echoing the same struggle

regarding her fragmented selfhood. An American student living in Manhattan in 2014, Manar is called a messed up "mutt" by her best friend for having a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother while living in the United States (275). Her best friend is teasing her, yet this feeling of not having one concrete identity plagues Manar with unease as it did for Sarah and Nidali in chapters one and two, respectively. Alyan writes Manar as the last generation of the Yacoub family we meet on the page, making her an important symbol for the detrimental, long-lasting, and far-reaching consequences of the Palestinian diaspora. Decades after Hussam's death, Manar still feels the repercussions of familial pain, narrating, "Palestine was something raw in the family, a wound never completely scabbed over" (281). While this wound may be something an American child would hope to ignore or be indifferent to, Manar resembles her great-grandfather Hussam in associating her physical pain to be a direct result of her fractured identity. She believes, "her problems, the disarray of her life, all spring from her heritage" (276). It is not until she visits Palestine as an adult woman that she reckons with her privilege of having a hybrid identity, thinking to herself: "while she was busy sleeping with American boys and writing essays about the diaspora, there were people over here *being Palestinian*" (282). Alyan is deliberate with this line, suggesting a meta-textual irony of an Arab American author writing a novel about the diaspora that criticizes the very act. As if Manar's distance from the region and her privilege of being American does not qualify her for "*being*" Palestinian too. She is an American, living in the West, far from the daily violence and pain experienced in Gaza and the West Bank, but ultimately she cannot remove herself from her Palestinian heritage and all the labels that come with it. Her identity's very existence is seen as a threat, stirring up controversy in contemporary society that encourages Arabs to "mourn the loss of Palestine without any public signs of grief" (Massad 189). But Manar recognizes her distress is something much bigger

than her struggles as an individual; rather, this is an inheritance of "a traumatic legacy" (Salam and Mahfouz 303). There is a "sense of thwarted belonging so strong" to Palestine that she upholds her Arab identity, despite it causing her pain (313). Notably, the echo can be read as a positive call for the present generations to advocate and voice out what their ancestors could not. What separates Manar and other Arab Americans of the diaspora in her age group from their parents is the curiosity to look to the past for answers for their present pain. Scholars Wael J. Salam and Safi M. Mahfouz describe, "as the novel unfolds, Palestinian children not only listen to their parents' and grandparents' stories of wars and displacements, but also experience violence in Palestine or see it on the media on a daily basis" (303). Alyan begins the novel with Hussam's hopelessness and ends with Manar's inherited pain to remind us that Palestinians are still present. The children don't have a choice, if they want to resist the erasure of their Palestinian identity, then they must openly speak up about their families' histories.

A House with a Garden

Alyan's brilliant forward and backward dynamic tracks these moments across her characters' lives, both to echo and to salvage the collective Palestinian identity. The distinct use of metonymy, a central image of a garden in Palestine, is repeated in various chapters as the years carry on. The garden is anaphoric—a stylized and repeated word or phrase for poetic effect—and a motif throughout the progression of the novel that gets passed from generation to generation. As a symbolic and romantic image of Palestine, neutral from a central political location and name, it defies all spatial-temporal specificity. The spatial-temporal can be understood as a story with a location, time period, and background information, so the reader can contextually gather and suppose meaning from the text (Pitkänen 1). Alyan employs this

impressionistic technique to create purposeful *abstraction* through poetic imagery. Since we do not know where exactly on a map this garden sits or what it has become, in relation to national identity or religious identity, we are compelled to focus on the characters' interiority instead. Abstraction helps resist the temptation for readers to project their own political or ethnic identities—who and what values they chose to align with—onto the characters or story. Without this location specificity, the question of whether the garden is now under Israeli occupation or still within the Palestinian territories is written past by Alyan, who favors the garden's symbolic existence as 'Palestinian consciousness' over an actual place. Thus, through this use of metonymy, the garden ends up standing for the national space of the Palestinian collective, the home they are desiring to return to. She echoes the image of the garden in almost every character's chapter, connecting the family who are bound to the garden so that it remains in their memory. In Nablus 1965, Mustafa's psychological turmoil reflects his father Hussam: "A small part of him—which he already recognizes as a lost, former self—longs for his mother's garden, the sound of wind rustling the leaves" (47). Several years later in Kuwait, Atef, the friend of Mustafa and husband of Mustafa's sister, Alia, recalls meeting Alia in the same garden: "*You look beautiful in red. I miss you. Remember that afternoon in your mother's garden*?" (100). His love and longing for what was is lyrical and tender, recalling the beauty of his wife, the innocence of their first meeting, with no mention of the catastrophe that would follow. The garden is a safe space in his memory, where once he was just a young man falling in love "dazed at the sight of Alia" (98). Alyan takes a gentle approach: her prose makes no mention of how Israeli troops destroyed or stole the land holding this garden and is deliberately lacking in anger towards a historical event, surrounded by trauma and erasure. Atef does not necessarily yearn for the house back or for catastrophe to befall Israel. Instead, he yearns for this safe and simple

moment. His holding on to a fragmented moment in time again creates a tension with the spatial-temporal specificity, since his nostalgia is for a place eternal in his memory, but may no longer physically exist in real life.

Further, Alyan's deliberate emphasis on the metonymy of the garden allows a region of the world, riddled with decades of war and differing opinions, to be accessible for non-Arab readers, as many may not be familiar with the historical details about Palestine and Israel. The abstraction of names, religions, and nationalities from the garden arguably welcomes in an array of readers who may otherwise turn down a novel heavy in political bias or agenda. Rather than losing a non-Arab readership who cannot (and do not want to) relate to decades of Palestinian-Israeli war, Alyan's prose integrates abstraction of time-space specificity so that she does not hold the non-Arab reader at arm's length. She invites them in closer with her humanized portrayals of her characters' inner lives. Interestingly, the more universal her readership, the more Alyan can preserve the ideas and stories of Palestine, not just in the collective consciousness, but in the American literary market. We experience this lyrical, human portrait most strongly with the character of Atef who grows from a young man to an aged great-grandfather by the end of the book. In the scene discussed above, when Atef narrates how he misses his wife (even though she is right in front of his eyes in the scene), he is actually nostalgic for his homeland and the past self he has had to leave behind. Despite the traumatic upending of his home, Palestine is an unchanging place in his memory. Atef thinks to himself about Alia, "*I was watching you earlier. You look exactly the same*" (100). His nostalgia and yearning for a person he once knew is actually a yearning for a place, forced into erasure, that speaks to the Palestinian diaspora's mourning at large. Atef resembles the Palestinian traumatic memory that is collective. But before the collective consciousness can be buried entirely beneath time, Alyan

excavates memories, sentiments, and longing through the continuous technique of echoing each character.

As the novel continues forward in time, the garden only becomes more symbolic and important. The next generation, Atef's daughter Riham, also recalls, "there was another garden" but "the details of it are hazy to her, almost fictional" (106). While Riham's memory of the garden and her homeland is not lucid in great detail, the collective memory remains and "serves as a basis through which Palestinians call for the right to return" (Aboubakr). Riham does not 'answer the call' to return to her parents' and grandparents' homeland, however, her niece and Atef's granddaughter, Manar, will. As the novel proceeds forward, it becomes explicit that the garden symbolizes Palestinian nationhood. To preserve the garden, in each child's memory, is to preserve Palestine as a nation. Linah's chapter (Atef's other granddaughter) echoes this preservation once more when Atef, now an old man, realizes he *must* speak about the family's garden, and thus his homeland, to his grandchildren in order to protect it. In Amman 2011, the grandkids, Linah and Manar, come to speak with Atef and he tells them, "'Your grandmother used to live in a house with a garden. In Palestine. With her brother…I used to go there a lot'" (273). By recalling this symbolic place once more for his grandchildren, making it individualized within the lyrical prose, he is passing on crucial information to guide the Palestinian collective memory throughout the next generations. Alyan narrates, "*He has to remember for the both of them*. Yes. Atef continues talking. 'A good house. There was a table under the trees. In the summer, we'd sit out there for hours'" (273). Through the lineage of Atef, Alyan is upholding the historical, cultural, and political presence of Palestinians in both Arab and non-Arabs' memories and awareness. Eventually, Atef will pass away, but now his grandchildren can pass on the story of the garden in Palestine that once existed. Finally, the epilogue follows Alia's

perspective as she hears her granddaughter Manar singing to her baby. She recalls moments of joy in the last sentences of the novel, confirming how significant the garden is to the Yacoub family: “her mother’s garden…she sits in the dark, listening to the ancient, salvaged music” (310). The symbolism in this last moment is rich and multi-layered where, once more, Alyan recalls the homeland of Palestine with the garden and its ties to Palestine’s history. The “music” resembles the cultural stories to be passed on orally, just as Manar is singing to her baby—the next generation—and these stories, Alyan emphasizes, are worth salvaging and protecting at all costs.

The Unmoored Self

Water, having the power to both cleanse and drown, is a poetic motif in the novel symbolizing the Yacoub family’s unmoored self and the threat of memory erosion. Displaced from their homeland of Jaffa, the Yacoub family loses their sense of belonging to a place and to their identity of being Palestinian. Further, Jaffa, itself, is emblematic of water, as it sits in one of the most important historical and geographical sites of “seafaring and international trade routes in Palestine,” and was once a “highly sophisticated urban coastal centre” dating back to the “Iron Age II (c. 1000-600 BC)” (Masalha). Known today as Tel Aviv-Yafo, the ancient port city in Israel, Alyan uses Jaffa not just as another representation of water, but also as a symbolic call for Palestinians to come back to the sea, back to their homeland. The sea for Palestinians is sacred, once the livelihood for indigenous Palestinian fishermen, and many Arabs cannot fathom their life or identity without it. The imam in Nablus is part of this lineage and explains to the character Mustafa: “‘my father…his grandfather’s grandfather, they were fishermen. They knew the sea as intimately as they knew their children or their own bodies’” (40). He continues, telling Mustafa

that he wishes his father had died from "an enormous wave" taking him (43), before the *Nakba* exodus which resulted in the eventual fleeing of "700,000" Palestinians (Reiff). For the imam, the sea was so intricately linked with his family that he perceives the removal from this region as the removal from one's selfhood, one's purpose, or meaning in life. Alyan's inclusion of this dialogue tells us that removing a person from their land and livelihood can have destructive effects on the individual and will eventually get passed down to their children. Israel's folding of Jaffa is historically contested in political discourse, but Alyan focuses on the poetics to display a human portrait of the intimate, personal consequences. The imam says, "they've robbed us even of the dignity of death" (43). Alyan implies here that not belonging to a place or home is worse than death. The imam's wish that his father had rather died in the sea, doing what he loved and knew best, to have died not knowing what it would have been like to lose his home and pass away in a foreign place, is a heartbreaking reminder of the ensuing trauma the *Nakba* has caused. Existing unmoored from their homeland results in an unmoored Palestinian community and a consciousness, now afflicted with this pain.

Two generations forward, we witness water acting as a destructive agent to the Palestinian community again with the Yacoub family. Shortly after the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and Palestine, protagonist Alia finds herself uprooted in Kuwait City, surrounded in her home by other Arab refugees. "*We're like castaways from a shipwreck*," she thinks as many Palestinians found themselves without not only their physical homes but also their citizenship after the Arab armies' loss to Israel in 1967 (69). Alyan's poetic metaphor is quite literal here: "castaways" represents Palestinians both forcibly removed (cast out) by the Israeli military, as well as stranded survivors, stateless, without a home or belonging. The "shipwreck" is another metaphor to represent the people of Jaffa, indigenous seafarers, on their ship or home,

now destroyed by the wars. Alia refers to the water, once the wellspring of their home in Jaffa, morphing into a great destructor, capable of wrecking homes and washing away survivors to be lost at sea. They are lost survivors, clinging on to each other and an identity that could be lost forever. Alia is no longer the past self she was—happily preparing for her wedding in Nablus, her family whole and together—and she recognizes she must cling to what she can remember. Alyan emphasizes Alia's resistance to forgetting, compared to her husband Atef who is more willing to begin their new life in Kuwait and "*believes Kuwait will save him*" as a way to foreshadow Alia's eventual mental decline with Alzheimer's disease (70). Alia, as a leading protagonist, strongly preserves and holds onto this life and identity she once knew, so that eventually when she can no longer remember, her husband Atef will be the one to preserve her memories.

Water, as a motif, threatens a total loss of the Palestinian collective consciousness: Alyan imagines what could happen if Palestinians allow their sense of attachment to be completely eroded. Alia and Atef's "bookish" daughter Riham struggles with her lack of belonging in her social spheres, preferring studying rather than spending time with the more confident and liberated girls on her trip to Jordan (102). Her being an outsider and her fractured selfhood is a consequence of the loss of belonging both her parents and grandmother share. Her father, Atef, does not speak to her of his time fighting in Palestine, her mother, Alia, is emotionally absent, and her grandmother does not talk much about her lost home in Jaffa. In a pivotal moment in Riham's chapter, she goes off swimming in the Jordanian sea by herself and her mother and friends stay on the beach. Drifting out further than she intended, the waves suddenly pull her under. She is drowning: "she sees herself, a flimsy string floating through the water. Then another image—seeing herself from above, looking down at her struggling, airless body" (126).

Alyan presents an image quite literally of one person being split into two people, two halves of herself, one dying and one seeking a buoy to live. While having this near-death experience, Riham's first sense is the need to belong to something and somewhere. She cannot keep allowing the waves of life to erode her sense of self. Alyan reveals to us what will happen if she does: in a powerful image while drowning, Riham envisions "that she has lived for decades, that she is an old woman dying now, elsewhere, and this is just a memory" (126). Her vision speaks again to Alyan stressing the importance of voicing Palestinian identity in the collective memory. Without remembrance, the characters will die along with their histories. The water is an awakening of self for Riham, as she calls for God, "when the waves rocked her hard enough, she had called out for Allah and no one else" (130). Riham finds belonging not in a country, citizenship status, or social groups, but in faith. This idea of faith can be taken further if we read it as faith in "resisting the loss" of Palestine and one day recovering it for future generations (Massad 191).

Memory is the most vulnerable to water's destructive force—the stories and experiences of Palestinian elders drowning under the depths of forgotten time. Arguably, the most prominent theme of Alyan's novel ties directly to its title in which "salt houses stand for memories" always at the risk of being washed away, dissolved, irrecoverable (Salam and Mahfouz 302). The imagery of water metaphorically drowning Palestinian families is prevalent in Manar's chapter when she sits on the beach in Jaffa and draws all her family's names in the sand. "'We were all here'" she muses about her family members, some who lived in Jaffa, now deceased, and some still alive but could never make it back to Palestine (296). Then, suddenly, "a large wave washes over the sand, the water eating her words, her family come and gone in this sea that belongs to none of them" (296). Her belief that the sea does not "belong" to her family is both painful and freeing, Alyan suggests if it does not belong to the Palestinians then it does not belong to Israelis

either. Manar favors the perspective of the sea as elusive and decentralized just like Jarrar's stance on the intersectional and unclaimed Sea of Galilee in chapter two. Though for Manar the water is redemptive in this scene, the elders struggle to fight its incoming disintegration. While Alia's battle with Alzheimer's takes up the second half of the novel, it motivates Atef, an elder grandfather at the end, to vehemently cling to the memories of his past homes. He reminisces about "some old, vanished house in Jaffa. They glitter whitely in his mind, like structures made of salt, before a tidal wave comes and sweeps them away" giving the novel its title (273). Alyan's envisioning of water as a violent force, a "tidal wave," portrays how difficult it is for elders in the Palestinian diaspora to recall and pass on memories of their homeland to future generations. With every recollection, water threatens to erode and drown. But the struggle is essential to salvage and preserve. When Atef and his family realize and comes to terms with Alia's Alzheimer's disease, it becomes the family's duty to remember what she no longer can. Alyan illuminates the immense courage it takes when the doctor reports Alia's disease to the family and Atef struggles to process the news, "the words float in and out, as though Atef is submerged, lifting his head above water every few minutes" (259). Although he is at risk of metaphorically going under like his wife, Atef decides to share as much as he can with his grandchildren and contribute his memories to the collective consciousness.

To Write is to Recover

Writing for Alyan, and meta-textually for her characters, is recovering. Epistolary writing, perhaps one of the most significant and lyrically expressive techniques of the novel, threads the Yacoub family's four generations into one consciousness. Atef's collection of letters becomes a major connecting point throughout the story. Special focus is placed on him as a

character because he is the only person who knows about the disappearance of Alia's brother, Mustafa, and his assumed death by Israeli troops. This event inspires Atef to write unsent letters to Mustafa as a way to cope with his grief. He describes the changes in his life and family, and even makes more intimate, diaristic confessions about his wife, and their past, narrating, "*I wanted all of it*, he wrote once. It was true" (274). Alyan never reveals to us an entire letter, only fragments italicized in several of Atef's chapters as he recalls what he had written to Mustafa, causing us to frequently guess the context. The fragments of the letters are another meta-textual inclusion to reference the fragmentation of a Palestinian's life and the tides of memories that surface and recede. Even further, this format of fragmented letters symbolizes Alyan's own fragmented way of writing, her focus on tiny moments, writing each paragraph like a poem. Atef's letters are so beautiful, lyrical, and confessional that they capture the hearts and minds of his grandchildren when they discover them years later. Atef's grandson Zain is the first to discover the brown book, accidentally left behind in a box in Beirut: "'it's in Arabic,' Zain says disappointed. Neither he nor Linah can read Arabic well. 'There's, like, a hundred pages'" (241). Right away, the grandchildren are witnessing an intimate and deeply personal view of their grandfather, one that their parents do not even know. Quickly, the letters become a thread connecting "the grandchildren with their ancestral history" (Salam and Mahfouz 305). But this initial discovery presents a major dilemma regarding memory preservation that Alyan heeds warning against throughout the whole novel. With the grandchildren being raised American, and broadly the younger Palestinian diaspora generation, they are not able to read Arabic as fluently, and so the memories of the elder generation are at risk of being lost or forgotten about. Alyan mirrors the reading experience masterfully, in the same way that English-speaking and American

readers are learning about the trauma of Arab Palestinians, so are the young characters of the novel.

Nonetheless, Zain's curiosity pushes him to know more, now fascinated by his grandfather's past and the man named Mustafa, and he is determined to decrypt the letters. He is excavating and salvaging the Palestinian collective consciousness. In the same way, this thesis has deciphered Alyan's form by linking moments and memories—many not on a structured, narrative timeline—Zain, too, must connect the fragments of the letters. Thus, deciphering the letters is like the reading of the novel. After eventually translating them, Zain reports back to Linah that Mustafa was "someone in Palestine. Jiddo sent him the letters…He wrote something about a house" (247). The epistolary thread is an explicit way for Alyan to poetically connect the familial and collective self with the younger generations' consciousness. Now "Atef's 'haunting legacy,'" a result of the intergenerational trauma in the Yacoub family, becomes known to his grandchildren, whereas before, they may never have understood this painful part of their grandfather's past (Schwab 2010). Interestingly, when Atef does find out his grandchildren have read his letters, he is overcome with joy and relief. "He was stunned to find himself smiling. Slowly, then laughing…It was like dropping the weight of a planet," Alyan narrates, "What had they thought reading them?…Better to give the world over intact, let them speculate. They know him. Yes. He is glad" (269). Atef feels such immense gladness at his grandson's discovery because a part of him, his identity and most personal self, is now understood by his grandchildren. They love his letters so much that "they talk about the letters like a book" and Alyan narrates in Manar's chapter, "she knows some of the passages by heart" (279). The "book" of letters for the characters, one they cherish so dearly, is the novel *Salt Houses* for us, urging readers to remember the "passages by heart," to preserve the memory of these people.

With the grandchildren understanding and even enjoying knowing about Atef's darker moments and confessions, he feels assured they will pass on the memories—their uncle Mustafa, the trials and tribulations the grandparents faced after so many displacements and wars, and overall, their Palestinian legacy—with grace and perseverance.

In *Salt Houses*, Alyan stresses the pertinence of recovering fragmented memories so that the Palestinian elders can preserve their identity, culture, and history for the next generation. Her poetic form, expansive and interconnected among a multitude of characters, countries, and experiences, crafts a powerful and compelling history of one Palestinian family's intergenerational pain. Through the various characters recalling their memories, Alyan "weaves these flashbacks and nightmares to serve as resistance tactics against forgetfulness and memory erasure" (Salam and Mahfouz 300). So, while memory is decayed from old age, the novel's backward and forward form recovers it into being. If each generation in every chapter remembers their personal presence within the Palestinian collective, then the collective consciousness and identity will not be completely eviscerated. In the last moments of her life, Salma, the matriarch and Alia's mother, lies on her deathbed and suddenly begins pleading to Alia, "when it happens, you must find a way to remember" (141). Alia does not understand at first and asks her what she means. Her mother responds, "'I was wrong. I thought I could make myself see something that wasn't there. But it was a lie. I saw the houses, I saw how they were lost. *You cannot let yourself forget*" (141). Most likely, Salma is referring to the teacup ritual on the eve of her daughter's wedding when she saw the prediction of migration and destruction. After spending her lifetime suppressing memories of Jaffa and her family's upheaval, Salma reconciles that her family cannot forget where they have come from and what they have lost. Alyan uses italics to emphasize the catastrophe of what forgetting could mean for the family.

Notably, this is another moment foreshadowing Alia's battle with Alzheimer's, an omen that either she (and Atef) will need to preserve and pass on the family's memories. As Atef overhears the grandchildren say, "'He has to remember for the both of them now" (268).

Again and again, from one elder character to the next, Alyan deliberately uses the saga genre to connect the extensive line of generations and teach us about what the life of one Palestinian family would look like, from 1948 to the present day 2010s. Her rich, multi-layered lyrical form allows an experimental take on the standard novel format to mirror and salvage the Arab American identity of the Palestinian diaspora most effectively. Repetition, metonymy, imagery, and the poetic, fragmented nature of her prose all present a compelling, contemporary view of the Arab American subject. Although far from the reductive post-9/11 image that Jarrar was fearful of, Alyan is still faced with the complexities of sharing Palestinian-American stories within the literary market. But her human and lyrical portrayal succeeds in connecting us to the people of Palestine, not to politics. She succeeds through a happy accident: Alyan's scattered Word documents, the fragments of her story, result in a form much closer to how Arab Americans experience navigating life. "What is a life?" Alyan asks us towards the end of the novel, a question relevant for all readers, Arab and non-Arab, as we reflect on the fragmented memories and perspectives we have just read. She answers, "Continuing to move, enduring, not stopping even when there is pain" (273). Her words speak beyond the page and the characters—she speaks for the Palestinian diaspora, continuing to fight for their remembered presence in history, in literature, in the public eye, and in the present, despite the pain. Alyan reminds *us*, as readers, we cannot let ourselves forget about Palestine.

Conclusion:

Removing the Binary Between Form and Identity

Colonizers write about flowers.
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks
Seconds before becoming daisies.
I want to be like those poets who care about the moon.
Palestinians don't see the moon from jail cells and prisons.
It's so beautiful, the moon.
They're so beautiful, the flowers.
I pick flowers for my dead father when I'm sad.
He watches Al Jazeera all day.
I wish Jessica would stop texting me Happy Ramadan.
I know I'm American because when I walk into a room something dies.
Metaphors about death are for poets who think ghosts care about sound.
When I die, I promise to haunt you forever.
One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them.

— Noor Hindi, "Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying" (2020)

To speak on an ethnic writer's use of form is not without its challenges. Palestinian-American writer, Noor Hindi, brings up an important idea in her 2020 poem "Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People are Dying" regarding the use of empty metaphors and well-crafted prose without consideration of ethnic identity. Hindi protests any careless belief that Arabs can simply indulge in craft and write about the beauty around them—flowers, the moon, the lyrical self—with the same privilege held by the Romantic tradition's writers and without care for the influence their Arabness will innately have. "Colonizers write about flowers" is a powerful opening. It is a direct implication that white authors and poets in the U.S. write about peaceful imagery because they can, as they exist far removed from the wars of the Middle East. This line also reminds us that aspects of romanticism—writing about serene nature and individual exploration—is rooted in the poetic traditions of the West and, therefore, in colonization. So, as

much as Hindi wants to be "like those poets who care about the moon," she recognizes the dishonor in ignoring how the Palestinian people, who share her heritage and homeland, do not hold these same privileges. Taking a broader look, I find Hindi's poem even more interesting in tandem with other Palestinian artistic contemporaries who share similar sentiments on balancing politics and the engagement of form. Visionary Palestinian painter, Sliman Mansour, recently described in a video interview with Mickey Muhanna a series of his paintings that were questioned by Israeli authorities in 1981 Ramallah: "I never considered myself a political artist," (16:18-16:21) he explains but when he was instructed by the Israelis to paint something 'apolitical' like nice women or flowers, he remarks, "I thought it's kind of silly…that I'm painting flowers and I'm living under occupation. It doesn't fit" ("Sliman Mansour" 16:37-16:44). The last line of Hindi's poem echoes this: "One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them." Both Mansour, as painter, and Hindi, as poet, view flowers as a symbolic privilege: to be able to write about flowers means one owns the land on which these flowers grow, where they can plant their own flowers, watch them bloom, and reap their harvest. The loss of the homeland (Lebanon, Kuwait, Palestine in this study), by either a colonial settler or a war leader, seems to be the most, if not the only, significant idea that Arab American and MENA writers and scholars refer to. Hindi argues that to write or paint flowers is to possess a form that grants this freedom of expression, as if, politics and creative prose are binary and antithetical to each other.

On first reading, Hindi's poem makes a persuasive argument that form is superfluous in the face of real hardship. What tangible progress is made by scholars and writers, whether Arab or non-Arab, sitting in a classroom and discussing what each metaphor means in a poem when real civilians of the world are dying? But this study, conducted over the last three chapters, proves that to assign a binary between politics and form, or identity and aesthetics, is a reductive

mistake. Scholars so willingly overlook form and ignore form altogether that they reject the craft of Arab American writers and ignore the fact that form is working naturally as an act of resistance in itself. Hindi makes this fatal mistake in her poem. She reduces ethnic Arab writers to be spokespeople for social and political traumas of the MENA region, claiming she cannot be like her Western counterparts, yet in her writing she employs the same literary techniques that this study examines. Like Hala Alyan, Hindi embraces lyricism with her lyrical "I" narrator to make her grief intensely personal and rooted in her individual emotions. Similar to Randa Jarrar, she situates her Arab experience in American culture—"I wish Jessica would stop texting me *Happy Ramadan*"—to make it relatable for both white and Arab readers. And like Alameddine, she relies on numerous metaphors, like daisies and the moon, to represent larger ideas on death and the diaspora. Ultimately, Hindi's poem reduces her own people, and by extension, any author of color, to be capable only of ethnographic depictions in literature. By contrast, a more complex perspective on the innovative and formalistic choices Arab American writers make to resist simplified misrepresentations in literature should continue to be considered in the study of Arab writers. This thesis represents Arab American writers, not as mere ethnographic or political spokespeople, but as deliberate craftsmen in contemporary literature.

This thesis examines only a small selection of novels and scholarship on the creative uses of form to portray complex and nuanced identity in Arab American contemporary fiction. In the modern-day 21st-century, the pursuit to reshape how the Arab American is understood, identified, and expressed in fiction frequently falls upon the Arab descendants of the diaspora, born in or taking refuge in the United States. Arab Americans, notably, cannot always find resonance with the cultural traits of their Arab parents and grandparents nor find safety within the politically charged arena of their adopted home in the U.S. We consistently see the Arab

American writer and scholar turn to the blank page as their only home, one place where they can exist concretely, not floating between the U.S. and the MENA region. Writing gives structure to the replicating of this unique identity, yet this writing holds inherent stakes: *how* does the Arab American write about the complex negotiation of identity they face on the daily? This thesis has worked to answer this question with a selection of three novels, exploring the Arab diasporic writer's craft and form at length. Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* told one Arab American woman's story made up entirely of first chapters that never finish, presenting a kaleidoscopic look at all her different aspects. Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* responds to the post-9/11 decade with a bildungsroman structure that both embraces Western aesthetics but refuses total assimilation into American culture. Finally, Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* is shaped by poetic fragments where lyricism acts as a vehicle for portraying the depth of intergenerational pain experienced by Palestinian diasporic families. In all three novels, form—how these writers chose to *craft* their stories—is not only the precedent to their writing process but the major tool for each novel's richly layered portrait of Arab American identity.

When we hear the word "Arab" in the United States, white Americans may not often think of creativity, aestheticism, or beauty, even. What comes to mind may still be news reports laced with Islamophobic rhetoric, Bush-era memories of the Iraq invasion, and narratives entrenched in one foreign conflict or another. When we do think of aesthetics, they may think only of magic lamps and Scheherazade's tales, as if the Arab world is nothing more than an ancient place, forever trapped in long-lost scrolls of classical tales. Critic Fady Joudah also describes the continuous binary made between identity and politics when discussing Mahmoud Darwish's last collection of journals. He writes, "some time will have to pass before 'resistance' or 'the political' are no longer the first words uttered…But how much time?" (2009). Arguably, that

time to bypass hesitations about aesthetics is now. By not overlooking form, we can observe how these Arab American authors equally demonstrate significant matters of identity, lost lives, pain, and the creative joy of the Arab diaspora. The novels of this study use form deliberately to better represent all the complex elements of Arab American identity: the sufferings and triumphs, the death of old identities, the rebirth and reshaping of a new selfhood, and the ongoing perseverance of existing between two worlds. With ongoing attention to the formalism and aesthetics of 21st-century Arab American novels, a richer, deeper, and more expressive perspective can be continued in the study of American literature and scholarship.

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