

MULTILINGUAL ARABESQUES  
IN THE NOVEL IN NORTH AMERICA

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## ABSTRACT

Rachel Anne Norman: Multilingual Arabesques in the Novel in North America  
(Under the direction of María DeGuzmán)

“Multilingual Arabesques” examines the literary and linguistic constructions of identity in the Arab diaspora in North America. Novels, and the languages used to write them, are cardinal spaces of cultural belonging. Arab North Americans’ inclusion (or not) of Arabic in their fiction establishes a linguistic identity that situates characters, texts, and authors within and beyond national spaces. By comparing representations of Arabic as a “foreign” language in novels from Canada, Mexico, and the United States, this dissertation argues that Arab diasporic writers invoke language to perform identity in contextually contingent ways. Within the United States and Canada, Arabs are socially constructed as “enemy,” “other,” and “fanatical terrorist,” and authors claim ethnic and national belonging through representations of code-switching and translanguaging that powerfully contest and transform the spatial hegemony of the nation-state. Absent the same historical constructions of race, Mexico figures Arab immigrants as corrupt businessmen out to cheat “real” Mexicans. Arab Mexican authors variously utilize Arabic not as a tool to modify the nation but rather to create a linguistic space that stands outside geography. Chapter 1 explores the form and function of the intersections between language and identity categories like ethnicity, race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality. Continuing the discussion of gender, Chapter 2 argues that an Arab diasporic identity is inscribed within the female body through the cultural resources of food and language, while Chapter 3 suggests that queer Arab

American characters inhabiting non-normative narrative structures challenge homonational global politics. Finally, Chapter 4 elucidates how authors manipulate language to normalize the presence of Arabic and Arab bodies by inserting Arabic into the linguistic landscape of North America. Although the Arab linguistic production of identity differs between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, all three Arab immigrant communities enlist language in the rhetorical and material pursuit of belonging. The first study in the field to compare nationally and linguistically diverse Arab diasporic texts, “Multilingual Arabesques” helps us to understand critical points of continuity and rupture within the Arab diaspora in North America.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1994 J. Kadi called Arab Canadian and Arab US Americans “The Most Invisible of the Invisibles.” Today, as the United States still grapples with the repercussions of the Gulf Wars, September 11, a prolonged occupation of Iraq, and most recently the so-called “ban on immigration,” that statement is no longer true. Within Canada, Arab<sup>1</sup> ethnic identities are doubly “othered” on account of the tensions between Francophone and Anglophone national spaces, and within Quebec they constitute a minority within a minority. Regardless of language, though, in both the United States and Canada, Arab immigrants are now acutely visible and socially constructed as “enemy,” “other,” and “fanatical terrorists.”

This conflation of *Arab* with *terrorist* is often taken for granted by the public, media, and academics in both nations. To the south, however, a very different stereotype exists. In Mexico, Arab immigrants are not automatically construed as terrorists; rather they are seen as corrupt businessmen who are out to cheat “real” Mexicans. Even in the wake of September 11, this division between stereotypes in Canada, the United States, and Mexico has held firm. These ideas are rooted in the varied historical constructions of ethnic identity within these nations. In the introduction to *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (2013), Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat suggest that

Arabs in the United States are excluded from normative notions of national identity

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<sup>1</sup> I mainly use the term *Arab* as opposed to *Middle Eastern* in this dissertation. *Arab* refers to an ethnic group with ancestral origins in West/Southwest Asia and North Africa. *Middle Eastern* is a geographically based descriptor and can refer to a number of ethnicities that originate in the region. See Nadine Naber’s introduction to *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11* for a nuanced discussion of the terms *Arab* and *Middle Eastern*.

based on discourses of either whiteness or Islamophobia, but also by some version of multiculturalism that has no room for experiences outside of the established ethnic/racial categories of opposition. In the case of Arabs in Latin America, meanwhile, exclusion from the national imaginary operates in relation to discourses of mixed national identity. In the case of Mexico, for example, the figure of the Arab must be seen in conjunction with mestizo identity, in relation to the hegemonic trope of “la raza cósmica.” (20)

“La raza cósmica,” an ideology developed by José Vasconcelos (1925), describes a future race born in the Americas that contains all of the other races of the world and which will initiate a new, universal era. Arguing against the social Darwinism that dominated Europe (as well as the United States and Canada), Vasconcelos sought to overturn the “scientific” theories of race that were created to justify ethnic superiority on one hand and repression on the other.

This difference in national and ethnic identity politics suggests the Arab Mexican community would have little in common with the Arab Canadian and Arab US American communities. The borders between these three nations are far from permanent and impermeable, though, and the fluidity of these borders is demonstrated in Arab American<sup>2</sup> literature. One-third of the United States’ contiguous land mass was at one time part of the Mexican nation-state,<sup>3</sup> a fact depicted in the cultural milieu represented in novels like Diana

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use *America* to mean the Americas broadly. When necessary, I use the term *US American* to denote someone specifically from the United States.

<sup>3</sup> What is now Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, California, and portions of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming were originally part of Mexico and acquired by the United States at different times and through different means over the course of the two nations’ history.

Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and poetry collections like Marian Haddad's *Somewhere Between Mexico and a River Called Home* (2004). Similarly, Canada and the United States are historically imbricated; their border is the longest in the world and has shifted a number of times over the years.<sup>4</sup> Further, despite recent efforts to secure the current US American borders by requiring a passport to cross the US-Canadian border (previously only a driver's license was required) and constructing a wall between Mexico and the United States,<sup>5</sup> Arab immigrants to North America are still able to move between the three nations regularly.

Within the Arab American fictional world this ability to cross borders is reflected in characters like the father in Bárbara Jacobs's *Las hojas muertas*, who is raised in the United States before moving to Mexico to raise his own family, and Kathleen in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, who moves from Canada to the United States for school. Characters also find themselves immigrating to different destinations than they first intended—such as the family in Héctor Azar's *Las tres primeras personas* who first dock in New York, only to proceed on to Veracruz when turned away by immigration officials. As Arab families move around the globe from the Middle East to North America and then between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, parents are separated from children and

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<sup>4</sup> The border, named the International Boundary, was created, and then contested, through a series of treaties beginning with the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and ending with the Treaty of 1908.

<sup>5</sup> As Alsultany and Shohat point out, this fixation on securing the United States' borders is ultimately grounded in Islamophobic rhetoric which conflates Arab and Mexican in the national discourse: "For the superpatriotic defenders of the border, the wall between Mexico and the United States offers a fortification not only against the Latin South but also against the Arab/Muslim East. And despite some terrorist scares coming from the Canadian border, it is only the Mexican border that triggers anti-immigration hysteria, the scorn for Mexican-American 'greasers' overlaps with both 9/11 and the War on Terror as an overarching rhetorical framework" (8).

cousins live in separate worlds governed by national borders and distinct languages. These seemingly disparate geographic spaces are connected, though, via the web created by the family ties within the Arab diaspora in North America.

Transnational paradigms are most commonly theorized as a result of engagement between an “original homeland” and the “new home.” In examining Arab diasporic subjects in Canada, Mexico, and the United States together, “Multilingual Arabesques” creates a new critical paradigm that suggests transnational relationships exist within and across the Arab diaspora in North America. These readings of fictional texts from multiple perspectives illuminate the deep interconnectedness of these North American geographies—and nowhere is this interconnectedness more apparent than in the use of language to develop an ethnic identity that traverses national borders and connects families across the diaspora. The novels that I review exhibit a variety of recurring themes that echo across English, French, and Spanish, but the use of Arabic as a tool to construct, maintain, and modify an Arab ethnic identity dominates. Despite being separated by national and linguistic boundaries, and writing within societies that construct race in starkly different ways, these authors are acutely concerned with the power of language.

As Arab Canadian, Mexican, and US American authors negotiate Arabic and multilingualism within their writing they construct identities that encompass complex transnational configurations of race, ethnicity,<sup>6</sup> gender, sexuality, class, and religion. When

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<sup>6</sup> The differences between race and ethnicity are nuanced and shift based on time period and national context. In this dissertation I rely on the current legal constructions in North America of “Arab” as an ethnicity rather than a race. However, within North America race is institutionalized in a way that has social consequences for the members of different ethnic groups. Although “Arab” does not legally constitute a “race,” Arab Americans within Canada, Mexico, and the United States have been racialized. For Arabs in the United States especially their conflation with “terrorist” acts as a form of racialization that has profound



Arab Canadian novelist Abla Farhoud asks, “What happened to make my words turn into grains of wheat, of rice, into grape leaves and cabbage leaves? Why have my thoughts changed to olive oil and lemon juice?”<sup>7</sup> her description of lost language evokes the deep ties of Arab diasporic linguistic practices to food, and signals the author’s play with traditions of gendered speech. To the south Thérèse Soukar Chehade, an author in the United States, creates Emilie, an Arab immigrant who “minds her speech the way she minds the hard-to-find cardamom she uses to spice up her Turkish coffee,” and Joseph Geha writes about an Arab US American mother who allows the steam from freshly-baked bread to speak for her. In Mexico, Héctor Azar examines these intersections of food, gender, and language as he conflates the processes for making sour yogurt with breastfeeding and raising children. Although separated by language and nationality, these authors engage in a set of themes and rhetorical practices that echo throughout the diaspora.

The gendered silences illustrated in these texts are only one example of the ways in which language forms and is formed by identity within the Arab diaspora in North America. “Multilingual Arabesques in the Novel in North America” posits that language mediates the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, class, and nationality within the identities of Arab North Americans. Further, through its critical role in identity formation and its ability to challenge national hegemonies, language ultimately forms a cardinal space in which these diasporic subjects find belonging and construct their transnational identities. The readings of

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social and legal repercussions. To that end, I discuss both race and ethnicity as important identity categories for Arab Americans.

<sup>7</sup> “Qu’est-ce qui est arrivé pour que mes mots se transforment en grains de blé, de riz, en feuilles de vigne et en feuilles de chou ? Pour que mes pensées se changent en huile d’olive et en jus de citron ?” (*Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, 16). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

silent matriarchs suggest that Arab diasporic identity relies on a conflation of the female body with the nation to maintain an ethnic identity, but a select number of female characters challenge this silencing through queer gender identities that are developed through and grounded in language play. As these women code-switch and create non-linear novels that can encompass their complex identities, they also challenge the contemporary constructions of nation-states. Within the Arab diaspora in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, language is ultimately used in complex and variegated ways, and in addition to forming identity and challenging national hegemonies, it also constitutes a space in which Arab Americans can construct their own versions of belonging.

In spite of the obvious geographic boundaries that circumscribe North America, the shared histories of colonialism, and the clear thematic similarities in Arab Canadian, Mexican, and US American writings, the connections between these bodies of literature are often overlooked in academic scholarship in favor of an area studies or linguistically based methodology. The United States and Canada are often presented as closely tied to Europe and configured as part of “the West” and “the First World,” while Mexico is tied to Latin America, “the Global South,” and the developing “Third World.” Even in studies where a comparative approach is taken, these methodological and theoretical divisions often perpetuate themselves.

While Wail Hassan’s *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011) seeks to transcend national borders, it pairs US American texts with writing produced in Britain—two countries that share a history and linguistic tradition, but which are separated by an ocean. Similarly the only other major piece of Arab diasporic scholarship to take a comparative approach, Rodrigo Cánovas’s

*Literatura de inmigrantes árabes y judíos en Chile y México* (Arab and Jewish Immigrant Literature in Chile and Mexico, 2011), pairs writings in Spanish from Mexico and Chile. Although these scholars recognize the need for a comparative approach when examining the transnational nature of Arab diasporic writing, these discussions are still circumscribed by language. My research brings linguistically diverse writings into conversation with one another to attend to the themes that resonate across boundaries and throughout the Arab diaspora. By examining Arab Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone writings alongside one another, my research bridges both the political and linguistic divides that separate these works. This multinational and multilingual approach allows for a discussion of the Arab diaspora as a global phenomenon that supersedes a homogenous area studies approach.

## **1. Arab American Literary Texts & Literary Historiography**

“Multilingual Arabesques in the Novel in North America” argues that we should read Arab diasporic literary texts in a comparative framework. Literary criticism is, by and large, carved up in national terms with texts belonging to certain countries and languages. This is equally true for Arab American literature, and aside from Hassan and Cánovas’s monographs, scholarship on the Arab diaspora literature also tends to be understood in terms of the nation. Elizabeth Dahab, for instance, writes on Arab Canadian literature, while Carol Fadda-Conrey and Steven Salaita have published on Arab immigrant literature in the United States. In addition to having discrete critical fields, within each nation Arab American literature has had a unique history. This section briefly surveys the trajectories of Arab American literature in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, as well as the body of literary

criticism that has developed around each.

Elizabeth Dahab, writing in 2009, contends that there is an absence of scholarship on Arab Canadian authors in English or French: “No critical books or collection of papers had ever been written on those writers, no literary history had ever been undertaken, and no complete bibliography of their works had ever been published” (vii). Despite this lacuna in the scholarship, by her count there are over 150 books (in all genres) written by Canadians of Arab decent. Her monograph, *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature*, examines writings by five Arab Canadian authors: Abla Farhoud, Wajdi Mouawad, Naïm Kattan, Hédi Bouraoui, and Saad Elkhadem. Despite including close readings of each authors’ works, Dahab situates herself as a “researcher” rather than a “literary critic,” and she takes as her primary aim to catalog writings by Arab Canadian authors. Based on the database of writings she has collected, she suggests that an identifiable body of Arab Canadian writings began to emerge in the early 1970s with Saad Elkhadem, Naïm Kattan, and Vasco Varoujean leading the way. As in the United States, the 1980s and 1990s saw a boom in publication that created “the impression of an instant Arabic-Canadian literature” (19). This sudden increase in publications has remained steady through the first two decades of the new millennium. Literary criticism, though, has not kept pace. Although a variety of work has been published on Abla Farhoud and Wajdi Mouawad, it is restricted to journal articles and examinations as part of larger projects on the Arab francophone world or multicultural authors in Canada. Dahab’s monograph remains the only book-length study of Arab immigrant literature in Canada specifically.

Scholarship on Arab Mexican literature is similarly scant. In 2011 Rodrigo Cánovas produced a monograph on Arab and Jewish literature in Mexico and Chile, and to date it

continues to be the only book-length study that covers Arab Mexican letters. In comparison to the strikingly heterogeneous Jewish communities Cánovas examines, the Arab population in Mexico consists primarily of Lebanese immigrants of Maronite confession who found work first as peddlers and later as shop owners (155). This homogeneity is reflected in the literary texts produced by the community, and Cánovas identifies the recreation of a Lebanese ancestral memory by Mexican descendants as a key uniting theme (163).

Beginning with the celebrated Mexican poet Jaime Sabines, Cánovas contends that although Sabines celebrated his Lebanese heritage in his personal life, in his writing he alludes to it in only one place: a 1973 poem titled “Algo sobre la muerte del Mayor Sabines.” The poem, written in homage to his late father, states, “—cedar of Lebanon, oak of Chiapas— / you hide yourself in the earth, you soar up / from your obscure and lonely root”<sup>8</sup> (Sabines 259).

Cánovas argues that “this unique verse...synthesizes the feeling of a collective soul”<sup>9</sup> and that within Arab Mexican literature the roots of the immigrant ancestor, planted in the soil of Mexico, create a new species: the American cedar (177). He suggests that although “assimilation is the distinctive feature of this group it is strange that their literary matters follow a movement rather divergent to that feature” (178).<sup>10</sup> Arab Mexican literature is principally characterized, he argues, by feelings of alienation from the Lebanese ancestor, a struggle to reconcile ancestral memory, and integration into Mexico (178).

In contrast to the scant Arab Canadian and Arab Mexican literary criticism and

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<sup>8</sup> “—cedro del Líbano, robledal de Chiapas— / te ocultas en la tierra, te remontas / a tu raíz oscura y desolada”

<sup>9</sup> “este verso único...sintetice el sentimiento de un alma colectiva”

<sup>10</sup> “Siendo la asimilación el rasgo distintivo de este grupo, resulta extraño que sus materias literarias sigan un movimiento más bien divergente a ese rasgo.”

historiographies, the waves of Arab US American writings are well documented. The first Arab US American texts appeared in the early 1900s with a group of expatriate Lebanese authors living in New York who dubbed themselves the Pen League. Scholars of Arab US American literature often discuss this group as predecessors to, but ultimately separate from, contemporary Arab US American authors. The discontinuities pointed to by critics stem from the literary traditions that the authors participate in—Middle Eastern versus American—and discrepancies in themes. While both groups do write about immigration and transnationalism, they approach these subjects in very different ways.<sup>11</sup> Although the authors writing in the early 1900s were deeply invested in creating connections and dialogue between the Middle East and the United States, they saw themselves as belonging to the Middle East and as ultimately returning there. Contemporary Arab US American writers, on the other hand, generally do not contribute to Middle Eastern literature, and engage with Arab immigrant literature almost exclusively.

By 1940, the Pen League had disbanded, ushering in what scholars, such as Fadda-Conrey, have dubbed a “transitional” phase (18). Following the dissolution of the group, only a handful of Arab American texts were published between the 1940s and 1980s and 90s, and the texts—primarily autobiographies and memoirs—discuss the Middle East and Arabic heritage in ambivalent and disconnected ways. The sense of shame that springs up in many of these works takes on an orientalist bent, and “home” and its traditions are both exotic and embarrassing. Despite the apparent rejection of heritage, the acceptance that Arab US American authors writing during this time period received helped to shape the proliferation

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<sup>11</sup> For a nuanced reading of how the Pen League presented themselves, see Jacob Berman’s “Mahjar Legacies: A Reinterpretation” in *Between the Middle East and the Americas*.

of Arab US American writing in the 1990s and onward.

Starting in the late 80s and on into 90s the number of texts being published by Arab US Americans grew exponentially, and the writing took on new themes and subjects. These texts often express an unresolved angst towards the political conflicts within and between the countries with which they identify, as characters attempt to create for themselves a transnational identity that embraces and remembers their connections to an Arab homeland, while becoming fully formed citizens within their adopted countries. With 9/11, Arab US Americans' already precarious place within the racial hierarchy was challenged, as "Muslimness" became more conflated with "Arabness," and the two groups were further demonized. This demonization, though, affected an outpouring of Arab US American literary voices.

Although the literary production by Arab US Americans has increased exponentially in the last 25 years, literary criticism has not been as prolific. There were no book length studies of Arab US American literature until 2007, when Salaita first published a monograph on the topic. In 2011 Salaita published another book, and both works treat Arab US American literature with broad strokes, aiming for breadth rather than depth. Three years later, in 2014, Fadda-Conrey published a book-length study titled *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*, which explores the literary representations of Arab homelands as a critical space in which US citizenship is redefined.

## **2. Language as Identity**

Though this dissertation is focused on the Arab diaspora in North America, it is also

an exercise in thinking through larger questions about the politics of language usage in literature and the linguistic possibilities for power and resistance. Ultimately, my research question is this: how are the politics of language usage relevant to the diasporic subject? I argue that the representations of “foreign” language examined within this dissertation carry political implications. The mixing of languages in multiethnic texts in North America is often understood as simply “spicing up” a text and lending an “authentic” air.<sup>12</sup> The analyses I present here counter this suggestion, and instead develop an understanding of these representations as illustrations of linguistic tension that is rooted in nuanced racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and class identities.

I draw primarily on two critical legacies that challenge the suggestion that language mixing within novels represents nothing more than exotic flair: scholars writing on multiethnic North American literature and scholars writing on postcolonial literature. Authors like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, writing on post/anti-colonial literature, argue that the incorporation of other languages into English allows colonized authors to “write back” to the colonizer.<sup>13</sup> This incorporation interrupts the grammatical structure of English and in doing so symbolically interrupts the power structure of colonialism. Moroccan author Abdelkebir Khatibi has called for multilingual authors to take this linguistic challenge a step further in their texts. Positing a theory of radical bilingualism, Khatibi suggests capitalizing on the mutability of language to challenge social and political

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<sup>12</sup> This certainly extends beyond North America. In her study of Lebanese literature written in French, Michelle Hartman discusses this perception amongst scholars and readers that the inclusion of “foreign” language within a text is merely “window dressing,” meaning language is ultimately not substantive to the text.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge (1989).



structures through intermingling two languages within a single text.<sup>14</sup> Other authors and scholars around the globe have developed similar theories of multilingualism, including Patrick Chamoiseau writing in the Caribbean tradition of créolité<sup>15</sup> and Gloria Anzaldúa who develops the US American borderlands tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Similar to this political engagement with language emerging from postcolonial writing, within the United States and Canada critics have delved into how language mixing operates within multiethnic texts. Critics such as Nina Scott<sup>17</sup> and Lourdes Torres,<sup>18</sup> working in Latina/o literature, Lise Gauvin,<sup>19</sup> working in Quebecois literature, Lisa Cohen Minnick, working in African American literature, and Evelyn Ch'ien, working in multiethnic literature broadly, have demonstrated that multilingualism in North American texts is a fruitful avenue of inquiry. In *Proceed with Caution When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*, Doris Sommer argues,

By marking off an impassable distance between reader and text, and thereby

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<sup>14</sup> See *Du bilinguisme*. Paris: Denoël (1983).

<sup>15</sup> See especially the essay “Éloge de la créolité” (1989), which was written with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant and argues for a usage of French that reflects “creoleness” in its “opacity” to a speaker of “Standard French,” as well as the fictional novel *Texaco* (1992), which puts into practice the postcolonial linguistic theories elaborated in “Éloge.”

<sup>16</sup> Writing in both English and Spanish, Anzaldúa defines *borderlands* as a space of cultural hybridity that is neither Mexican nor US American. Her intentional use of mixed English and Spanish reflects this hybrid cultural identity.

<sup>17</sup> See Scott’s “The Politics of Language: Latina Writers in United States Literature and Curricula” in *MELUS* (1994) 19:1. Pp. 57-71.

<sup>18</sup> See Torres’s “In the Contact Zone: Code-Switching Strategies by Latino/a Writers” in *MELUS* (2007) 32.1. Pp. 75-96.

<sup>19</sup> See Gauvin’s *Langagement. L’écrivain et la langue au Québec*. Quebec: Éditions du Boréal (2000).

raising questions of access or welcome, resistant authors intend to produce constraints that more reading will not overcome...It is the rhetoric of selective, socially differentiated understanding...The question, finally, is not what ‘insiders’ can know as opposed to ‘outsiders’; it is how those positions are being constructed as incommensurate or conflictive. (11)

Many critics working within this field contend that code-switching within multiethnic literature is an intentionally political choice.

Ch’ien’s *Weird English* argues that for authors who practice “linguistic polyculturality” (21), language becomes a way to practice ethnic identity. Relying on the philosophy of language, her framework is a blend of Martin Gustafsson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Benedict Anderson, and Jacques Derrida. Ch’ien argues that what she labels as “weirding” of English by multiethnic authors is done with “strength and confidence” (5), and in an argument reminiscent of the postcolonial scholars examined above, she suggests that authors blending language in this way are creating language out of a resistance to the hegemony of English. Language for Ch’ien is not merely a passive vehicle for communication; rather, embedded into weird English is information about who the speaker is, and how the speaker relates to interlocutors.

Texts like Lisa Cohen Minnick’s *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* approach this same question of linguistic identity and literature from a quantitative perspective. In contrast to Ch’ien’s approach, which relies on what Minnick calls “impressionistic reactions” to language (xvii), Minnick uses quantitative linguistic studies of African American Vernacular to determine the accuracy of representations of AAV by authors such as Charles Chestnutt, Zora Neale Hurston and Mark

Twain. She argues that this analysis is valuable to both fields as it deepens literary criticism's ability to discuss the AAV present in the texts, and it extends linguistics' understanding of AAV by examining the oft-neglected print production of language.

Minnick's interdisciplinary work places two fields in conversation that rarely intersect. Within sociolinguistics language usage is examined for the ways in which it represents social behavior, and it is studied for both how it serves society and how it is shaped by society. Sub-disciplines, such as ethnolinguistics and raciolinguistics, specifically examine how language is both a construction and a reflection of the racialized identity of a speaker. H. Samy Alim, in the introduction to *Raciolinguistics* (2016), calls for scholars to "race language" and "language race," in other words, to "view race through the lens of language, and vice versa" (1). He contends "when it comes to broad scholarship on race and ethnicity, language is often overlooked as one of the most important cultural means that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others" (4-5). This assertion is especially true when it comes to scholarship on Arab Americans. While a variety of studies have focused on Latinx, African American, and Asian American communities, there is a dearth of scholarship on the language choices of Arab Americans. Although taking a humanistic and qualitative rather than quantitative approach, my central question—What does it mean for Arab Americans to speak as racialized subjects in contemporary North America? —echoes the questions being asked in the field of sociolinguistics. This framework allows me to explore Arab North American literary negotiations of political and cultural alignment via linguistic choices that bring immigrant subjects both closer to and further from the communities in which they find themselves.

### 3. Outline of the Dissertation

The literary landscapes of the Arab diaspora in Canada, Mexico, and the United States are blanketed in layers of language. “Multilingual Arabesques in the Novel in North America” seeks to analyze language and race together—rather than as discrete and unconnected social processes—to raise critical questions about the relations between language, race, and power within the lives of Arab Americans. In the four chapters that follow, I look comparatively across national and linguistic boundaries to better understand the role of language in identity formation within the Arab diaspora. Each chapter examines a theme within the literary corpus from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to analyze how Arab American identities are styled, performed, and constructed through language in a variety of contexts.

The study specifically takes novels as its object of inquiry for two reasons: the first is the genre’s unique ability to develop a sense of individualism, and the second is its concurrence with the colonial period. As Ian Watt writes in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), the format of the novel is closely allied to the individualism inherent in the social structure of modern society (62). Nancy Armstrong (2006) agrees, arguing that the history of the novel and the history of the modern individual subject are the same. Further, Edward Said suggests that the colonial period is “the period in which the novel form and the new historical narrative become preeminent” and that “most cultural historians, and certainly all literary scholars, have failed to remark the geographical notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territories that underlies Western fiction, historical writing, and philosophical discourse of time” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 58). This dissertation examines the formation

of an individualized Arab American subjecthood while considering the implications of such a formation via the form of the novel in regards to time and nation. Beginning with texts that present chaotic family structures through ruptures in language and code-switching, I examine crises of reproduction, fragmentation, splintering, and disassociation to suggest that these texts form a protest against a variety of hegemonies—most notably linguistic and national. Ultimately, I argue that through the construction of a translinguistic identity language becomes a literal space within the geography of North America in which Arab Americans construct their own belongings.

Chapter 1, “Identifying Languages: The Shape of Code-Switching in Arab American Novels” lays the groundwork for an investigation of what it means for Arab Americans, as racialized subjects, to speak. I begin by chronicling the various methods used by Arab American authors to represent their multilingual communities and characters in fiction. Maintaining my comparative focus, I examine texts from Canada, Mexico, and the United States in English, French, and Spanish. Code-switches from all three countries follow similar patterns, and transliteration, italics, and glosses are nearly ubiquitous. Following this cataloguing of Arabic usage, I turn to close readings of several novels to discuss how the inclusion of Arabic within these texts illustrates how Arab Americans linguistically construct a variety of identity categories, including gender, sexual, ethnic, racial, national, religious, and class identities. Using three representative texts, I argue that the examples of code-switching in Carlos Martínez Assad’s *En el verano, la tierra* (1994), Abla Farhoud’s *Le fou d’Omar* (2005), and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) demonstrate that rather than stable and predetermined, Arab American identities shift across contexts and even within specific interactions. In Assad’s *En el verano, la tierra*, a Lebanese identity is

specifically constructed through language and the ability to speak Arabic, while Farhoud's *Le fou d'Omar* uses characters' language choices to represent ethnic, national, and class identities. Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* similarly constructs its protagonist's intersecting national, ethnic, religious, and gender identities using Arabic and English language choices. In these texts code-switching becomes a powerful method for subverting language practices that reflect national hegemonies, and characters use language as a tool to rearrange the linguistic hierarchy of conversations and recast definitions of belonging. This modified linguistic belonging, predicated on multilingualism, is then extended to understandings of association and acceptance within the family, community, and nation.

Building on the previous chapter, "Silence, Identity, and Consumption: Locating Identity in the Arab American Female Body" focuses specifically on the intersections of gender and language in the Arab diaspora. Using close readings from five texts—Héctor Azar's *Las tres primeras personas* (1976), Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), Thérèse Soukar Chehade's *Loom* (2010), Abla Farhoud's *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998), and Joseph Geha's *Lebanese Blonde* (2012)—I analyze moments of gendered linguistic loss as Arab matriarchs fall into muteness and their food is transformed into a method of communication. Beginning with Azar's *Las tres primeras personas*, I trace the symbolic treatment of food and the female form as women's bodies are refigured as stand-ins for an inaccessible Lebanon. Specifically examining the matriarch's production of food in MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, I suggest that beyond a metaphoric token of the ancestral homeland, the women in these novels become edible symbols who are simultaneously consumed and silenced. Following this examination of the commodification of women in an effort to maintain ethnic and national identities, I examine Chehade's *Loom*,

Farhoud's *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, and Geha's *Lebanese Blonde* with each suggesting a different solution for the construction of Arab American identities that are grounded in gendered silence and consumption.

In Chapter 3, I continue my focus on gender and turn to texts that queer gender, sexuality, and narrative through language. Building on the close readings of Assad's *En el verano, la tierra* and Azar's *Las tres primeras personas*, as well as Farhoud's *Le fou d'Omar*, I consider Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001) and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008). These two texts present queer Arab characters, Sarah and Nidali respectively, that code-switch between Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. As they do, Sarah and Nidali are able to construct a masculinized linguistic identity that challenges the gender norms of their communities. These queer identities reflect the non-linear narrative structures of the novels that tell their stories, and as Sarah and Nidali search for belonging within their families, communities, and nations, they disregard normative constructions of time and geography. Expanding in scope to a discussion of the form and function of storytelling, I chart how these texts utilize non-normative narrative structures, such as non-linear and multi-vocal narration. As these texts queer definitions of gender, sexuality, and narrative through language, they also destabilize notions of migration as a unidirectional process, and assimilation as the desired outcome.

In the final chapter, "Modifying Language, Modifying Space: The Geopolitical and Linguistic Geographies of North America," I consider how Arabic is used to define space within Arab American literature. Expanding on my reading of *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home*'s use of language to queer the nation-state through non-linear narratives, I argue that language is fundamental to Arab immigrant notions of belonging. Providing close readings

from Jorge Nacif Mina's *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* (1995), Denis Chouinard's *L'ange de goudron* (2001), and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), I argue that the manipulation of language creates distinctly Arab spaces within North America. In Mina's *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* heaven is imagined as a space within the nation that is characterized as an eternal conversation taking place in Arabic. In contrast, *L'ange de goudron* uses Arabic to claim space within urban and rural geographies, an act that suggests transnational identities can overcome Canada's shallow espousal of multiculturalism. Like *L'ange du goudron*, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* uses language to both define and question group identities and spatial belonging, as Arabic and English are blended together at the level of sentences, and then at the level of words. Via the careful typographic representation of language and translation in the text the reader is encouraged to learn Arabic, an act that erases perceived linguistic dichotomies. In these narrative moments the borders of language, like the borders of the nation, become permeable, and as these authors represent Arabic in ways that normalize it, they also normalize the presence of Arab bodies within the geopolitical spaces of North America.

This dissertation conceives of national spaces, like languages, as malleable and constantly evolving. Within the texts examined here, Arabic, English, French, and Spanish are reconfigured based on individual and communal orientations. In *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (2014), Fadda-Conrey suggests that within a transnational framework space and perspective are refigured in a way that metaphorically collapses the distance between original homelands and new homes. I argue that language does this same cultural work, and that translanguaging within Arab American texts provides a challenge to national hegemonies.



Although the four chapters that make up this study approach the junctures of language and nation in topically different ways, a unifying theme throughout is the rupture of language within the life of the diasporic subject. Figured as a symbol for fragmentation, splintering, and disassociation, language is employed by both authors and characters to challenge a variety of hegemonic structures. Latina/o Studies scholar María DeGuzmán, writing on Deleuzian madness in relation to decolonization and transculturality asks, “What value does a mad process of impersonalization (one might call it de-personalization) have for people struggling against the presumptuous hierarchies of coloniality and potentially fascistic counter-responses based on appeals to difference or unity (nation, *raza*) from or against the oppressors? Can the dissolution of boundaries and the loss of identity serve as methods of decolonization?” (206). Texts like Farhoud’s *Le fou d’Omar*—which illustrates madness through multilingualism—and Jarrar’s *A Map of Home*—which linguistically unravels the boundaries between nations as well as between the self and other—answer these questions for the Arab diasporic subject through language. Ultimately, I read the primary texts in this study as theoretical contributions in and of themselves as their usages of language reformulate space through translingual identities that challenge hegemonies of many kinds.

## II. IDENTIFYING LANGUAGES: THE SHAPE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN ARAB AMERICAN NOVELS

### 1. Introduction

My research for this project began with a simple question: What does it mean for Arab immigrants, as racialized subjects, to speak in North America? In order to answer this question, I examine the different ways in which Arab American authors include Arabic language within their novels and outline how that usage illustrates a variety of identity categories, including gender, sexual, ethnic, racial, national, religious, and class identities. The close readings I provide show how Arabic operates in different contexts of social reality, and how those realities refract through Arabic. I argue that language serves as a cultural symbol that signifies individual identity as well as group belonging, and that the characters in these texts demonstrate the centrality of language to Arab American life.

In the first section of this chapter I characterize the linguistic resources present within Arab American novels and the methods used to represent them, including reported language, transliterated and non-transliterated language, and finally translated and non-translated language. Following this cataloging of the forms Arabic takes within these novels, I examine representative texts in detail to analyze how those language choices function and how Arab American authors specifically engage in identification through language. The provided examples of code-switching in *En el verano, la tierra* (1994), *Le fou d'Omar* (2005), and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) demonstrate that rather than stable and predetermined, Arab American identities shift across contexts and even within specific interactions. As my readings suggest, the characters within these novels both perform identities that are

constructed through language and, at times, intentionally wield that language to shift their intersectional identities to suit their needs.

## **2. Categorizing Arabic in Arab American Texts**

Code-switching within multiethnic North American novels is a common occurrence and takes a variety of forms. These are the three most common: (1) The two languages are integrated to such an extent that only a bilingual reader will understand the text; (2) The secondary language is integrated into the primary language in a way that still makes the text accessible to a monolingual reader of the primary language; (3) Code-switching is not represented in the text; rather it is described and the reader is informed that a character is speaking a specific language. All three of these types occur within Arab American literature, although the transliteration of Arabic can complicate the categories. Further, these categories are not always distinct or discrete. These three broad categories, however, are useful shorthand for examining the commonalities amongst multilingual Arab American texts.

### **2.1. Reported Language**

One the most common methods for incorporating Arabic into a novel is simply to state that Arabic is being spoken and such reported Arabic appears in a variety of ways. Dialogue is written in the primary language of the text, and the reader is told that the exchange took place in Arabic, as in Joseph Geha's *Lebanese Blonde* (2012): “‘*A little olive oil, a little butter,*’ he was saying in Arabic, ‘*then you take a small handful of the dried wheat and yogurt to start off. As it heats, stir in just a little broth at a time*’” (173, original italics). In this particular case, in addition to stating that the conversation is taking place in Arabic the

language is marked by italics, indicating translation is taking place.<sup>20</sup>

Alternatively, the reader is told that Arabic is being spoken, but the informational content is left out. In Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) Salwa Haddad has an affair with a young co-worker. After their first kiss, Salwa is consumed with guilt over this extramarital indiscretion, and her guilt manifests as a linguistic conflict: “‘What have I done? What have I done?’ Salwa demanded of herself in English, this being an American problem, an American situation. She promised herself to think about it only in English, even as her brain shouted at her in Arabic, cursed her with her mother’s words” (175). In this moment, language and culture stand in for one another, English being the appropriate language for “an American problem” and a moral transgression, while Arabic is transformed into a true maternal language and conveys her mother’s imagined disapproval. This code-switch between languages is merely described, though, and the reproachful Arabic is never reported within the text.

Similarly, in Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* (2001) frequent meditations on language take place, although there is a distinct lack of Arabic in the text. For instance:

In the Lebanese dialect, the words associated with smoking, verbs in particular are *sui generis*. You not only smoke a cigarette, you can drink it. The verb *to smoke* may stand on its own, but the verb *to drink* cannot, of course since it implies the drinking of liquids. One must use the phrase *drink a cigarette*, which sounds ridiculous in any other language. That kind of idiosyncrasy fascinated my thirteen-year-old mind.

However, the particular use of the Lebanese dialect which turned out to be an embarrassment was the word *inhale*. When it comes to cigarettes, one does not inhale

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<sup>20</sup> Language in *Lebanese Blonde* is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

in Lebanese, one swallows (13).

Despite being a description of Arabic, this charting of slang and grammar rules is reported entirely in English through translation. Beyond simply noting the words themselves, the narrator ponders their construction and the grammatical rules that surround them, noting the differences between transitive and intransitive verbs. As a narrative device, this meditation on language illustrates the linguistic milieu in which the trilingual main character operates, the fluidity with which she speaks multiple languages, and the context of the code-switching that takes place throughout the novel.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2. Transliterated Arabic

Representing Arabic in texts written in Latin script introduces a host of challenges. In the vast majority of texts, authors transliterate the Arabic they include and using personal systems that reflect a localized dialect of Arabic or an immigrant family's transliterated spellings.<sup>22</sup> The heterogeneity of Arabic language representations is illustrated in J. Kadi's translation note at the beginning of *Food for Our Grandmothers*. As the editor of the collection of essays, Kadi carefully considers how to represent the Arabic:

Many Arabic words are used throughout this book. By and large, I have left the transliteration the way the authors wrote it. All of us grew up hearing Arabic very differently, because of our countries of origin, our class and regional backgrounds, and the time period our families immigrated. It seemed more appropriate to leave these words and terms mostly as they are, rather than having them conform to one

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<sup>21</sup> For more on language and narrative choices in *I, the Divine*, see Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> As opposed to a standardized system such as the one put out by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

standard, formal transliteration. (xi)

Amongst the novels examined for this project, transliterated Arabic ranges from a single word to full sentences and with very few exceptions appears in italics. Authors most commonly also include definitions for the Arabic in some capacity, either as an in-text gloss or as a glossary at the end of the novel.

Carlos Martínez Assad's *En el verano, la tierra*, for example, uses both in-text glosses and a glossary as strategies to define the Arabic included in the text. A ten-page glossary at the end of the novel defines the most frequently used Arabic words, and for the words that appear no definition is given directly in the text, such as:

We ate *kebbeh*, *falafel*, *chauarma*, *homous* and *shrishtauole*, and there was no limit to your surprise when you saw the bowl full of cakes and sweets: *awamet*, *atayef*, *burma*, *karabeej* and *eristelao*, and you ended up just as sugar-coated as the desserts.<sup>23</sup>

Each of these Arabic words appears frequently throughout the text and is defined in detail in the glossary. *Kebbeh*, for instance, is defined as “A Lebanese dish made from lamb mixed with wheat and spices. The variety depends on the region.”<sup>24</sup> For infrequently used words, phrases, and full sentences, definitions are provided alongside the transliterated Arabic. For example:

The driver shouts at a woman:

—*Shubaddak bil jara* [What do you want, shit].

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<sup>23</sup> “Comimos *kebbeh*, *falafel*, *chauarma*, *homous* y *shrishtauole*, y tu sorpresa no tuvo límite cuando viste la palangana llena de pastelillos y dulces: *awamet*, *atayef*, *burma*, *karabeej* y *eristelao*, y terminaste tan enmielado como los postres.” (20, original italics)

<sup>24</sup> “Platillo libanés realizado con carne de borrego mezclada con trigo y especias. Su variedad depende de la región” (166).

—*Mish fahen* [I don't understand] —she replies.

Although there isn't space, she ends up sitting down and the argument is taken up by men who insult each other:

—*Akrut, haqkirin* [Thieves, assholes].<sup>25</sup>

Translations like these, directly alongside the words and offset by brackets, parentheses, or commas, are the most common style of glossing in novels from all three countries.<sup>26</sup>

Translations, whether in-text glosses or glossaries, are not always included though, and transliterated Arabic occasionally appears without a definition. Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), for instance, contains substantial Arabic that is left without translation:

James said, "I love you, Materia."

She said, "*Baddi moot*." (37)

This untranslated code-switch takes place shortly after Materia has had her first child, and the meaning of her utterance ("I want to die") is profound. Not understood by the people attending her (no one else in the room, including her husband, speaks Arabic), Materia's statement goes unnoticed. Further, the extent of Materia's suffering is not reflected in the English, meaning that a monolingual reader would also misunderstand her postpartum state.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> El chofer le grita a una mujer:

—*Shubaddak bil jara* [Qué quieres, mierda].

—*Mish fahen* [No entiendo] —responde ella.

Aunque no hay lugar, termina por sentarse y el pleito es retomado por los hombres que se insultan:

—*Akrut, haqkirin* [Ladrones, cabrones]. (55, original italics)

<sup>26</sup> The use of Arabic in *En el verano, la tierra* is examined in detail later in this chapter.

### 2.3. Arabic in Arabic Script

Very few texts include Arabic in Arabic script, although there are examples from all three of the countries examined in this study. From Mexico, Héctor Azar's *Las Tres Primeras Personas* (1977) includes a letter signed in Arabic (fig. 1), while the Canadian text *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998), by Abla Farhoud, includes a glossary of Arabic aphorisms written in Arabic script and translated directly into French (fig. 2). In the United States, author Mohja Kahf occasionally weaves Arabic script into her poetry and leaves these lines untranslated (fig. 3). Including Arabic script within a text otherwise written in Latin script presents a variety of problems, not least of which is the transition between the two scripts. Azar's novel solves this problem by duplicating the handwritten signatures as facsimiles. Farhoud's text aligns the Arabic text to the right (in keeping with Arabic's writing system), while Kahf places the Arabic script in line with the Latin script. Farhoud's Arabic is also accompanied by French translations, although the translations are intentionally awkward and demonstrate the extent to which cultural maxims are difficult to translate. The very title of the novel, *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, is taken from one of these Arabic sayings. Meaning "Happiness has a slippery tail," the phrase has as little meaning in French as it does in English. By contrast, Kahf provides no translation for the Arabic script she occasionally includes, and in the case of this particular 1997 poem ("Copulation in English") the result impacts both content and form. For a monolingual reader, this means either accepting partial understanding or finding an Arabic speaker to assist with translation.

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the use of Arabic in *Fall on Your Knees*, see Chapter 3.





## LAS TRES PRIMERAS PERSONAS

Muchas cosas quisiera decirte —*ya'aine*— pero la carta es tan infinitamente pequeña para la inmensa distancia que existe en medio del mar. Todas las bendiciones y dos palabras de tus hijas en la escritura de México:

LULU  
لولو

MADRE

AMALIA  
لولو!

Mi vida: te escribo la dirección en la forma en que deben escribirme:

HON - QUI  
Lavandería China  
Señor Moisés Barba  
Manzanares 52  
Ciudad de México

MEXIQUE

—SENSIBLERÍAS, don Moisés. sensiblerías. Yo le escribo a usted esta carta y cuantas quiera, pero está fuera de tono; resulta soberanamente cursi, pedante y del más acedo matiz romanticoide. Dése usted cuenta que la mejor maestra es la naturaleza y ella no es nada

Figure 1. Page from Héctor Azar's *Las Tres Primeras Personas*.

## LEXIQUE

Proverbes et dictons qui apparaissent dans le roman  
ou qui ont inspiré l'auteure :

فلاح مكتفي، سلطان مختفي

Un paysan qui se suffit à lui-même est un sultan qui  
s'ignore.

روحي ع روح ولدي، وروح ولدي كالحجر

Mon âme est tournée vers celle de mon enfant et  
l'âme de mon enfant est de pierre.

ليت الشباب يعود يوما، فأخبره بما فعل بي المشيب

Si jeunesse revenait un jour, je lui raconterais ce que  
vieillesse a fait de moi.

**Figure 2.** Glossary from Abla Farhoud's *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*.

English will come to us hoarse with the passion  
we will have taught English to have  
and English will never be the same and will never regret us  
Although, after this night of intense copulation,  
we may slaughter English in its bed and redeem our honor,  
even while pregnant with English's bastard  
و إذا الفجر مطلقاً كالحريق

1997

**Figure 3.** Closing lines of Mohja Kahf's 1997 poem "Copulation in English" as printed in *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003).

### 3. The Structure of Language, the Form of Identity

Just as authors represent Arabic within their texts in a variety of ways, the reasons why they do so are manifold. Geha has commented that he includes Arabic in his writing to give a sense of “authenticity” to the text. In doing so, he capitalizes on the cultural commodity of language to negotiate the processes of publishing and selling his work. Arabic signals an ethnic identity for the text that primes readers to understand the narrative in certain ways. But language choices function within texts to construct certain identities for characters as well. In the three texts analyzed in the following sections, characters construct their identities through language, and they are understood and perceived differently on account of those linguistic choices. Beginning with Azar’s *En el verano, la tierra*, I argue that Arabic is used as the primary marker for ethnic belonging, even more so than things like appearance, nationality, or heritage. In the following analyses of *Le fou d’Omar* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, I expand this discussion of language and ethnicity to four additional intersecting identities: nationality, class, gender, and religion. Each of these three representative texts demonstrates the ways in which language both shapes and is shaped by the ethnic identities of Arab American characters.

#### 3.1. Ethnicity in Carlos Martínez Assad’s *En el verano, la tierra*

Assad’s *En el verano, la tierra* incorporates Arabic into the text of the novel in a variety of ways. As already examined above in the section on transliterated Arabic, the novel utilizes both in-text glosses and a glossary to provide translations for Arabic. Additionally, though, this inclusion of Arabic plays an important role in the construction of ethnicity for the characters within the novel. Written in Mexico in 2014, *En el verano, la tierra*

simultaneously tells the stories of a grandfather and a grandson. As the grandfather emigrates from Lebanon to Mexico with his young family, the narrative alternates between his story and the story of his grandson, José, traveling to Lebanon for the first time many years later. Beginning in France, José embarks with a woman, Alina, who is half Lebanese and half French. Half Lebanese and half Mexican himself, José believes they are visiting Lebanon and the surrounding countries in search of their Lebanese heritage. More interested in politics than José and concerned for the future of Lebanon, Alina ultimately joins the fighting as the Lebanese Civil War breaks out. When she is killed, questions are raised about what makes someone Lebanese, and her interest in the country's future is set in relief against José's interest in discovering his family's past.

Throughout the novel José's claim to an ethnic heritage and his belonging within the Middle East are framed in linguistic terms. Beginning with the story of his family's emigration, the national spaces of Lebanon and Mexico are constructed in linguistic terms. Traveling to France first, the family stops in Marseille before boarding the ocean liner that will take them to Mexico:

We found a hostel in a guesthouse run by a nice Spanish woman recommended by other countrymen who had preceded us on the same route. There we made good meals and one evening we organized a *sariye* and we all danced *dabke* while forgetting the painful absence of the relatives who were farther and farther removed from us. I urged your uncles to pay attention to the words of our hostess because she spoke the same language as Mexico. We left Marseille saying adiós instead of *Ma'a salama*. Something broke inside me when *La Cascoigne* of the Compagnie Generale Transatlantique sailed into the mist and left Europe behind; Now the unknown

came.<sup>28</sup>

France becomes a neutral space in which the family pauses before traveling to the “unknown” space of the Americas. Within this in-between geography they find remnants of Lebanon in the form of food and dance, and whispers of their future in the form of language. Encouraging the children to pick up as much Spanish as they can, José’s grandfather realizes the cultural capital present in language. His desire to acquire some Spanish before arriving in Mexico comes at an emotional cost, though. Language becomes a stand in for the spaces through which they transfer, and as they transition from Arabic to Spanish and the “old world” to the “new,” José’s grandfather describes this change as a breaking within himself. Spanish, then, takes on a dual role in this passage. It simultaneously marks the unknown space ahead and is a tool with which the family can negotiate that space in advance.

As the narrative shifts from José’s grandfather to José, this construction of language as a key feature in the negotiation between belonging and space reappears. Now a young man, José, who grew up in Mexico, travels to France where he meets Alina and a group of Arab friends. Mirroring the party a generation before, José attends gatherings where food and language play important roles:

In those days, gatherings with Lebanese and other Palestinian friends were frequent.

They argued bitterly while savoring dishes that smelled of mint and cumin, sprinkled

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<sup>28</sup> “Encontramos albergue en una casa de huéspedes atendida por una simpática mujer española conocida por otros paisanos que nos habían precedido en el mismo recorrido. Allí hicimos buenas comidas y una noche organizamos una *sariye* y todos bailamos *dabke* olvidando las penas por los familiares de quienes nos alejábamos cada vez más. Les insistí a tus tíos para que pusieran atención en las palabras de nuestra anfitriona porque hablaba la misma lengua de México. Salimos de Marsella diciendo *adiós* en lugar de *Ma’a salama*. Algo se rompió dentro de mí cuando zarpamos en el vapor *La Cascogne* de la Compagnie Générale Transatlantique y dejamos atrás Europa; ahora sí venía lo desconocido.”

with arak, the delicious aniseed wine of that region, brought by one of the visitors.

The French language would dim as the discussion rose in pitch to shouts: *I sadiqui enta rhaltan* [You are wrong, friend], *Semma mishan Allah* [Let's listen to God].<sup>29</sup>

Linguistically and emotionally, José moves in the opposite direction that his grandfather did years before. José does not speak Arabic, but despite this feels that, "That night something broke inside me and a different sentiment, one of strong brotherhood, arose in my relationship with them."<sup>30</sup> In France, both grandfather and future grandson negotiate the space between Lebanon and Mexico via language. As the grandfather prepares to leave Europe for the Americas, "something breaks" inside him, and this shift between nations and geographic spaces is marked linguistically as the family begins to speak Spanish instead of Arabic. As the grandson retraces the grandfather's steps in the opposite direction, a similar occurrence takes place. With a group of Arabs in France, "something breaks" inside José while at a party where the nationalities of the partygoers are equally illustrated through food and language. As the grandson moves backwards in time and space he locates in this new group something "different." Unlike his grandfather, for whom Spanish marked an "unknown" space, for José the heated conversations that spontaneously switch into Arabic create in him a feeling of "strong brotherhood"—despite the fact that he does not speak Arabic. Rather, the language has taken the form of a cultural symbol, and it is not what the

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<sup>29</sup> "Por esos días las tertulias con libaneses y otros amigos palestinos se hicieron frecuentes. Se discutía acremente mientras se saboreaban platillos con olor a menta y a comino salpicados con el arak, el delicioso vino anisado de aquella región, traído por alguno de los visitantes. La lengua francesa se iba opacando conforme la discusión subía de tono para pasar a los gritos: *I sadiqui enta rhaltan* [Te equivocas amigo], *Semma mishan Allah* [Escuchemos a Alá]." (28, italics and translation in original)

<sup>30</sup> "Esa noche algo se rompió en mí y un sentimiento diferente, de fuerte hermandad, surgió en mi relación con ellos." (32)



language communicates, but rather what it represents that is important. As the grandson retraces his family's movement across the globe and travels first from the American continent to Europe and then to the Middle East, he also recreates in reverse the linguistic transitions of his grandfather.

When Alina and another friend from the group, Ahmad, ask José to travel with them to Lebanon he agrees. Eager to find the Lebanon of his grandfather's stories, José arrives in the Middle East searching for a myth. On the first morning of the trip, waking in Syria, José finds himself overcome by the experience of listening to Muslim morning prayers:

The muezzin conducts the prayer using a microphone from the top of the minaret:

*Allah Akbar* [God is great]. He is answered by a single voice composed of thousands of throats: *Wah Muhammad rasullillah* [And Muhammad is his prophet].

The rhythm is felt on the skin. It is introduced through the pores, lodges in the body and suddenly I become part of that cry...<sup>31</sup>

Despite the fact that José is Christian and does not speak Arabic, he feels the Arabic language of the Muslim prayer on his very skin, entering through his pores, and finds himself carried within the prayer. He is “converted” into part of the call, part of the language.<sup>32</sup> His first experience of belonging in the Middle East uses language to transcend the sectarian questions that will tear at the fabric of Lebanon as the civil war breaks out.

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<sup>31</sup> El muecín conduce la plegaria utilizando un micrófono desde lo alto del minarete: *Allah Akbar* [Dios es grande]. Le responde una sola voz compuesta por miles de gargantas: *Wah Muhammad rasullillah* [Y Mahoma es su profeta].

El ritmo se siente sobre la piel. Se va introduciendo por los poros, se aloja en el cuerpo y de pronto me convierto en parte de ese grito...” (53)

<sup>32</sup> For more on embodiment within this context, see Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000).

Despite José's sense of integration into the Arabic language via the communal prayer, and by extension his integration into the location, he is continually figured by others as an outsider through language. As he crosses into Lebanon for the first time, he is stopped and questioned. Separated from Alina, he does not fully understand what is happening. The confusion is the result of his inability to speak Arabic: "They speak to me in Arabic and I reply that I don't understand, which only makes them more impatient."<sup>33</sup> They strip search him and detain him. The moment marks the beginning of José's fraught homecoming to Lebanon, and the tension of the moment is defined specifically through language.

The scene is repeated as José attempts to move around the Middle East. In another border crossing, between Syria and Jordan, he is stopped again—and again the border guards construct their understanding of José as non-Arab through language. Watching as "the Syrian citizens easily pass through to Jordan but for us the process is always complicated,"<sup>34</sup> José understands his Arabness as limited. Compared to the local citizens who move through the borders unchecked, José is figured as a tourist within his ancestral home. His non-belonging is not constructed through nationality, legal citizenship, or even ancestry, though, but rather language: "'Your surname is Arabic; therefore you must speak Arabic.' I shake my head, and he decides to punish me. 'Then you must pay five dinars and six hundred piasters.'"<sup>35</sup> Recognized as having Arab ancestry, José is specifically admonished for his inability to speak Arabic. Standing at the border, a site of national power crystallized, language becomes

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<sup>33</sup> "Me hablan en árabe y respondo que no los entiendo, lo cual los hace impacientarse más." (79)

<sup>34</sup> "Los ciudadanos sirios pasan con facilidad a Jordania pero para nosotros el trámite siempre se enreda." (130)

<sup>35</sup> "—Su apellido es árabe; por lo tanto usted debe hablar árabe —hago un ademán negativo con la cabeza, y él decide castigarme—. Entonces debe pagar cinco dinares y seiscientas piastres" (130).

a marker for identity. Rather than his appearance, his citizenship, his class, or his heritage, it is language that impedes his movement and affords the border guard an excuse to stop and economically sanction him.

As the novel progresses, the narrative shifts between José's travels through the Middle East and Middle Eastern folklore recounted by José's grandfather. Initially, the grandfather's narrative breaks are addressed to José in the second person, but eventually this narrative link falls away and the stories stand alone. Separated from each other by a break on the page and different size font and margins, the parallel narratives touch on similar themes but are otherwise separate. Two-thirds of the way through the novel, however, the narratives intersect in both time and space. José's grandfather, reminiscing about his home, closes his section saying, "Nowhere in the world is there a village more welcoming."<sup>36</sup> As José's voice takes back over he acknowledges his grandfather, saying, "—Ana a'arif [I know, I know] — and walking in these places that are so familiar to me, I repeat—: Ana a'arif, ana a'arif."<sup>37</sup> This transgression of the narrative break is negotiated via memory and language. The places through which José wanders cannot be familiar to him, as he has never been there before. Further, although José does not speak Arabic, lost between the timeframe of his story and his grandfather's, in this moment he suddenly does. His recognition of what should be an unknown space is augmented by his sudden knowledge of what should be an unknown linguistic code.

Language's ability to mediate belonging within geographical space is extended to

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<sup>36</sup> "No hay en el mundo pueblo más hospitalario" (104).

<sup>37</sup> "—Ana a'arif [Lo sé, lo sé] —y caminando por esos lugares tan familiares para mí, repetía—: Ana a'arif, ana a'arif." (104).

questions of ethnic belonging. José's Arabness is constructed through comparisons with his girlfriend and traveling partner, Alina. Both half Lebanese, José and Alina share the same number of Arab ancestors, but their claims to an Arab identity are not presented equally. Frequently cast as more "authentically" Arab, Alina is the one who organizes their trip to the Middle East, who finds their accommodations, and who guides them through the tourist sites. Reflecting on his role as tourist within his ancestral home, José notices that although Alina is guiding their trip, she does not look Middle Eastern:

...I think looking at her that while I can pass for an ordinary citizen in the region, she, with everything and her sober black cotton dress, could hardly be recognized as an Arab. In her eyes was the color of the sea and her European ancestry, and her chestnut hair made her stand out at once. Observing her intensely, I heard myself saying:

*"Habibi."*

"I can call you *habibi*; but a man speaking to a woman should say *habitate*," she replies with a frank smile.<sup>38</sup>

Comparing their appearances, José realizes that while he phenotypically blends in, Alina stands out. This thought—that at least in terms of appearance he belongs and she does not—is fleeting though. Lost in the reverie of his own racial belonging, José unconsciously slips into Arabic and calls Alina "*habibi*." This code-switch into Arabic is presented as unintentional: he is so removed from the situation and lost in his Arabness that he hears

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<sup>38</sup> ...pienso al mirarla que mientras yo puedo pasar por un ciudadano corriente en la región, ella, con todo y su sobrio vestido negro de algodón, difícilmente podría ser reconocida como árabe. En el color del mar en sus ojos estaba su ascendencia europea y su cabellera castaña la hacían destacarse en seguida. Observándola intensamente me escuché decirle:

—*Habibi*.

—Yo sí puedo decirte *habibi*; pero el hombre a la mujer debe decirle *habitate* — responde con una sonrisa franca. (104, the changes in tense are present in the original)

himself say it, as if he were some other person. Rather than reinforce José's racialized belonging and Alina's non-belonging, though, José's use of Arabic displaces him. His utterance is not grammatically correct, and as Alina corrects him she is refigured as ethnically more Arab than he is.

As José and Alina continue their tour of the Middle East, José becomes more and more lost within his grandfather's memories. Alina, by contrast, becomes increasingly interested in the political strife and brewing civil war she sees around them. On the edge of the Red Sea, Alina confronts José about his obsession with the past. She says, "Something has changed in me, in you, and in our relationship. We can't go on like this when there are so many things to do. I think you are selfish, overwhelmed by your memories and by the past that you have invented, and I want to live in the future..."<sup>39</sup> Unable to locate the Lebanon of his grandfather, José has become disillusioned. By contrast, Alina is unconcerned with reconstructing the Lebanon of her antecedents and through the trip has become increasingly concerned with the current politics of the nation. As she and José fight about the nature of their visit and their responsibility toward the homeland of their ancestors, she asks, "How can I not be moved when I see these big-eyed children questioning themselves every morning? What does destiny have in store for them, their parents, and their siblings in this divided land? Is my story, and my mother's story, not also a part of all this?"<sup>40</sup> For Alina, unlike for José, the Lebanon of her family's stories is connected to the present Lebanon, and she

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<sup>39</sup> "—Algo ha cambiado en mí, en ti y en nuestra relación. No podemos seguir así cuando hay tantas cosas por hacer. Te noto egoísta, agobiado por tus recuerdos y por el pasado que has inventado, y yo quiero vivir el futuro..." (143).

<sup>40</sup> "¿cómo puedo dejar de conmoverme al ver a esos niños de ojos grandes interrogarse por el mañana?, ¿qué les depara el destino a ellos, a sus padres y a sus hermanos en esta tierra dividida? ¿Acaso mi historia, la de mi madre, no está vinculada también a todo esto?" (143)

understands herself as intimately responsible for its future. As a result of the fight the two cut their tour of the Middle East short and return to Lebanon.

Back in Beirut, the discord between the two lovers manifests physically. As Alina's interest in becoming involved in Lebanon's current politics grows, José becomes sick. Having lost his appetite, he falls ill while they are out sightseeing and Alina continues to discuss the confessional system and growing unrest around them. Succumbing to a fever brought on by malaria, José suddenly hallucinates his grandfather's presence:

I see the Great Mosque of the Umayyads with its white stones shining with the same sun that hits my head... And I see my grandfather with his impeccable white suit and his cane walking towards me through all the noise and talking to me in Arabic, which I now understand: "*Allah yerhamu*" [God, have mercy on him].<sup>41</sup>

Within his fever the boundaries between time, space, and language are erased. On the brink of death, José is suddenly able to understand Arabic. As his grandfather walks towards him, he invokes God's mercy, a saying most commonly used when referring to a deceased loved one. This momentary linguistic understanding precipitates a conflation of José's and his grandfather's narratives. As José's fever spikes and he finally understands the language that has kept him from finding belonging within the Middle East, he addresses his disillusion to his grandfather directly:

Blood boils in my veins and I hear a scream that will never end come from my dry throat.

Grandfather! Grandfather! This is not how you told me it would be. There are no

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<sup>41</sup> "Alcanzo a ver la Gran Mezquita de los omeyas con sus piedras blanquísimas recibiendo los destellos del sol que golpean fuertemente mi cabeza... Y veo a mi abuelo con su impecable traje blanco y su bastón acercarse en medio del gran barullo y habándome [sic] en árabe, que ahora entiendo: "*Allah yerhamu*" [Dios, ten piedad de él]." (150)

wonderful stories, only politics. Where is the country that Solomon sang about, touched by the grace of God? The Middle East is a passageway and death is its only destination. That's why you fled, that's why you looked for another land and left me the penance of returning to scream that everything is lost. Grandfather! Don't go! Not without first telling me another one of your stories. Please, one more. Just one more.<sup>42</sup>

Lost in his fever, José succumbs to the tendency Alina criticizes him for and cannot move beyond the Lebanon described by his grandfather. Unable to reconcile his family's memory with what he sees around him, he cannot see the future that Alina wants to fight for. Instead, he declares the Middle East a passageway to death, accusing his grandfather of leaving him with a false heritage. As his narrative comes to a close, he begs his grandfather for one last story, and as his grandfather's voice takes over it responds to his request, saying "Have I already told you about how I left Lebanon? It was the middle of the night..."<sup>43</sup> As José's grandfather appears in Jose's fever dream and then responds to his request, the separation between the two narratives ruptures.

When José's fever finally breaks and he wakes, Alina is gone. She has left him to join the fighting in Beirut. Weeks later, after José has returned to France, he receives a letter that announces Alina's death. The letter assures him that, shot during the fighting, "she fought

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<sup>42</sup> La sangre hierve en mis venas y escucho salir de mi garganta reseca ese grito que nunca terminará.

¡Abuelo!, ¡abuelo! Esto no es como me lo contaste. No hay historias maravillosas, sino intereses políticos. ¿Dónde está el país cantado por Salomón, tocado por la gracia de Dios? Medio Oriente es un pasadizo a la muerte como único destino. Por eso huiste, por eso buscaste otra tierra y me dejaste la penitencia de regresar para gritar que todo está perdido. ¡Abuelo!, no te vayas. No sin antes contarme otra de tus historias. ¡Por favor!, una más. Sólo una más. (150-151)

<sup>43</sup> "¿Ya te conté cómo salí de Líbano? Era de madrugada..." (151)

with the hope of seeing Lebanon recover its stability, its autonomy, and a bit of unity,”<sup>44</sup> and that “she died as a Lebanese.”<sup>45</sup> Figured once again as truly Lebanese, Alina’s sacrifice stands in contrast to José’s search for his history and his inability to find belonging within Lebanon. The letter, and the novel, concludes:

... You came looking to weave together the threads of your history and the history of your ancestors, and I am sure that you did it and that you returned to Mexico less weighted down by uncertainty, enriched by the lived dreams, despite the pain of witnessing the conclusion of this story.<sup>46</sup>

As the novel comes to a close the construction of José throughout the text as not truly Lebanese intensifies. Reminded repeatedly throughout the novel of his position as an outsider because of his inability to understand or speak Arabic, he finally ends the trip as a tourist when he returns to his home country. Alina—already positioned as more Arab than José because she speaks more Arabic—by contrast transcends her mixed heritage and dies as a true Lebanese, in service to Lebanon, and on Lebanese soil.

### **3.2. Nation and Class in Farhoud’s *Le fou d’Omar***

Farhoud’s *Le fou d’Omar* is a complex polyphonic and multivocal text that tells the story of the Lkhouloud family. Having lived in Montreal for several years, the Muslim and

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<sup>44</sup> “Luchaba con la esperanza de ver a Líbano recorbrar su estabilidad, su autonomía y un mínimo de unidad.” (159)

<sup>45</sup> “Murió como Líbano” (159).

<sup>46</sup> “... Tú viniste buscando hilvanar la madeja de tu historia, de tus antepasados, y casi estoy seguro de que lo lograste para regresar a México menos cargado de incertidumbres, enriquecido por los sueños vividos, pero con el dolor de presenciar la conclusión de esta historia.” (160)



Lebanese family has lost their mother and suffered through the mental illness of one son, Radwan. Omar, the father, has desperately attempted to keep the family together and to care for his ill son, and the novel tells the story of Omar's death. Broken into six "*livres*," the novel is narrated by four voices: in the first person by the father, Omar (book 5), a son, Rawi (Book 3), and the mentally ill son, Radwan (books 2 and 6). Additionally, two books (1 and 4) are narrated by the Lkhouloud's non-Muslim and non-Arab neighbor, Lucien Laflamme. Laflamme, having read the Quran, is intrigued by the Muslim religion and his neighbors. He watches the family, and although he is kept at a distance and does not know them intimately, it is through his voice in book 1 that the reader is first introduced to the Lkhoulouds and witnesses the first episode of Radwan's mental illness. As the novel continues, the theme of estrangement (caused as much by the son's mental illness as the family's immigration to Canada from Lebanon) is examined from multiple perspectives as the narration shifts between characters. Radiating out from Radwan's chapters, his insanity touches everyone around him. While his father fights to save Radwan and acts as his fulltime caregiver, his brother Rawi feels abandoned and ultimately leaves the family, and later Canada. It is only when Omar, their father, dies that the two brothers are reunited.

As these multiple voices narrate the events that follow Omar's death, a variety of languages and dialects erupt throughout the narrative, including English, Arabic, Italian, and two dialects of French. These languages mark the characters, their experiences, and the progression of the plot. French is the principal language of the text and the wider-Quebecois society, while Arabic is the intimate language of the family. English and Italian appear in moments of trauma, and represent disruptions to the linguistic code of the text. Radwan's insanity is expressed through shifting and uncontrolled language, while Rawi's insistence on

economic success and detachment from his family is conveyed in careful and perfect French. Omar's book, filled with longing for his children, is characterized by a stilted French that betrays Arabic as its underlying linguistic code. For each of these three characters language plays a pivotal role in the construction of an ethnic identity that intersects with identities of nationality, class, and ability.

The shortest of the books, Omar's section of the novel describes his pain over the death of his daughter, Soraya, his reactions to his son Radwan's psychotic episodes and his desire to care for and protect him, and his guilt over his resultant neglect of his other children. Arabic peeks through in the occasional translation and calque and affects the grammatical structure of the French. Taking on the role of an almost spectral presence within the book, Arabic stands as a symbol for the home country that Omar has left and the family that he is attempting to keep together. In one of his sections Radwan comments on his father's language choices, saying, "In Lebanon it didn't matter if we spoke French. Here, he turned tail to tip, as they say, it was Arabic, nothing but Arabic, just Arabic."<sup>47</sup> This willingness to speak French in Lebanon but not in Quebec begins with a resistance to loss of culture due to immigration, but is equally bound up in a shifting perspective on globalism and colonialism. What the French language embodied in Lebanon—an educated and cosmopolitan lifestyle—disappears in the face of pressure to assimilate to a dominant culture in Quebec. Omar is transformed into a diligent keeper of culture as he insists the family speak only in Arabic, marking the linguistic boundaries of the family home and relegating French to "out there." Within the space of Montreal, Arabic becomes an interior language, while French exists in the exterior. The differences between the immigrant home and the

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<sup>47</sup> "Au Liban, ça lui faisait rien qu'on parle français. Ici, il a viré boutte pour boutte, comme ils disent, c'était l'arabe, rien que l'arabe, just l'arabe" (30).

larger French Canadian culture are marked linguistically. In drawing these linguistic lines around the physical space of the house and metaphorical space of the family, Omar attempts to bind his children together via Arabic. He imposes the language on them as the sole method of communication within the family: “With father and mother we spoke Arabic.”<sup>48</sup> This linguistic tension binding the family reflects Omar’s ideals and privileging of their place of origin, and his children internalize this construction of Arabic as the language of family. As Arabic takes on this role, it manifests differently for both Radwan and Rawi.

Rawi, having left the family following the death of his mother, now lives in Florida. A successful writer,<sup>49</sup> the French in Rawi’s book stands in stark contrast to that in Omar’s. Unlike the French haunted by Arabic in Omar’s section, Rawi writes with a meticulousness that generates a suspiciously perfect French—it is free from mistakes, slang, and dialect. In keeping with his success as a writer and his flawless French scrubbed of any Arabic influence, Rawi has changed his name to Pierre Luc Duranceau. He both fears the discovery of his name change and dwells on the change’s implied denial of his roots. This self-selected isolation from his family in the form of eschewing his name—as a result of feeling neglected by his father in the face of Radwan’s mental illness—is repeated linguistically and geographically. Rawi’s departure from the family into an economically-successful career is reflected in his departure from Canada when he chooses to move to the United States. Further, if Omar has insisted on Arabic as the language of the family, Rawi’s removal from the family signals a removal from Arabic as well. Beyond no longer speaking Arabic, Rawi has successfully erased all traces of Arabic from his French as well. Rawi has successfully

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<sup>48</sup> “Avec père et mère, on parlait arabe” (41).

<sup>49</sup> The name Rawi also means “storyteller” in Arabic.

retreated from the interiority of the family into the exterior world—moving linguistically into larger French Canada, and then geographically into larger North America.

These three spaces—geographic, familial, and lingual—are intertwined with one another and Rawi's move away from his family is marked linguistically. The catalyst for his retreat from Arabic is the death of his mother. Left alone with Radwan and their father, and hurt by his brother's outbursts and his father's neglect, he decides to leave. Radwan recounts this moment as linguistically important, as Rawi breaks with their father's code of Arabic within the home and announces his departure in two external languages:

Duranceau, you must be sick to call yourself Duranceau, decided that he had no more reason to come and see us, my father and I. He told us that in French. Because monsieur no longer wants to speak Arabic. He told us the same thing in English, the dolt, as if we needed to hear twice the same silly things.<sup>50</sup>

This retreat from the interior of the family and the family's language is precipitated by the death of the mother. In this moment of trauma Rawi not only divorces himself from the family but from the very language that binds the family together. Exiting the interior spaces of familial home and language, he moves into the exterior public spaces of the larger society, and in so doing moves into that forbidden language within the family—French—and then steps even further afield by repeating himself in English. In this moment, as he announces his departure, English is the only language truly free from attachment. If Arabic represents the interior space of the family and French represents the exterior space of public life, English exists outside of this dichotomy. As he repeats his message in English his words become a

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<sup>50</sup> "Duranceau, faut-tu être malade pour s'appeler Duranceau, a décidé qu'il n'avait plus aucune raison de venir nous voir, mon père et moi. Il nous a dit ça en français. Parce que monsieur ne veut plus parler l'arabe. Il nous a répété la même chose en anglais, l'épais, comme on si on avait besoin d'entendre deux fois les mêmes niaiseries." (37)

performed statement. The very act of placing them into English represents the definitive moment of the break with the situation as he chooses a language that is his neither by birth nor adoption.

As Rawi assimilates linguistically and culturally his very self is replaced by his assumed identity, Duranceau. This transition does not provide Rawi with the clean break he seeks, though. The antiseptic identity he has created in Duranceau is haunted by his past, and he admits: “Rawi collides with the Duranceau that I have become. Rawi suffocates in the body and life of Duranceau, he has no place. I’m stuck between Rawi and Duranceau.”<sup>51</sup> Far from providing the narrator with an identity that allows him to pass painlessly into the larger exterior public, Duranceau stifles him. Rather than craft a transcultural identity that allows him to move between the interior spaces of home, family and Arabic and the exterior spaces of the public society, Canada and French, the speaker creates two separate identities to inhabit each sphere. He struggles, then, to move between the two identities, and the two identities—the public and the private—cannot exist as they have been constructed. The utter domination of Duranceau leaves Rawi “suffocating,” and the narrator “stuck” between them. Floundering between his two identities, the narrator is stuck between the public and the private spheres. Unable to navigate the passage between the exterior world and the interior world, he attempts to eschew the private space of family and familial language altogether.

Moving into English—and the United States—allows the narrator to release the tension between these two dichotomies. He says “Speaking English is already an entertainment. This

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<sup>51</sup> “Rawi se heurte au Duranceau que je suis devenu. Rawi étouffe dans le corps et la vie de Duranceau, il n’a aucune place. Je suis coincé entre Rawi et Duranceau.” (109)

takes you away from your mother tongue and the language you chose to write. Rest.”<sup>52</sup>

Within the space of English the narrator is able to rest himself linguistically, as his bifurcated identity can step outside of the need to be translingual. In this moment he un-identifies with both identities that have been set up in antithesis and creates a third space where he can step outside of this tension.

It is not until the death of the second parent that the narrator makes his return to Arabic. Confronted with the trauma of losing a parent, his flight from country, language, and family ends. Returning to Montreal, he sheds French, noting that “In serious circumstances, we spoke our maternal language.”<sup>53</sup> As the narrator steps back into Arabic and the familial space, a reconciliation occurs between his two selves (Duranceau and Rawi) and the two brothers. With their father gone, Rawi and Radwan are able to set aside the other linguistic codes they carry and find each other within Arabic.

Although Rawi comments frequently on his use of Arabic, within the text representations of Arabic are absent from his *livre*. It is not until Radwan announces the death of their father and Rawi confronts the loss of his second parent that he moves fully into Arabic, and Arabic breaks through the French of the novel in the space of his dialogue. At the end of the novel, wrapped in the arms of his estranged brother, Rawi cries out “Allah yerhamo. Allah yerhamo” (Rest in peace, rest in peace; literally: God give him mercy, God give him mercy, 183). As Arabic enters the novel for the first time via Rawi, Rawi reenters his family. Physically wrapped within the embrace of his brother, the two mourn their father, and Rawi returns to Arabic. The novel closes with a conversation between the two brothers:

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<sup>52</sup> “Parler l’anglais est déjà un divertissement. Cela t’éloigne de ta langue maternelle et de la langue que tu as choisie pour écrire. Repose-toi.” (112)

<sup>53</sup> “dans les circonstances graves, nous parlions notre langue maternelle.” (118)

Radwan asks Rawi if he plans to have children, and whether he will teach them to speak Arabic. The newly reconciled Rawi responds that yes, he will teach his children Arabic. In the wake of the death of the father, Rawi is able to return to interior spaces of the family, and even imagine biologically and linguistically contributing to the continuation of the family tree.

Just as the French that Omar and Rawi speak indicates how they are constructing their ethnic, national, and class identities, so too does language play a critical role in Radwan's narratives. Radwan's construction of self is bound up in his understandings of his family's ethnicity and heritage, and his use of language allows him to navigate his place within Canada as an immigrant while mediating his perception of the world through his mental illness.

As Radwan begins Book 2, he awakes to find his father has died in bed. The first sentence of Radwan's narrative is a linguistic schism, unable to describe the trauma that has taken place in the night. Radwan begins with a code-switch, saying in fragmented English, "Father. My Father. My father is. My father is dead" (21). As he finally completes the sentence, he shifts to French and admits that this is the only phrase, and only language, that comes to him. Attempting to express the same information in French yields no meaning. Turning to Arabic, he discovers that the language cannot encompass the trauma. Trying it out, he narrates, "Bayé mèt, bayé mèt"<sup>54</sup> before deciding, "that sounds like *jingle bell, jingle bell*."<sup>55</sup> The linguistic sign is separated from its signifier as the trauma of losing his father forces a disassociation of language from meaning, and the traumatic information that should

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<sup>54</sup> Transliterated Arabic into French meaning "My father is dead, my father is dead."

<sup>55</sup> "ça sonnait comme *jingle bell, jingle bell*" (21, italics added to emphasize the sudden shift between languages in the translation.)

be encoded within the language is rendered absurd. Notably, though, this linguistic disassociation does not occur equally across Radwan's four languages. Rather, it is in Arabic that Radwan cannot make sense of what has happened, and he does not even attempt it in French until much later in the novel. It is only in English and Italian that, at least for the majority of the novel, he is able to admit that his father has died.

At times Radwan becomes rhetorically stuck, repeating a word in a variety of languages. When Radwan repeats "Vivre. La vie. Life. To live. El hayat. La vita è bella" (64), the tarrying on the word forces a reflection on the part of the reader. The moment of translation, repeated again and again through French, English, Arabic, and then Italian, disrupts the flow of the novel and these switches take place on two levels: within the text, and within the experience of the reader. As Radwan uses language to express his experience of trauma, his construction of identity is mediated linguistically through his mental illness. For readers, though, the intrusion of this multiplicity of languages into Radwan's books strips meaning from linguistic signs and relegates the symbol to a secondary place behind the surface of the text. Readers encounter a strange pastiche of language that lacks the most common foreign language markers in the North American publishing industry: italics and translations. As these unmarked languages spill over each other, repeating and revising information already given, they pervert the original utterances and highlight the constructed nature of a novel. They break the illusion of cohesion between language and novel and reveal in the separation of linguistic sign and symbol.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> I return to this discussion of disrupted narratives in Chapter 4.



### 3.3. Religion and Gender in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Kahf's 2006 novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, charts the personal development of a Muslim American girl struggling with what it means to be a Muslim American woman. As Khadra Shamy navigates her evolving world she must come to terms with her intersected identities: woman, Muslim, American, Arab, immigrant. This section focuses specifically on the functions of Khadra's code-switching between English and Arabic at crucial moments of self-development and self-definition within the novel. As a young woman, Khadra is challenged to repeatedly reinvent herself in response to the disparate communities in which she exists. Playing an astute linguistic game, she slides in and out of Arabic, Standard English, and colloquial Midwestern English depending on her interlocutor and how she wishes to portray herself.

As with language in *Le fou d'Omar* and *En el verano, la tierra*, code-switching in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is used to construct an ethnic identity and is affected by that construction. In my close reading of *En el verano, la tierra* I followed an ethnolinguistic examination of language and argued that characters' use of Arabic in the novel allowed them to present themselves as more authentically Arab. Within the section on *Le fou d'Omar* I broadened my examination of language, ethnicity, and identity to include the intersecting identities of class and ability. In this section, I will continue this expansion through close readings that focus on the use of language in constructing gendered and religious identities in relation to ethnic identities.

Growing up in the United States, Khadra is heavily invested in maintaining her identity as an Arab and a Muslim, and the novel uses a variety of methods to challenge notions of ethnic and religious identity. When the Shamy family first arrives in Indiana the

narrator describes what the rest of the neighborhood's residents see as they unpack their U-Haul: "a bunch of foreigners. Dark and wrong. Dressed funny. Their talk was gross sounds, like someone throwing up" (6). Three things mark the Shamys as foreign: the color of their skin, their clothes (especially hijab), and their language. These three things form motifs that run through the novel and create a text in which Khadra struggles to define her identity in relation to the small Muslim community in which she is raised and the larger American community that surrounds her. Religion, especially, is examined at a variety of levels, beginning with Khadra's personal relationship with Islam, before extending into the immediate community and moving out into the wider American society. The role of religion in Khadra's life shifts as she moves through various life phases, from adolescence to college to adulthood. At various points her faith means different things to her and she practices differently, wavering from a very conservative, strict, and nearly militaristic interpretation of Islam, to an interest in the beauty found in Quranic recital, to disillusion with the treatment of women, to a more liberal and personal relationship with her faith. As she moves through these stages she is also confronted by the members of her religious community, who practice Islam in a wide variety of ways—from those who practice polygamy to those drawn to Sufism.

Growing up in Indiana, Khadra's strong identification with Islam compels her to find methods for expressing her religious identity. She does this in a variety of ways, including altering her diet and dress, but she places a special emphasis on the importance of maintaining her fluency in Arabic. The ties between language and religion are represented so strongly within the novel that Khadra regards learning to speak Arabic properly as part of learning about Islam. Knowledge of Arabic phonology is such an integral part of Quranic

recital that the two are taught in conjunction with each other, and as Khadra learns the practice of reciting the Quran she also learns about Arabic,

It [Quranic recital lessons] began with a diagram of the throat with the Arabic letters charted at their place of origin. Hard palate, soft palate, the root of the tongue, the median sulcus down its middle, the phonemes that belong to each of its side sections. When to soften the t and d and when to harden them.

(197)

This connection between the importance of Arabic to the proper pronunciation of the Quran and the didactic teaching of it links Arabic just as strongly to religion as to ethnicity within the text. For Khadra, though, the two are more than linked. Language and religion are synonymous: “Losing Arabic was tantamount to losing the religion, so ‘You have to marry a native Arabic speaker...’” (137). Not only figuring language as a stand in for religion, Khadra privileges language to the point that it becomes a necessary characteristic trait for eligible future spouses. As Khadra grows up a woman, a Muslim, and an Arab in the United States, language is an intrinsic identity marker in regards gender, religion, and ethnicity.

The intersections of these three identities occasionally cause friction for Khadra, though, and it is primarily through language that she renegotiates her gender, ethnicity, and religion when challenged. Like many first and second-generation Arab American women, Khadra is constantly reminded by her family that Arab girls are “good” while American girls are “bad.”<sup>57</sup> Traveling to the Middle East for the first time, though, her understanding of how gender, ethnic, and religious identities are constructed is challenged, and Khadra ends up deeply conflicted about who she is and who she is supposed to be.

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<sup>57</sup> See Nadine Naber’s “Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore.”

Khadra begins the trip to Saudi Arabia for Haj in a state of excitement, but the visit is sullied with relentless disappointment. While there, the Shamys stay with relatives, and Khadra and her brother are relieved to discover that the perfect Arab cousins they have heard so much about are far from perfect. Her disillusionment with her cousin Afaaf<sup>58</sup> culminates when the two leave the house under the pretext of going to the mall. Instead they meet up with Afaaf's friends, with Afaaf announcing, "Here she is...my American cousin" as they climb into a limo and leave the mall. One of the boys asks if Khadra understands Arabic, and Khadra retorts that she does. Disappointed, the boy notes she doesn't speak Arabic with an accent, and is therefore not "really American." Khadra responds proudly that "no, [she's] not really American. [She's] an Arab, like [him]." Despite her protests that she is "like [him]," she is uncomfortable and out of place. She is shocked to see her cousin take off her abaya and veil and declines when one of the boys attempts to shake her hand, noting that she doesn't "even shake hands with men in America." When she is left alone in the limo with the boy who first asked about her Americanness, he introduces himself as Ghazi and then questions her again, asking, "So...you're American, huh?" In giving himself a name, he gives himself agency, and rather than asking Khadra for her name, he reiterates his hope that she's American, reducing her to a label. Khadra rejects the label he is so hopefully applying, and responds, "No, I'm Arab. I told you. I'm Arab. Just like you." This entire exchange takes place in Arabic, and English is interjected only when another boy greets Khadra with an excited "Hi!" and in the same breath he remarks as an aside in Arabic to the rest of the group that she doesn't "look American." Paralleling the previous exchange between Ghazi and Khadra, the label *American* is once again invoked, and language is closely tied to it.

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<sup>58</sup> The name *Afaaf* means chaste or virtuous.

Back in the limo, alone, Ghazi attempts to remove Khadra's veil and begins to grope her breasts. When she protests, Ghazi responds, "you grew up in America—don't tell me you never do stuff like this in America—." America, repeated twice in rapid succession, reveals Ghazi's lack of interest in her personhood as he links her sexuality to a geopolitical space. Horrified, Khadra quickly exits the vehicle and screams for Afaaf. When Afaaf appears, she is annoyed, and asks Khadra if this is not as fun as America. Khadra responds:

*That again. "I'm not American!" she yelled in Arabic, kicking dust at Afaaf. Then, because the worst insults she knew in Arabic were what her parents blurted when she or her brothers misbehaved—brat or at worst churl—she launched into a torrent of English: "I hate you—you're a FILTHY girl, with FILTHY friends—you take me home—you take me home RIGHT NOW. You—you—you goddamn bitch."*

This loss of control stems from the relentless application of the label *American*. The group's drug use and promiscuity bother her less than being called American and she snaps, breaking into English. Caught between her desire to be seen as Arab and her understanding of gender roles within Islam, Khadra's Arabic fails her. Exerting linguistic power by code-switching into the language that represents everything she is trying to deny, Khadra switches into English.

Years later, back in America and engaged to be married, Khadra is again cast as *American*. Her fiancé, Juma, has come to the United States from Kuwait to study and plans to return to the Middle East when he is done. Unlike Khadra, Juma sees his time in the United States as only a brief visit. This division between them is illustrated poignantly in various instances, and the language used to communicate these differences reiterates the divide between them. Normally, they speak almost exclusively in Arabic, and when Khadra

does incorporate English into their dialogues Juma occasionally misunderstands her due to the extent to which her English has been Americanized. Following a traditionally conservative form of courtship, they have few interactions before getting married, and during one of their dates Khadra asks Juma if he thinks they will have a good life. In a park, lying in the grass, Juma abruptly changes the subject, and asks Khadra how many children she would like to have. Khadra becomes defensive and replies “Right away? None,” with an “edge in her voice.” Juma placates her but also dismisses the unease that has crept into the conversation, noting that “a lot of girls talked that way when they first got married...[and] later they tended to come around.” He pushes the subject and asks her about “later on.” She admits that she hasn’t thought that far ahead, and asks him how many he would like. Juma suggests nine. Khadra’s reaction is visceral and immediate. She sits upright from her prone position and blurts out: “Nine! Nuh-uh!” Khadra’s reaction to what she perceives as an outrageous demand causes her to revert not just to English, but to informal colloquialization, and Juma, despite his proficiency in English, is forced to ask for a translation. “What is this, ‘nuh-uh’?” he asks, to which Khadra responds, “Nothing. Just dumb Hoosier talk. Means no” (211). Although Khadra diminishes her use of the English that has become so customary to her as dumb, the code-switch has shifted the power dynamic between them. Her switch to English forces Juma out of the conversation, and it is only by asking Khadra what *nuh-uh* means that Juma can regain access. Khadra is now in control, and her knowledge of English allows her to play the role of gatekeeper. Considering the topic of conversation started out as the good life the two were going to share before Juma suggested they have nine children, it is clear that Juma’s and Khadra’s expectations of their future roles within the marriage are not aligned. The request for nine children challenges Khadra’s womanhood via the suggestion

that her only role in their marriage will be to produce offspring, and in this moment Khadra uses language as tool to flee and take refuge in her Americanness. By the end of the conversation the two have reconciled, laughing about their disagreement and delighting in the chance touches of their hands as they feed bread to ducks. This tense exchange linguistically foreshadows the fraught nature of their future marriage, though, and after endless fights about Khadra's role as a woman and a wife, the two divorce.

Both of these instances—the one in Saudi Arabia when Khadra is a teenager, and the one in the United States a few years later when Khadra is on the cusp of marriage—reveal conflicting and colliding identities. Throughout the majority of the novel, Khadra shifts between identities that are never quite reconciled to each other. Unlike these ever conflicting selves, her everyday language use slides between English and Arabic, and the two codes are blended together effortlessly, even mid-word. In these two moments, however, when Khadra's compound identities crash together, so too does her language and the switch from one language to the other is imbued with emotion and power. These two moments are not examples of a bilingual speaker existing peacefully within her language spectrum, her own linguistic repertoire. Rather, in these moments, Khadra's two languages appear in conflict, and as she attempts to reconcile her view of herself as an American, a woman, a Muslim and an Arab in the face of the expectations being thrust at her by the outer world, her language choices disrupt communication as a method for subverting power and repositioning the speaker outside of these questions of ethnicity and gender.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The sociolinguistic work that has been done on the role of Arabic code-switching and

identity in the Arab diaspora focuses in large part on spoken language<sup>59</sup> and emphasizes two primary identity categories: ethnic and religious. In contrast, Yasir Suleiman's *Arabic, Self and Identity: A Study in Conflict and Displacement* considers a corpus of autobiography, autoethnography, literary production, and more in order to assess notions of self as relating to language within the Arab diaspora. Authors examined include Edward Said, Leila Ahmed, Moustapha Safouan, and Amin Maalouf. Suleiman addresses language as a tool for individual and group identity marking. He states, "Under normal circumstances, the symbolism of language blends into a banal or quotidian view of identity that is hardly noticed in everyday life. However, its potency comes to the fore in situations of strife or conflict when it becomes particularly urgent to mark the boundaries of the group or the Self as a form of (sometimes atavistic) self-defence" (1).

In his section on Edward Said, Suleiman argues that examining memoir and literature can provide an understanding of "the intersectionality of language, identity, displacement, exile, diaspora, trauma and globalisation..." (79). This intersectionality is discussed quite frankly in Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, and Suleiman points to language as one of the main causes of Said's sense of displacement, a result of feeling "linguistically 'out of place'" (78). The effect of language on Said's sense of self is openly discussed in his memoir, and Suleiman points to a section of the introduction (xiii-xiv) as particularly poignant,

The *basic split* in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one language in the other—to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were

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<sup>59</sup> See Bassione 2009; Y. Suleiman 1994, 2003, 2011; Mango 2010, 2012.



mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other—has been a complicating task. (78, emphasis added in Suleiman)

Suleiman continues his exploration of language commentary by memoirists and authors with a discussion of Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*, saying, "Reflecting on her deep-rooted and contrasting attitudes towards English and Arabic as a young student, Ahmed considers these attitudes as an expression of the 'internalised colonialism' that the intellectual, professional and governing classes in Egypt practised..." (99). Suleiman argues that "A key thesis here is that language is as relevant a marker of individual identity, the Self, as it is of group or collective identity. It is, however, important not to draw a sharp distinction between the Self and collective identity; the two feed into each other" (77).

Following the methodology laid out by Suleiman for a qualitative sociolinguistic study of literature by treating language as "a symbolic resource that can enhance our understanding of how individuals conceive of themselves and their communities" (77), I have looked to Azar's *En el verano, la tierra*, Farhoud's *Le fou d'Omar*, and Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* to demonstrate how Arab American texts employ language to construct characters' ethnic identities in relation to their communities. The examples of code-switching analyzed here demonstrate that, rather than stable and predetermined, individual identities shift across linguistic contexts and even within specific interactions. As Jennifer Roth-Gordon explains: "cultural and linguistic practices (what people actually do and how they speak) matter to our everyday assessments of someone's race" (51). The characters in these novels are racially and ethnically categorized through language, and they use language to manipulate how they are racially perceived by those around them. Through their ability to switch between codes they maintain or subvert cultural understandings of race via linguistic

power structures. Further, in *Le fou d'Omar* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, this manipulation of language informs not only racial and ethnic identity categories, but national, class, gender, and religious identities as well. In the next chapter I continue the discussion of the intersections of race, gender, and language begun here through an analysis of silence in five texts from Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

### III. SILENCE, LANGUAGE, AND CONSUMPTION: LOCATING IDENTITY IN THE ARAB AMERICAN FEMALE BODY

“If you want to hear me, listen to my silences as well as my words.”

—J. Kadi

#### 1. Introduction

Years ago, I ate at a Lebanese restaurant called Sitti in Raleigh, North Carolina. Following a large meal of *labnah* and *kafta*, the bill arrived clipped to a postcard. On one side was a black and white facsimile of an old family photograph, and on the other was a note. It instructed the diner that “[t]he most important, beloved figure in any Lebanese family is the grandmother, or *sitti*. This is especially true for the families, like ours, who started making the journey to America from tiny Lebanese villages nearly a century ago. Our grandmothers were the caretakers and teachers of our home country’s culture, faith, and food. Always food.” Filled with the food of my childhood, the meal had evoked strong memories of my own *sitti*. I tucked the postcard into my purse and took it home.



**Figure 4.** Postcard from Sitti in Raleigh, North Carolina

This homage to the grandmother, bound up with her cooking, is a common occurrence in Arab American cultural production. From restaurants to life writing to fiction, the grandmother and her food occupy a special place in the Arab American imaginary.

Within fiction, this matriarch inhabits a variety of intersecting identities—including poor and wealthy, rural and urban, illiterate and hyperliterate, religious and atheist. What all of these women have in common, though, is that they invariably cook.<sup>60</sup> Although literary critics often present the motif of food in Arab American literature within an apolitical framework,<sup>61</sup> I argue that food in Arab American writing is unequivocally political.<sup>62</sup> Images of consumption occur so often and seem so ordinary that they are often read as immaterial; however, it is because they appear persistently that they assume potent significance. Further, representations of food rarely stand alone; rather they are carefully situated in the moment of creation and notably tied to the physical labor of the matriarch of the family. Like the traditional Arab refrain “*yaslamu ’idek(ī)*” or “bless your hands” after someone has prepared a meal, the preparation of food in Arab American literature is entwined with the fingers that craft it.

In this essay I survey five representative works of fiction from the Lebanese diaspora in North America to examine the production and ingestion of food, focusing especially on the significance of this ingestion for the matriarch and the community that surrounds her.

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<sup>60</sup> Even the strikingly independent Mamá Salima in Bárbara Jacob’s *Las Hojas Muertas* (1987) who reads voraciously, writes for a newspaper, runs a business, and has separated from her husband, “shut[s] herself up in the kitchen and [makes] Arabic empanadas with meat or spinach without anyone [seeing] her” (“Pero era rico que nos visitara Mamá Salima en México porque se encerraba en la cocina y hacía empanadas árabes de carne o espinaca sin que nadie la viera” [14]). Sarah Nour-el-Din in Rabih Alameddine’s *I, The Divine* (2014) is an exception, although perhaps an exception that proves the rule.

<sup>61</sup> See Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2014): 5.

<sup>62</sup> This is well established in Asian American studies. See especially Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, Anita Mannur, eds., *Eating Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

Beginning with Lebanese Mexican Héctor Azar's *Las Tres Primeras Personas* (1976), I analyze the novel's symbolic treatment of food and the female form, their conflation, and their ties to ethnic, cultural, and national identities. I then turn to Lebanese Canadian Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996). As in *Las Tres Primeras Personas*, I argue that the matriarch of *Fall on Your Knees*, Materia, as well as her food and language, are elevated to the level of symbol within the family and I discuss the metaphoric and literal silencing and consumption of her body. After establishing the extent to which women's bodies are conflated with the food they create, silenced, and used as commodities to maintain ethnic and national identities, I move to examine three texts that suggest very different consequences and solutions for the Arab American community. Lebanese US American Thérèse Soukar Chehade's *Loom* (2010) centers on Emilie, a matriarch who falls silent and stops eating, only to regain her voice when she reenters the kitchen and begins to cook again. Situating Emilie within feminist conversations about silence, I ultimately read her character alongside Suad Joseph's theories of intimate selving in Lebanese families. From there I examine another Canadian text, Abla Farhoud's *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998), which imagines a mute grandmother, Duonia, who understands her relationship with her adult children through food and discovers her voice by rewriting her story. This conclusion—removing Duonia from the kitchen by repositioning her as a storyteller—contrasts with Emilie's reentry into the kitchen. The two novels suggest heterogeneity of gendered linguistic identity construction within the Arab American community. Finally, I consider an alternative construction of gendered labor in Joseph Geha's US American novel, *Lebanese Blonde* (2012), which unyokes the female body and food and suggests a new direction for Arab American identity politics. Despite the diverse nationalities and languages represented

by these texts, striking themes recur. My multinational and multilingual approach allows a discussion of diaspora as a global phenomenon that illustrates how the female form becomes a cardinal space for an Arab diasporic identity.

### **1.1. Arab American Mothers and Grandmothers in Fiction and Non-Fiction**

The connection between food and the female body and its use as a stand-in for Arab American identity has been explored by contemporary scholars from a variety of fields, but nowhere is it more apparent than in title of J. Kadi's anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994). One of the first anthologies in the field, *Food for Our Grandmothers* brought together diverse authors in an attempt to offer a map for Arab Americans who are "struggling with issues of culture, identity, history, and activism" (xvii). Maps, Kadi notes in the anthology's introduction, "exist in many forms" (xiii). He encourages readers to consider *Food for Our Grandmothers* as a map that represents "both physical and political features of the earth's surface," and that "provides new information about where and how we locate ourselves in the world." (xiii). Over the years, *Food for Our Grandmothers* has certainly become a map for Arab American Studies in many ways, and it stands as a landmark text in the field. The title, though, raises questions about how we define that field. In the introduction Kadi describes the lengthy deliberations that took place over the collection's title. Discussing the subtitle first, he lays out a painstaking examination of the politics of naming and locating identity. Although he ultimately settles on "Arab-American and Arab-Canadian," he also carefully considers the drawbacks of using the word *Arab* and evaluates alternatives such as "West Asian/North African" and "people of Middle Eastern/North African decent" (xviii). Explaining that each

of the terms he considered carries historical and political implications, Kadi describes “grappl[ing] long and hard” with the decision and ultimately acknowledges that choosing an identity label both empowers and excludes (xvii).

Stepping away from a fraught definition of Arab American identity that is tied to geopolitics, Kadi turns to the main title and locates a unifying trope in the figure of the grandmother. In contrast with choosing the subtitle, he writes, “the main title, ‘Food for Our Grandmothers,’ came to me easily and cleanly” (xx). Exemplified in the line “If a woman could be a land, then Sittee was Lebanon to me” from one of the collection’s essays (10), this fixing of ancestral homelands within the matriarchal figure eases tensions surrounding questions of citizenship and nationalism while maintaining ties to an ethnic identity and ancestral homeland. Noting the incredible number of essays received that concentrate on the figure of the grandmother, Kadi designed the collection as an offering to these iconic women and decided to use their food as the organizing principle (xx).

Kadi’s narration of the contentious endeavor to name and locate a community, and the ultimate ease with which he selects a title that pays twin tribute to the grandmother and her food, illustrates a similar turn within a variety of genres in the Arab diaspora. In her work, Evelyn Shakir describes the mother (and by extension the grandmother) figure as the archetypal “culture-bearers” (Shakir 1988, 41). Beginning with the first wave of Arab US American writing, Shakir locates a lineage of women who “embody the ethnic legacy that defines both who their sons are and who their sons, as Americans, are not” in the autobiographies of authors such as Abraham Rihbany and Salom Rizhk (41). Examining the second wave of Arab US American literature, Shakir identifies the same trope in writing by second-generation authors such as William Peter Blatty, Vance Bourjaily, and Eugene Paul



Nassar. Like earlier authors, the “female portraits” of Blatty, Bourjaily, and Nassar’s mothers and grandmothers, she suggests, “serve as rhetorical vehicles for...placing the author and his values” within a national and ethnic identity (Shakir 1991, 5).

Carol Fadda-Conrey suggests a similar reading of the grandmother figure in her monograph, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature* (2014). “Whether kneading dough, rolling grape leaves, or preparing homemade remedies,” she states, “the grandmother becomes a symbol of cultural and domestic practices from which the second and third generations of Arab Americans are largely disconnected” (39). Through her production of the ingestible, the grandmother is consequently positioned as a symbol of the ancestral homeland, and like the figure of the grandmother at the restaurant in Raleigh, these matriarchs are cast as “culture-bearers” who “embody the ethnic legacy” (Shakir 1998, 41). They take on iconic status, and their domestic production—most notably food—is used as a rhetorical device to represent the author’s beginnings and first familial bonds, as well as to define what it means to be Arab.

## **1.2. Feminisms and the Construction of Silence**

Historically, Western thought has equated voice with agency, and to “have a voice” means the ability to control and exercise power. The inverse of this association presupposes an absence of voice as powerlessness. This absence manifests as silence, and, beginning with Aristotle, theorists from antiquity to the present have figured silence as a negative linguistic space that must be overcome. This equivalence of silence with powerlessness positions *voice* as the path to empowerment. A silenced voice must, therefore, be reactivated in order to change the oppressive system that has silenced it. Feminists in the United States and Canada

have attended to the fraught relationship between voice, silence, and power as it relates to gender and have called for women to speak and step out of the silent spaces they inhabit. Second-wave feminists<sup>63</sup> Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen have dedicated significant portions of their careers to thinking and writing about how women can “come to voice.” To expose demands on women’s time and bodies both have examined the intersection of class and gender in their writings. Olsen, one of the first feminists to write extensively on silence, distinguishes between “natural” silences and “unnatural” silences. The latter is defined as silence that results from disadvantage through a denial of education or economic resources or the demands of caregiving. Natural silence, on the other hand, marks those moments that are characterized by an inward turning in anticipation of future creative endeavors. Olsen’s writings began a feminist conversation on silence, creativity, and power that has continued to the present day.

Rich, writing only a few years after Olsen, has attended to the palpability of silence in women’s lives in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979). She writes on the ways in which the demands placed on women—childcare, housework, and serving men—render them silent and aid in their exclusion from public spaces, higher education, and knowledge production. Rich calls for a “re-visioning” of texts that encourages women to move away from the isolated spaces of domestic life and break their silence. This silence is cast as devastating to women, and Rich states “in a world where naming and language are power, silence is oppression, is violence” (204). Breaking this violent silence imposed on women becomes an act of survival, and Rich’s writings plaintively call for women to do just that.

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<sup>63</sup> I use the terms *first wave* and *second wave* to differentiate between feminist activity occurring in the 19th and early 20th centuries focusing primarily on women’s suffrage and later activity beginning in the 1960s that expanded the focus to questions of reproductive and workplace rights, family and sexuality issues, and legal inequality.

Like Olsen, though, Rich distinguishes between oppressive silences and generative silences. In a poem written only a year before *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, she describes silence as powerful and power-filled, rather than the result of a lack of power. She writes: “Silence can be a plan / rigorously executed / the blueprint of a life / It is a presence / it has a history a form / Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence” (Cartographies of Silence, 1978). Silence is transformed from violent and oppressive to arresting and defiant. Rather than the result of a denial of voice, silence becomes a space of regeneration. Taking these two conceptualizations together, silence is simultaneously a form of oppression that must be actively resisted and the site from which to stage the resistance.

As feminism has developed in North America, feminists of color and US third-world feminists have called for greater awareness of the intersecting consequences of gender and race, as well as class and sexuality. This emphasis on the individualized nature of oppression for different groups led to a re-envisioning of feminism, but the basic conceptualizations of silence have remained the same. Feminists of color have argued that “silence is like starvation” (Moraga 44) and have called on third-world women and women of color to write their truths, and in doing so engage in “soul alchemy” (Anzaldúa) and discover themselves. Audre Lorde’s work is similarly in keeping with the dichotomization between silence and voice. She writes against silence, saying “your silence will not protect you” (41), and asserts that a silent person cannot be whole. She proposes a “commitment to language and to the power of language” to transform and break the silence (43).

Although the relationship between women of color feminism and Arab American feminism has historically been contentious, Arab American feminists too have addressed the relationship between gender, power, and voice. Three principal texts theorize Arab American

feminism in the United States and Canada: *Food for Our Grandmothers*; *Bint Arab*, a 1997 monograph by Evelyn Shakir that explores the lives of Arab and Arab American women in the United States and offers counter examples to the prevalent stereotype of Arab and Arab American women as docile housewives; and *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (2011), a collection of essays by people of Arab decent living in the United States and edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber. All three of these collections ground themselves in the women of color model of feminism, but reject liberal multicultural notions of Arab American feminism as simply another category within the already existing landscape of feminism in North America. In his introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*, Kadi cites *This Bridge Called My Back*, as well as anthologies of black feminist, Asian American feminist, and Native American feminist writings as inspiration, but seeks to push beyond being added alongside these texts as merely another example that reinforces their theories. Rather, the consensus among Arab American feminists writing in these texts is that there are new and generative ways of seeing and understanding the intersections of gender and race that come to the fore by examining Arab American women's lives. Similar to the US and Canadian feminists of color that many Arab American feminists draw on, Arab American feminists argue against a dichotomization of identity categories. Rather, they construct racism, sexism, and classism as simultaneous and overlapping. This intersectionality plays out again and again in Arab American feminist writings and in literature by and about Arab American women. In addition to the women of color model of feminism, though, many of these Arab North American scholars and writers also share the perspectives put forward by queers of color and postcolonial feminisms that suggest that there is no global model for feminism nor a universal female experience. Arab American feminism argues for this

heterogeneity at both the global and personal levels.

Within this feminist conversation, Arab US American and Canadian feminists construct silence in myriad ways. Kadi wrote in 1988 (although not published until 2011) on the silenced spaces he inhabits, citing the confluence of race, gender, and class as personal silencing mechanisms. He argues against white feminism's privileged dismissal of women of color and working class women's experiences and theorizes this dismissal as a form of silencing. Discussing his time in graduate school, Kadi recalls how "the white, upper-middle-class women speak easily," while noting that Kadi, at the time identifying as female, was "mostly silent" (539). Using the metaphor of owning physical space through speech, Kadi asserts that both space and speech are claimed by oppressors, whom he defines as "men, white people, middle- or upper-class people" (540). This act, he states, means "silence is left for the oppressed" (540). Inside of these silences, Kadi withers, consumed by a "dead weight" (544). "When you are continually forced to swallow words," he writes, "it damages you psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, physically" (543-44). Kadi's solution, like Rich, Olsen, Lorde, Moraga, and Anzaldúa, is to urge women to speak. His remedy for the silences surrounding the intersections of gender, race, and class mimics the tools used by the privileged white feminists he critiques; he calls for "a speak-out on class oppression" and "a speak-out on race oppression" (542).

Other Arab American feminist scholars have attended to the relationship between gender and silence in varying ways. Laila Farah wrote in 2013 on women's embroidery as a tool used within the Palestinian refugee camps to construct a national narrative in spite of political and cultural erasure. Barred from building permanent structures, holding employment in sixty-four professions, or having a passport, residents of the camps construct

their national identities “in their bodies, hearts, and minds” (240). Farah discusses how women literally embody the Palestinian culture, calling them the “bearers of history, of testimony, of survival, and of resistance,” because they physically reproduce that culture in their work, despite the fact that “their voices are silenced” (240). She specifically examines embroidery within the camps as “silent speaking” and a “non-vocal form of expression” (241). This transgressive act allows these Arab women to narrate their memories without words: the “impact on identity and the relationship to feelings of being vanquished, victimized and a sense of loss lead to a particular kind of remembering and a gendered style of breaking the silence around their experiences” (242). Farah’s theory of a “gendered style of breaking silence” that uses non-vocal methods of speaking and maintaining identity in the face of oppression understands the relationship between voice, silence, and power differently from authors like Kadi.

### **1.3. Silent Matriarchs in Arab American Literature**

Like Kadi’s and Farah’s contrasting theorizations of silence and gender, fictional mute Arab American matriarchs embody silence differently. Within novels in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, silence is simultaneously understood as oppressive and as a site of healing that encapsulates its own form of resistance. In this chapter I examine five texts from the Arab diaspora in North America. My readings of the first two novels will focus on surveying the varied ways in which language, silence, gender, and food function within the text. Turning to the last three novels, I will examine how each challenges the conflation of food and the female body that is so prevalent in Arab American literature.

In the Mexican novel *Las Tres Primeras Personas* metaphors of food are used to

understand ethnic and national identities. As the novel constructs this edible Lebanese identity, it does so within the body of one of its female characters, Lúhlu. Drawing on Lúhlu's hair, eyes, and very blood to embody Lebaneseness within the nation-state of Mexico, the novel also renders Lúhlu silent as the process of immigration slowly strips her of language. To the north, in Canada, MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* offers a similarly silenced matriarch. Materia, despite speaking both Arabic and English fluently, is stripped of language through the trauma of motherhood and she is (literally) consumed by her children. When a final attempt to speak fails, Materia commits suicide, leaving behind a family that is disintegrating. In the years following Materia's death her daughters struggle to maintain familial bonds, Arabic becomes a secret and magical language within the home, and it is not until the family begins cooking Materia's ethnic food again that they are reconciled as a family. As these two novels demonstrate, the convergence of the female body into an edible representation of "Lebanon" requires the sacrifice of the mother.

The next three novels deal with these same themes of gender, consumption, and language, and each imagines a different way of conceptualizing an Arab ethnic identity within North America. The matriarch in Chehade's *Loom*, Emilie, embodies a silence that can only be overcome when she begins to cook again. Having immigrated to the United States as an adult, she has never mastered English and, as a result, has not left the house in eighteen years. Trapped inside, she withers and retreats inward, falling further and further into silence. Having largely given up speaking even in Arabic, she alarms her family when she also begins silently declining food. This pairing of loss-of-language and loss-of-appetite ties food and silence together, and Emilie regains her desire to speak only when she begins sharing food with the family's neighbor. Similarly, the matriarch of Farhoud's *Le bonheur a*

*la queue glissante*, Dounia, finds herself trapped within the domestic space of her family's home. Unable to speak English or French, Dounia relies on her husband and children and allows them to speak for her both inside and outside the home. As her husband appropriates her stories to tell around the dinner table and her daughter appropriates her stories to write a novel, Dounia increasingly relies on food to communicate and nearly abandons spoken language altogether. As foodstuffs replace her words, though, she begins to question the relationship between mother and child. Unsatisfied with being little more than a source of nourishment for her children, she decides to tell her own story. In doing so, her character takes over the narrative voice of the novel, and the text of *Le bonheur* explores the stakes of a female body breaking her silence. Finally, in Geha's *Lebanese Blonde* another challenge to constructed gender roles is found, although that challenge is imagined very differently. Sam, the main character, struggles to communicate in his maternal language, Arabic. Similarly, his mother is not fluent in English, and the two are forced into bilingual conversation every time they speak. Foregoing spoken language altogether, Sam's mother uses food to make her arguments and communicate with her son. Unlike *Le bonheur a la queue glissante's* reimagining of gender roles by casting Dounia as a storyteller, though, *Lebanese Blonde* reimagines gender roles within the kitchen. Sam eventually learns to cook, and this presence of a male body within the kitchen releases future Arab American generations from codified gender roles and the powerless silence that gripped his mother.

The five women in these novels exemplify the archetype of a silent Arab matriarch. Although their silences are embedded in and produced by patriarchal and immigrant conditions, they each explore and challenge their individual silence in contextually contingent ways. From Materia's suicide to Dounia's rewriting of her own novel, the women



in these Arab American texts demonstrate the ways in which Arab American feminisms heterogeneously engage with questions of gender, ethnicity, domestic labor, and silence.

## **2. Locating a National Identity in Azar's *Las Tres Primeras Personas***

Nowhere is the relationship between food, the female body, and ethnic and national identity more overtly illustrated than in Lebanese Mexican author Azar's *Las Tres Primeras Personas*. The novel follows a father, Musa, and his two daughters, Lúhlu and Elmazza, as they emigrate from Lebanon to Mexico and "penetrate...the psychological and social characteristics of the new land."<sup>64</sup> Intending to immigrate to the United States, Musa, Lúhlu, and Elmazza are denied entrance in New York and choose to continue to Mexico rather than turn back. After being processed by immigration officials in Veracruz, they cross Mexico by train, take up peddling, and eventually open a successful storefront. The novel uses their arrival, journey, and assimilation as a foil and vehicle for examining questions of national identity and state formation in Mexico. Chapters frequently give over to long monologues that question the place of government, economy, and politics within the nation. In the midst of these philosophical ramblings, Musa, Lúhlu, and Elmazza are forced to renegotiate their Lebanese identities as they search for the economic prosperity that they believe will grant them acceptance and a hyphenated "Lebanese-Mexican" identity (148).

After the family crosses the Atlantic, a detailed portrait of Mexico emerges while an Arab identity is formed in the negative space left by a now abstract Lebanon. Separated from their country and family by an ocean, and from their new surroundings by foreign customs

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<sup>64</sup> "...para internarse—a través del desarrollo de la propia novela—en los caracteres psicológicos y sociales de la nueva tierra." (Inner flap)

and language, “home” is depicted in its discrete material parts, which are conflated with the female body as Lebanon is transposed onto and embodied within Lúhlu. Upon the family’s departure “the air of [the] village...stayed in [Lúhlu’s] veins,” and while the metonymic air is transcribed within her, her body bears the village across the ocean.<sup>65</sup> In Mexico, Lebanon is transformed from a concrete geopolitical space to an invention, and for the people around her, Lúhlu becomes the sole embodiment of the country, as “only [Lúhlu’s] eyes can depict for us the nights of Lebanon, [her] hair the brilliance of its summer.”<sup>66</sup> This corporeal locating of the nation fully claims Lúhlu’s body in service to the project of Arab diasporic identity construction, as her hair, her eyes, and her very blood become Lebanon. For Lúhlu, this separation from her homeland and the utilization of her body to construct an Arab diasporic identity within the Mexican nation-state does not end well: she falls silent and “loses speech” as “words harden on [her] lips” and her mother tongue “freezes, almost foreign on account of disuse during this difficult and pitiful journey towards solitude.”<sup>67</sup> Even her name—which means *Pearl*—reaffirms her conflation with her homeland, as it recalls Lebanon’s well-known nickname, The Pearl of the Middle East.

Additionally, Lúhlu’s name hints at another related motif in the text: the positioning of racial superiority within the female body. Invoking images of whiteness and concepts of value and purity, the symbolic pearl prefigures an extended examination of whiteness and

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<sup>65</sup> “El aire de mi pueblo era tenue y gris y se quedó en mis venas.” (15)

<sup>66</sup> “Tú [Lúhlu] solamente puedes describirnos las noches del Líbano en tus ojos, el brillo de su verano en tu pelo...” (65)

<sup>67</sup> “perder el habla”... “Las palabras se endurecen en mis labios. La palabra madre se ha vuelto helada, casi extraña por no pronunciarla en este duro y penoso viaje hacia la soledad...” (77)

racial purity that takes place through foodstuffs, notably yogurt and breast milk. Recounting how *laban* (sour yogurt) is made, Musa describes both the method for making yogurt and for raising children. In his conflation of cooking and childrearing, he also advises his interlocutor on the importance of maternal origins to Lebanese identity and claims a racial purity that sets his family apart from the Mexicans that surround them. He starts by recounting each step in the culinary process of rendering the milk, beginning with the probiotic starter: “Esper gave me the starter to make *laban*. Look, put some of the starter in a pot with one or two measures of warm milk, the creamiest possible. Stir it very well with a wooden spoon and then wrap it with immense love and a blanket of wool so that it does not get cold and stays warm for twenty-four hours while tenderly maturing.”<sup>68</sup> Although most commonly translated as “starter” when referring to yogurt, the word “*semilla*” also translates to “seed,” and carries all the same connotations as sperm in English. This seed, passed from person to person, begets generations of yogurt. The warm milk—impregnated, wrapped in love, and allowed to mature—produces a yogurt of “pure white.” If this same process is followed for children, Musa promises, they too will be pure.

With a sustained emphasis on the purity of origin, Musa compares this process to the Arab belief that the infant ingests its personality as it nurses. Looking to this first act of consumption of “the milk that came from your mother to reach your heart; to flow through you and stay in you with its taste and whiteness,” he locates in the mother more than just the

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<sup>68</sup> “Esper me dio la semilla para hacer *laben*. Miren, se pone un poco de la semilla en una olla con una o dos medidas de leche tibia lo más cremosa que se pueda. Se agita muy bien con la cuchara de palo y entonces se la envuelve con inmenso amor y una tilma de lana para que no le dé frío, y permanezca tibia durante veinticuatro horas madurando su ternura.” (59)

origin of temperament.<sup>69</sup> Rather, the breast of the mother becomes a space of cultural reproduction, providing a source for instilling both virtue and cultural identity. Given the proper origins, well cared for children, like properly prepared *laban*, will “remain white like the dress of the Virgin Mary.”<sup>70</sup> Purity—presented here as both virginity and whiteness—is tied to the female body of the nursing mother as well as to Mary, the Christian matriarch, and then extended to the female bodies of his daughters. Further, the purity and whiteness that is imparted from the mother separates an Arab racial identity from a Mexican racial identity. *Laban*, like breast milk, it is noted, “is white from the very beginning,” unlike “so many other impure and corrupt whites.”<sup>71</sup> Although the role whiteness plays in Arab diasporic identity construction has been examined in other locations,<sup>72</sup> Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp contends, “the construction of Lebaneseness has been unique in Mexico” (24). She notes that Arab immigrants who were economically successful—like Musa and his daughters—had the ability to craft an elite identity that resisted assimilation, while “immigrants who were less economically successful tended to more fully integrate into the metadiscourse of *mexicanidad*” (24). Mexican nationalism and racial identity, grounded in ideas of the *mestizo* and the *raza cósmica*, leave little room for discrete ethnic minorities. Although drawing on the same rhetoric of whiteness as Arab US Americans and Arab Canadians, Arab Mexicans

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<sup>69</sup> “...desde la leche que salió de tu madre para llegar a tu corazón; para bañarte a ti y quedarse en ti con su sabor y su blancura.” (59)

<sup>70</sup> “...permanezcan blancos como el vestido de la Virgen...” (59)

<sup>71</sup> “...*laben* es blanco desde el origen—no como tantos otros blancos impuros y corruptos...” (59)

<sup>72</sup> See Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

utilize this discourse of racial purity to set themselves apart from, and superior to, “other impure and corrupt whites” that result from mixing.

Turning from Mexico back to Lebanon and the origin of a superior Lebanese identity, *Lebanon* is etymologically conflated with *laban*. According to the novel, the country “took its name from this wonderful nectar,”<sup>73</sup> and as Musa dwells on this connection between nation and food, his mind wanders and *laban* is rendered into *Lebanon* via a series of ellipses: “Yes...*laban*...*Libnen*...*my land covers me and covers my daughters*...*Lebanon*.”<sup>74</sup> Although Lebanon did not take its name from *laban*,<sup>75</sup> the two words do share the root *lbn*, meaning milk. By incorrectly locating the origin of the name of the country in *laban*, Musa links ideas of nationhood to the themes of purity, whiteness, and milk. Returning to the belief that the infant ingests personality via the breast milk of the mother, this yoking of race, nation, and food in Lebanon’s name suggests that within a foreign context the transmission of an unadulterated cultural and national identity requires the consumption of a pure mother.

### 3. Tasting Silence in MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*

The conflation between the consumption of milk, the mother, and the nation suggested in *Las Tres Primeras Personas* is more fully developed in *Fall on Your Knees*—an

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<sup>73</sup> “...tomara su nombre de este néctar maravilloso...” (Azar 59)

<sup>74</sup> “*Sí...laben...Libnen...mi tierra bara [sic] mí y bara [sic] mis hijas...Lébano...*” (59; Italics and ellipses in original. Also of note: the verb *barrar* means to cover specifically with mud; there isn’t a direct translation in English. This has implications for the conflation of land, nation, and the female body, though.)

<sup>75</sup> Lebanon is thought to have taken its name from the white snow-capped peaks of its mountains.

Arab Canadian novel that carefully explores the relationship between domestic practices, the bodies that undertake them, and ethnic identity. Like *Las Tres Primeras Personas*, *Fall on Your Knees* arrives at moments of consumption that illuminate the extent to which the female body converges with the food that it produces. More than metaphor, though, the consumption of the mother and grandmother in *Fall on Your Knees* is literal, and the grotesque nature of these consumptive acts raises questions about the consequences of enlisting the female body in communal identity politics.<sup>76</sup> Further, like Lúhlu in *Primeras Personas*, the matriarch of *Fall on Your Knees* loses speech and falls into silence as her body is used to reify a national and ethnic identity and is consumed by her family.

Set on Cape Breton Island in Canada, *Fall on Your Knees* is a complex, multigenerational novel that begins with the elopement of eighteen-year-old Gaelic Irish James Piper<sup>77</sup> and twelve-year-old Lebanese Materia Mahmoud. Following the elopement, the outraged Mahmouds cut off Materia. A few months later she gives birth to her first

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<sup>76</sup> The literary exploration of food and the female body in *Fall on Your Knees* recalls another Canadian novel, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969). When protagonist Marian becomes engaged to be married she finds herself disassociating from her body and identifying with the food she is eating. Repelled by the suggested cannibalism, she slowly loses the ability to eat. When she realizes that her fiancé is metaphorically devouring her, she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and offers it to him. When he declines, she eats the cake herself and offers the last few bites to a man with whom she has an affair. *The Edible Woman* established Atwood as a major Canadian author and anticipated the rise of second-wave feminism in North America.

<sup>77</sup> Of the five novels examined in this chapter, *Fall on Your Knees* is the only one to depict a Lebanese woman married to an Anglo man, and themes of miscegenation, racism, and exoticism run throughout the text. James's character, specifically, could be read allegorically through a comparison to King James, the first monarch to unite England, Ireland, and Scotland. For more on the racial politics of the novel in the context of post-colonialism and multiculturalism in Canada, see Melanie Stevenson's 2001 "Othello, Darwin, and the evolution of race in Ann-Marie MacDonald's work" in *Canadian Literature* and Atef Laouyene's 2014 "Race, gender, and the exotic in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

daughter, Kathleen. Isolated and still a child herself, Materia does not adapt to motherhood and never bonds with the baby. Intuiting something dangerous in James's excessive affection for their daughter, she takes it upon herself to keep him sexually satisfied, and her efforts result in three more daughters: Mercedes, Frances, and Lily, who dies shortly after birth. Despite Materia's efforts, James is eventually overcome by his sexual desire for Kathleen and rapes and impregnates her with twins; she later dies during the birth. Frances, in a misguided attempt to baptize the newborns, takes the babies to the creek where the boy, Ambrose, drowns and the girl, Lily, contracts polio. In their grief, Materia "accidentally" commits suicide and James rapes Frances. Mercedes, Frances, and the newborn Lily are raised to believe that the deceased Materia is Lily's mother, and their story forms the rest of the novel as they negotiate family life with their tragically flawed father.

James first meets Materia when he comes to the Mahmouds' to tune their piano. Language and food play critical roles in this first meeting, as arriving at the Mahmouds' James can barely speak with Materia's mother, Mrs. Mahmoud, as she knows only a few words of English. Despite the gulf of silence imposed by no shared language, Mrs. Mahmoud prepares food for James and uses one of the few words she does know, commanding him to "eat" (18). His initial reaction betrays a racially fueled fear of the unknown, as he assumes the food will be "something exotic and horrible—raw sheep, an eyeball perhaps" (18). He is pleasantly surprised to be served "savory roast meat folded into flat bread, a salad of soft grain, parsley and tomatoes with something else he'd never before tasted: lemon. Strange and delicious pastes, pickled things, things wrapped in things, cinnamon...." (18). As James consumes Mrs. Mahmoud's cooking and the list of foods dissolves into ellipses, the two discover they do in fact share a language: Gaelic. Mrs. Mahmoud learned Gaelic, rather than

English, traveling through the countryside selling dry goods to the rural community, and James learned Gaelic from his mother. Despite his abusive father becoming angry when James and his mother spoke Gaelic to each other, his attachment to his maternal language leaves English feeling “flat and harsh” for him, “like daylight after night-fishing” (15). James is amazed and glad to find someone with whom he can speak the language of his childhood, but it is only after he ingests the food that Mrs. Mahmoud has produced that this avenue of communication is discovered. As Mrs. Mahmoud feeds him, she takes the place of his recently deceased mother: his consumption of her maternal production is followed closely by the discovery that she can speak his maternal language, which for him is as intimate as the night. This moment, early in the novel, presages the role that food and language will play in connecting family members through generations of conflict and incest. James is bonded to Mrs. Mahmoud through the simultaneous production and consumption of her maternal foods and his maternal language, and this bonding is followed closely by James’s elopement with Mrs. Mahmoud’s twelve-year-old daughter, Materia.

Following the elopement and Materia’s subsequent estrangement from the Mahmouds, language and food play an equally important role in the familial bonds created within James and Materia’s new family. The Mahmouds are scandalized by the elopement, and Materia is cut from the family tree. Isolated and still an adolescent, Materia gives birth to her first daughter, Kathleen, and quickly slips into postpartum depression. Speaking solely in Arabic she declares, “*Baddi moot*” (37, “I want to die”). She struggles to breastfeed, and as James attempts to force her she slips away from English and into Arabic and then silence, until she sits mute with her nipples “cracked and bleeding” (39). In a macabre moment, Materia sits silently, “bleeding, oozing milk,” holding Kathleen in her arms, whose “smile



[is] bright with blood” (39). As motherhood breaks open her body, the line between appropriate and inappropriate consumption is crossed, and the act of breastfeeding—a normalized ingestion of the mother—is rendered horrific. Unable to form an emotional attachment to her new daughter, Materia finally finds a connection in Arabic:

Feeding the child some lovely mush at the kitchen table, Materia leaned forward and cooed, “*Ya Helwi. Ya albi, ya Amar. Te’berini.*”<sup>78</sup>

The child smiled and Materia said a silent prayer of thanks, because at that moment she’d felt a faint breath of something not far from love. (40)

Like James’s bonding to his mother and later to Mrs. Mahmoud via his maternal language, Materia also finds an intergenerational connection in hers. It is only when Materia speaks to her daughter in her native Arabic and Kathleen responds with a smile that she feels a whisper of connection. Kathleen does not acquire Arabic as her maternal language, though. This budding relationship is interrupted when James protests, “don’t do that Materia...I don’t want her growing up confused. Speak English” (40). Like his father before him, who got angry, James seeks linguistic control of the household. It is not his daughter’s potential bilingualism that he objects to, because he occasionally speaks to Kathleen in Gaelic (42). Rather it is the relationship that Arabic would grant mother and child. As a bilingual speaker himself, James feels the intimate differences between a maternal language and a second language and denies that communicative intimacy to Materia.

James’s insistence on English as Kathleen’s first language gives primacy to his relationship with her. As a result, Materia and Kathleen never form a bond and Kathleen grows up despising her mother and her language. Years later, Materia, alarmed that she “still

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<sup>78</sup> “My beauty. My heart, my soul. Bury me. [I.e.: I would die for you]” Translation not included in original.

did not love her child” (43), tries speaking in Arabic again:

Materia sat the child on her lap and wrapped her arms around it. She sang,  
unrepeatable and undulating:

*“Kahn aa ’ndi aa ’sfoor*

*zarif u ghandoor*

*rasu aHmar, shaa ’ru asfar*

*bas aa ’yunu sood*

*sood metlel leyl....”* (44)

As Materia sits rocking Kathleen there is no spark of emotion like before. Rather, she feels sadness and distance. Her daughter is simply “the child,” and—betraying even more emotional distance—at times, “it” (44). Kathleen actively resists Materia’s attempts at connection via language. Sitting on her mother’s lap, “Kathleen tried not to breathe. Tried not to understand the song. She tried to think of Daddy and light things—fresh air, and green grass—she worried that Daddy would know. And be hurt” (44). Her resistance, although grounded in loyalty to her father, is executed linguistically. Understanding, an action normally characterized by passivity, is transformed by Kathleen into something active—and is actively resisted. Materia’s attempt at connection is thwarted, leaving “her heart...empty” (44), and she stops speaking Arabic to her daughter altogether (46). Kathleen is fully under her father’s purview—both emotionally and linguistically.

Materia, caught in the space between her husband and child, largely gives up language and chooses silence. Unable to cope with her isolation from her family and her inability to love Kathleen, Materia begins to visit the beach alone and “[talk] and [talk] in her mother tongue to the stones,” until she gives up completely: “day after day, Materia slowly

let her mind ebb away. Until she was ready to part with it once and for all” (59). Following her sacrifice of self, her English simply disintegrates—“prepositions were the first to fall away, then adverbs crumbled, along with whole clauses, until Materia was left with only the most stolid verbs and nouns” (85). In the linguistic space left by her lost English she slips into a passive silence that converts her into something docile and bovine.

In the space created by Materia’s mental and linguistic absence, James and Kathleen’s relationship flourishes, until the close bond that James has cultivated with his daughter grows into something sinister. Afraid of his desires, James redirects his lascivious wants to his wife, and their second daughter is conceived. With the birth of Mercedes, Materia discovers the relationship she sought with Kathleen and loves her daughter—“she doesn’t have to try, she just does, it’s a Joyful Mystery” (65). This daughter, Mercedes, and the one that follows, Frances, learn Arabic, and it is within the space of her mother tongue that Materia finds herself again and connects with her daughters: “The difference between Kathleen and the younger girls is that Materia speaks plenty with Mercedes and Frances...” (86). Far from being condoned, this reintroduction of the language into the household is furtive and secret, and the two girls “understand that Arabic is something just between them and Mumma” (86). Split, then, into Materia, Mercedes, and Frances, versus James and Kathleen, the family is divided by both language and love.

Kathleen’s resentment of her mother is manifold, and although it is most forcefully expressed via the linguistic divide between them, it is echoed in a parallel culinary rift. The twin productive and consumptive practices of cooking/eating and speaking/listening force the two apart, for Kathleen rejects Arabic food as firmly as she does the Arabic language:

What to feed her is a constant conundrum. Nothing satisfies. She rolls her eyes,

sighs ostentatiously, flounces from the room. Materia falls back on James's old standby of toasted cheese, slicing it daintily into four, placing it before her, "*SaHteyn*."

"Mother! English, please." (85)

Although Materia prepares her daughter a characteristically Anglo meal in response to her rejection of Lebanese food, she serves it side-by-side with linguistic production, and Arabic leaves her mouth as she sets the plate on the table. The word does not go unnoticed, though, and Kathleen's acceptance of the Anglicized food comes with an insistence on Anglicized speech.

Materia's relationships with her next two daughters, Mercedes and Frances, are not as painful, and while both girls participate in the consumption of their mother, the act is less explicit. Cut off from her extended family and community, Materia is the sole source of stories about the "Old Country" and serves as a conduit of Arab heritage for the girls. The coupling of language and food extends to the very essence of the Arabic spoken within the home, and as the language and food become enmeshed the lines between them and Materia's selfhood are blurred. In the intervening years since being cut off from her family, Materia's Arabic has slipped away through disuse, and when she speaks with Mercedes and Frances "[they] speak the Arabic of children—of food, endearments and storytelling" (86). Sitting in the kitchen while their mother cooks, they absorb her and her memories. While "a pot of *bezzella* and *roz* with lamb" simmers in the background, the two girls sit on their mother's lap, and Materia is transformed into the embodiment of their heritage. As she speaks to her daughters in Arabic, the girls "sink into [her] soft body" and her flesh takes on the characteristics of food, "her plushy smell of fresh wet bread and oil" becoming part of the

meal cooking in the background (86). The girls, enveloped by Materia's soft flesh and the odor of Materia-as-food, are also absorbed in her stories of Lebanon, "the most beautiful place in the world...the Pearl of the Orient" (86). In her preparation of these stories and food, Materia becomes both the meal and the memories of Lebanon she produces for her daughters' consumption, and within the domestic space of the kitchen the two girls symbolically consume their mother—just as their older sister literally consumed her before them. In addition to being the provider of the food, Materia becomes the very food itself; her physical body sustains her daughters and she is integrated into the meal she is preparing. Similarly, Arabic becomes more than just a way to discuss what they eat, and the language takes on a substantive presence in the house that, like food, has an odor Kathleen "can smell...hanging in the air" (97). The interconnectedness of language, food, and body becomes apparent as Materia's English slips away with her mind, and in her silence her physical body and limited Arabic begin to produce food-like scents.

Years later, following Kathleen's rape and impregnation with twins by her father, a silent Materia attends to her daughter alone as Kathleen labors through a breech birth in the attic of their home. When it becomes clear that either the laboring mother will die or the twin fetuses must be dismembered to save her, Materia waits until her daughter dies before cutting Kathleen's stomach open with "the old kitchen scissors, freshly sharp and sterilized" (131) and saves the twin babies. In these blood-soaked moments of traumatic death and birth, Materia deliberately chooses not to save her daughter. Delivering her grandchildren into life and her sexually-abused daughter into death, she finds agency and her voice. This brief moment of triumph is fleeting, though, and the power with which she acts becomes a point of rupture. Having saved her twin grandchildren, she exits the attic to confront a violent James,

and as the two grapple physically, they also grapple linguistically, slipping in and out of English and Arabic. As Materia switches from English to Arabic, screaming “Ebn sharmoota, keys emmak! Ya khereb bEytak, ya Hara’ deenak,”<sup>79</sup> she decides that she must kill her husband. Hitting him in the face with her fists, she realizes that if the kitchen scissors she used to deliver the twins were at hand she would not hesitate. As Materia reclaims her voice and speaks, she “is awake now, after a nineteen-year slumber” (140). Materia’s reemergence and forceful reinsertion of Arabic into the home is only momentary, though, and James eventually overpowers her, slamming her head repeatedly into the wall. As he does, Materia loses language again and “without the help of words her eyes become a horse’s eyes, as mute, as panicked” (140).

Following Materia’s linguistic reawakening at the death of her daughter and birth of her grandchildren, and her resiliencing at the hands of James, Materia asphyxiates while cleaning the oven. Significantly, her suicide takes place in the kitchen—the space in which Materia’s food, memories, and physical body have introduced Mercedes and Frances to their heritage. The location of her head inside the oven—a space normally reserved for the preparation of food—binds her to the comestible in entirely new ways. Following the funeral, the kitchen becomes a transitory space where death is fluid and not final, and Materia’s specter is the edible: “Daddy took a steak-and-kidney pie out of the icebox and heated it in the oven. How could it be that Mumma’s cooking was on the table when Mumma was in the ground?” (164). As the food Materia’s hands have prepared reheats in the place where she took her own life, it both outlives her and resurrects her. Following her mother’s death, Mercedes takes over as matriarch and runs the Piper household. She does not know how to

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<sup>79</sup> “Son of a whore, your mother’s pussy! May your house be destroyed, may your religion be burned!” (140) Translation not included in original.

prepare her mother's recipes, though, and as a result the family's diet shifts. Although her cooking feeds the family, it offers nothing more than the most basic sustenance. The liver and onions and grilled cheese sandwiches she prepares are barely edible, and in the wake of the deaths of Materia and Kathleen the family disintegrates and descends into further trauma as a distraught James rapes another of his daughters, Frances.

Like Materia's physical body and her Lebanese cooking, Arabic, too, is buried following Materia's death. As much of the responsibility of running the household falls to Mercedes, she and Frances grow apart. It is only at night, when they are in bed and can abandon the very different mantles that each has taken up, that they are able to recover their childhood connection. In the quiet and the dark they speak in their maternal language and share an intimacy that has been lost during the day. As the two girls age, their knowledge of Arabic fades and the language takes on symbolic role. Spoken only in secret, Arabic takes on mystical powers and is used to create a space of comfort and safety. Lily—the product of James and Kathleen's non-consensual and incestuous sexual encounter—learns this fantasy Arabic from her sisters:

*Inshallah* is Lily's magic word. It is from the language that she knows ought not to be used by day except in an emergency. Because the words are like wishes from a genie—don't waste them. Lily has not even a rudimentary understanding of Arabic; it is, rather, dreamlike. At night in bed, long after lights-out, she and Frances speak the strange language. Their bed language. Frances uses half-remembered phrases and tells fragments of old stories, weaving them with pieces of songs, filling in the many gaps with her own made-up words that approximate the sounds of Mumma's Old Country tongue. Lily converses fluently in the made-up language, unaware which

words are authentic, which invented, which hybrid. The meaning resides in the music and the privacy of their magic carpet bed. Arabian nights. (230)

Like Materia's edible specter, raised through her cooking following her death, Arabic continues to haunt the home. For Materia's daughters and granddaughter, Arabic becomes a source of comfort and power that separates them from their abusive father.

After the girls have grown, Frances discovers the extended family that disowned her mother years before—the Mahmouds—and learns to cook by breaking into their house and spying on them. Through this unsanctioned act of surveillance, she relinks the maternal line and reclaims her heritage via the privileged knowledge of ethnic food preparation. Cooking a meal of “*kibbeh nayeh*,” “*tabooleh*,” “stuffed *koosa*,” and “*bezzella* and *roz*,” Frances reintroduces “their mother’s food” to the family (398). As the Pipers turn from the unpalatable food they have been eating to the “more than delicious” Lebanese food, the edible specter of Materia is once again raised, and “it’s as though Mumma were here” (399). While the family eats, the food converges with Mercedes’s memories of her mother and her heritage. In the moment that Frances takes the lid off the pot of the “*bezzella* and *roz*,” Mercedes is transported through time and finds herself “in the kitchen with Mumma and the Old Country,” and she is “so happy” (399). This meal, and the personification of nation and ancestry embodied in the food, grants understanding and reconciliation for Mercedes as “at last, [she] thinks, we are a family” (399). Like the *semilla* that links generations of *laban* in *Las Tres Primeras Personas*, the ethnic food prepared by Frances restores the familial bond and provides the avenue for Mercedes to see her family as just that—a family.

For other members of the family, though, this meal does not recall halcyon days, and the act of consumption is far from an antidotal balm for the traumas that have taken place. As



James scoops a bite of the raw *kibbeh* drizzled with oil—marked with a “jack-o-lantern grin” rather than the traditional cross—on a piece of bread, the image of Materia, described throughout the novel as “bovine” (68) and smelling of “bread and oil” (86) is recalled. He eats “modestly,” his act of ingestion “intimate” and evocative of a believer consuming the Eucharistic host (Materia was profoundly Catholic—a point of contention between her and James). This already vulgar moment, in which eating and memory are enmeshed, reproduces Materia’s former body for the consumption of her husband. Her traditional recipes, recaptured by Frances and encoded with Materia’s memory, ethnicity, and faith, creates an unorthodox foodway. Turning to his daughter, James states, “It’s every bit as good as your mother’s” (398). As he consumes his wife’s food, prepared by the hands of his daughter, James and Frances’s history of pedophilia, incest, and rape renders an otherwise touching moment of familial unity abhorrent. Frances’s assumption of her mother’s role as cook (and therefore producer of authentic food, memory, and ethnicity) transforms her, like Materia, into an object for consumption. As her father ingests Frances’s Lebanese cooking, comestible and sexual consumption of the female body are conflated with reference to both mother and daughter.

#### **4. Intimate Selving in Chehade’s *Loom***

As with *Las Tres Primeras Personas* and *Fall on Your Knees*, Lebanese US American author Chehade’s novel *Loom* explores the necessity of the matriarch and her food for the formation of the community. And just as with *Primeras Personas* and *Fall on Your Knees*, the body of the matriarch is conflated with her food and that conflation is extended to language. Unlike the two novels from Canada and Mexico, though, *Loom* suggests that this

conflation is not intrinsically negative. Rather, the novel suggests that the grandmother's place within the domestic sphere is essential to the formation of selfhood and it is in occupying that space that she truly speaks. The novel tells the story of the Zaydans, an extended Lebanese family that has immigrated to New Jersey and lives together under one roof. Set over a two-day period during a blizzard, the narrative shifts between members of the family as they grapple with the forced seclusion of being snowed in. The storm has delayed the arrival of the family's niece from Lebanon, and as they wait, trapped within the house, each member considers their memories of "home" and their time in the United States. The narrative largely centers on Emilie, the grandmother, who is illiterate and speaks little English. She has given up speaking—in either English or Arabic—and her language choices are tied metaphorically to her food choices. As the narrative progresses Emilie recaptures the ability to speak by reentering the kitchen and beginning to cook Lebanese food again. Read through the lens of Western feminism's theorizations of silence, Emilie's character is problematic. In breaking her silence and repossessing her voice she simultaneously inscribes herself within the domestic sphere, suggesting that women may speak only from within the prescribed bounds of the home. However, if read alongside Suad Joseph's work, notably *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self and Identity* (1999), the figure of Emilie can be used to illustrate the roles language and silence play within myriad and heterogeneous constructions of gender identity within Arab American families.

As Joseph illustrates in *Intimate Selving*, the idea that a single and autonomous self is the basis for subjecthood is a predominantly Western notion. Within Lebanese families, Joseph suggests, conceptions of selfhood do not conform to this individualistic self but rather rely on the importance of roles of kinship within the family in the selving process. In setting

up this challenge to the West's hegemonic definition of self, Joseph calls for a concept of selfhood that allows for identity to be grounded in the community in a way that does not simultaneously deny agency. She argues, "It is productive to view persons in Arab societies as embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency" (11). Otherwise, she suggests, one risks misunderstanding the family's role in identity formation within Arab families. Rather, "[b]y recognizing the multiplicity of culturally legitimate paths to mature selfhood across cultures and within any one culture," Joseph states, "one avoids the hazards of ethnocentrism and the essentializing assumptions of cultural relativism as well" (15). Joseph explains that within a Lebanese context this form of selfhood is far from dysfunctional:

In societies in which the family or community is as or more valued than the person, in which persons achieve meaning in the context of family or community and in which survival depends upon integration into family or community, such relationality may support the production of what is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature persons. Relationality, then, becomes, not an explanation of dysfunctionality but rather a description of a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding and sociability. (9)

For Joseph, the notion of the self is intricately linked to the relations of kin within Lebanese families, and the figure of Emilie—freed from silence only when she reenters the kitchen—illustrates Joseph's argument.

Emilie has not left the house alone since her family arrived in the United States eighteen years ago, and inside the home she has ceded all domestic duties to her daughter-in-law. Simultaneously confined and ostracized, during the day Emilie counts the hours until

she can retire to her bedroom and be out of the way, and at night she counts the hours until she can emerge again. In this pattern of waiting, hours and days become fluid and geographies melt as “here and there” becomes “past and present” (1). Trapped in both space and time, the monotony of her daily routine slowly gives way to a self-imposed isolation, and Emilie falls into near muteness. Succumbing to the enervation of social bonds inherent in immigration, Emilie turns inward and sacrifices language: “a certain lethargy has taken over her jaw, as if she can no longer spare the energy for the intricacy of speech, the clamping together of thought and words” (32). Spoken language, created in the mouth and produced by a “clamping together of thought and words,” recalls the act of chewing and swallowing food. As the processes of producing language and ingesting food are synthesized, Emilie begins to mind “her speech the way she minds the hard-to-find cardamom she uses to spice up her Turkish coffee” (32). Within the inhospitable Northeastern landscape, her words are as valuable as rare Mediterranean spices, and voiced language and comestible food are yoked by scarcity.

Emilie’s silence, however, goes unnoticed by her family. It is not until she begins to quietly decline food—the figurative coupling of voice and food becoming literal—that they recognize her detachment: “Her silence began three years ago. We didn’t notice until the day she declined without a word a second serving of stewed okra. She had never refused stewed okra before. We suddenly realized she hadn’t spoken a word in weeks. Just like that, a dish of stewed okra turned down brought us to a revelation” (21). This silence functions as a narrative device within the text and signals Emilie’s isolation and displacement, while the obliviousness of the family members reflects their own detached states, both from each other and from the outside community.

Although Emilie's silence begins only after immigration to the United States, the interdependence of her speech and her familial relationships begins much earlier. Although the narrative takes place in the United States, Emilie's life in Lebanon is narrated via long flashbacks. On her wedding night her new husband, Farid, announces they are moving to Beirut, despite the fact that during their courtship he promised they would stay in her village. Emilie feels betrayed, as Farid has told her only after she is legally bound to him and has no legal recourse. Had he told her prior to the wedding, she could have exercised power in calling off their engagement; but by waiting until they are already married her husband removes this option as she is legally his property. For Emilie it is this moment of betrayal—not the event of leaving Lebanon—that marks the beginning of her life as an immigrant. Once in Beirut Emilie begins caring for Farid's mentally ill brother, Yussef, and providing emotionally for her niece, Eva, who has been all but abandoned by Emilie's sister. Despite her anger at having been moved to Beirut against her will, when she takes on the emotional and domestic labor of caring for extended family members, she discovers herself and her voice.

Although Farid initially tries to shield Emilie from Yussef, she eventually takes over his care—cooking for him, cleaning his apartment, and washing his clothing. As the domestic services that Emilie provides for Yussef grow, she justifies the new arrangement by deciding that “the progress he was making was well worth the work” (89). Emilie's time and service are given over in favor of progress for Yussef. Despite his original intentions to keep Emilie and Yussef apart, Farid ultimately “absolve[s] himself of responsibility toward his brother and [is] happy to let her be in charge” (90). It is here, in her role as caregiver to a fully-grown man, that Emilie's voice is suddenly most full: “The conversation flagged, but she could talk

for two. She had the distinct impression he listened carefully to her words. Every once in a while, he would nod vigorously at something she had said” (90). In exercising domestic control over Yussef she has also found a captive audience—one that stands in stark contrast to her husband and his friends to whom she feels inferior on account of her illiteracy and lack of education.

This control, however, is still grounded in feminine spaces and labor, and Emilie’s relationship to Yussef morphs into a maternal one rather than one of mutual respect between adults, his progress making her “proud like a mother who was witnessing at last the blossoming of a timid child” (91). When Yussef’s unpredictability causes Farid to place him in a mental institution, Emilie loses both her charge and her audience, and the regret she carries with her over the next several decades is echoed in the trauma of losing her place within the family as a result of immigration. This story is told inside the narrative frame of Emilie’s wresting the responsibility of making lunch from Salma and cooking for her neighbor. As she cleans the kitchen table, brings forth the ingredients from the fridge, and “tampers with the day’s menu” (94), she reasserts herself as matriarch and sets her feet on the path toward reclaiming her voice.

Following Emilie’s flashback to her time in Beirut caring for Yussef, she takes the food that she has prepared and sets out through the blizzard to deliver it to the family’s next door neighbor. Unbeknownst to her family, Emilie recently began taking leftovers from meals prepared by Salma to the neighbor, a middle aged man who lives alone, and leaving them on his doorstep. At first the neighbor—named *David* and nicknamed *Loom* by the family—plays along. Although he does not eat the food she offers, he leaves presents for her in return: small wooden figurines carved by his late wife. These exchanges awaken

something in Emilie that has been dormant for eighteen years. Her head is set to spinning, and, far from a lethargy that binds her jaw into silence, “suddenly, she ha[s] an acute awareness of being alive...” (33). Upon her return from her first trip to Loom’s she serves herself a large portion of stewed okra, the food that she turned down at the height of her self-isolation, and eats. She treasures the small wooden figurines Loom leaves for her, hiding them in secret places around the house and carrying one in her pocket at all times. The wooden eggs are her favorite, and in them she sees a duality, “as much as the promise of new life, a shutting down, a withholding” (34). Like the snow covering the ground and the silence that surrounds her, these eggs symbolize both a constrained space and a generative one, pregnant with possibility. Over several weeks Emilie leaves Loom a variety of Lebanese dishes (all prepared by Salma) including lamb, grape leave rolls, and fried spinach. Then, one day, Loom returns the plate without a statue. Emilie realizes “[h]e must have tired of their little game. It broke her heart” (35).

Loom, as isolated as Emilie, keeps to himself, caught in a cage of grief and loss after losing his wife and son in an accident. He has quit his job and moved to a remote area where he knows no one. He does not speak to his neighbors and passes his days alone in his house. Initially, Loom is intrigued by Emilie, wistfully thinking his deceased wife has sent her. He believes his wife would approve of the exchange of her carved statues for food and takes solace in her perceived approval. Despite his certainty that his wife would approve, Loom does not eat the food; “[h]e was happier with his diet of fast food, its honest impersonal anonymity putting him in his place, mocking his illusions once of believing himself destined to great happiness” (29). The food that he consumes stands in for his grief and loneliness. After a number of Loom and Emilie’s exchanges, Loom rethinks his generosity with his

wife's statues and stops leaving them. Emilie's attempts at connecting to Loom, reaching out to him across their individual and shared isolation, are temporarily thwarted.

Emilie does not give up, however. Not believing in God, as Emilie feels religion is for the faint-hearted, she places her faith in something else. She chooses instead "an unbreakable human connectedness" (36). Recalling how her niece, Eva, believes happiness is a crystal bead from her mother's rosary that she ate when she was a child, Emilie recognizes that their definitions of happiness are not so different. The bead, which Eva swallowed because it caught and burst with light and she wanted to see how it tasted, was strung to the other beads with a nylon string. Emilie's own definition relies on a similar insistence on the concrete—she too looks for the thing that binds together, and although "less tangible," it is "still secure" (36). She finds her own version of the crystal beads and connecting nylon filament in her family. "It was family," she says, "that kept us sane when the war broke out, when the earth somersaulted and our lives with it" (36). In reaching out to Loom via food, Emilie attempts to reconnect that broken filament of human connection on which the beads of her happiness are strung:

The eggs she kept in her pocket, sometimes a few at a time, reminding her every time she touched them that there was something beyond this, this house in the middle of nowhere with children who had stopped talking; something salvageable still. She had been right all along: human connection held them sanely together, like the string that had once held Shirin's rosary together. For each movement of the finger, a bead stands briefly alone, heaved by prayer. Break the rosary, as Eva once did, and we are lost, scattered to the winds. (167)

Recognizing that her isolation and silence are the result of connections broken by war and



immigration, Emilie attempts to reconnect the string holding her to the world. She offers her neighbor food, and for as long as he reciprocates with gifts the two stand like beads strung next to each other on the rosary. When Loom stops leaving the carved statues, however, the string snaps once again and Emilie retreats back into herself.

Returning to the present-day blizzard, Emilie's desolating silence briefly disappears during a phone call with her niece. Eva, Emilie's niece who is en route to New Jersey for a visit, has been delayed in New York by the snow. Calling to update the family on her status, she talks with each family member in turn. When Emilie picks up the receiver, her years-long silence disappears and "touched by joy, Emilie gives herself to it, laughs and chatters, samples at the feast of words before her" (2). In this flash of human connection both language and appetite return, and rather than hoard her speech like rare spices, she shares it with her interlocutor and feasts upon it. After speaking with her niece on the telephone and feeling the emotional tetanus uncoil and her jaw begin to move with the joy of human connection, Emilie sets to cooking. Her generosity with language is followed by a desire to share food as well, and she prepares a feast to share with Loom despite the recent lapse in their exchanges.

Setting out with the food she has prepared, her journey into the quiet snow of the blizzard takes her into the heart of memory, and the white light fractures around her, "in the distance she thinks she sees the sky open, and out comes an orange light to seep through the skeletons of trees and collect on the ground in shimmering pools and flit and flicker and burn through the total whiteness until the colors underneath are finally revealed" (121). Inside of this broken light Emilie reconsiders what the last eighteen years have meant. As she wades through the snow her memories transform, becoming "no longer a hedge against loss but loss

itself” (120). She slips in and out of the present, and realizes that “[s]ome things you never leave behind. They become one with you and you aren’t aware that you are carrying them within until something tells you to look inside” (121). With the arrival of Eva—the embodiment of “over there” and the past—imminent, Emilie is forced further inside herself, to the center of her memory. Her walk through the blinding white and silence of the snow becomes an existential journey through which she moves towards another existence. Upon reaching Loom’s she leaves her old existence behind and crosses the threshold of light, arriving at a new “world that she is about to touch” (123).

After Emilie’s journey through the frozen landscape, she is reborn. Stepping from the cocoon of silence she has constructed around herself, she arrives at Loom’s house with her bags of food: “She looks at [Loom]...motions at the bag of kafta, and utters one of the few words she knows in English: ‘Eat!’” (144). As Emilie arrives at her destination, stepping out of the frozen landscape and herself, she hands over her cooking and speaks. Loom, similarly, emerges from his own isolations, and “...whether to be polite or because he is really hungry, he reaches for the bag, and with utter delight, [Emilie] watches him bite into the meat. She knows she is not imagining his smile” (144). In this moment Loom commits an act he has only been faking up until this point: he consumes the Lebanese food offered to him and Emilie is granted her position as caretaker and provider of nourishment. In that same moment, Emilie’s silence—broken only moments earlier—gives way to the production of English, as she utters one of the only words she knows: “Eat!” As she produces language, she uses that production to exhort Loom to consume, and is rewarded with true consumption.

Following this exchange of language and food, Emilie announces her intention to cook once more. Entering Loom’s kitchen, Emilie reasserts her dominance of the domestic

sphere. Josephine, George, and Salma—who have followed Emilie—are reduced to “clingy children” (157). Emilie’s control of the kitchen is complete, “[a]nd the same way she would difficult children, Emilie orders them out. Bravely they linger, and she commands them again, this time with a tone that suffers no contradiction” (157). Far from the woman who refuses to eat and has fallen mute, Emilie now cooks and “commands.” Like her possessing of Yussef, and finding in him a receptive audience, Emilie “stake[s] her claim” on Loom, “he who was in need of food” (158). In locating this man to care for, she regains control of the domestic space, ordering him around as she cooks. As she does so, she ultimately finds her voice.

As the novel comes to a close, though, it is clear that Emilie’s return to the domestic sphere does more than just save her individual voice. Emilie regains the ability to speak via reinserting herself into the kitchen and beginning to cook again. As she takes up the domestic work she had relinquished upon arriving in the United States, she reclaims her voice. As a result the other members of the Zaydan family, as well as Loom, transcend their own estrangement and isolation. Emilie has a sense of having “saved them all,” and this ending suggests that the strength of the familial bonds of the Zaydan family is dependent on Emilie’s construction of relational selfhood that reflects Joseph’s theories on intimate selving within Lebanese families.

## **5. Removing the Mother from the Kitchen in Farhoud’s *Le bonheur a la queue glissante***

The first person narrator of Lebanese Canadian Farhoud’s novel *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* is another silent, illiterate matriarch who cooks. The grandmother of a large extended family living in Montreal, Dounia struggles to negotiate silence, narrative, and self.

In her efforts to avoid confronting her past, she allows her husband and her daughter to tell her stories for her. Like Emilie, in *Loom*, Dounia eventually finds her voice again, but her path out of silence looks very different. Rather than constructing a relational self that prioritizes kinship bonds, Dounia questions the nature of the bond between mother and child. Initially seeking that bond through the food and nourishment imparted from mother to child, Dounia eventually realizes that simply feeding her children is not enough. In her questioning of heritage and the maintenance of individual and communal identities, Dounia begins to speak again and takes over the narration of the novel.

In her monograph *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*, Fadda-Conrey notes that a number of Arab US American authors, such as David Williams and D.H. Melhem, are similarly critical of the construction and reduction of the female ancestor, and she argues that “many Arab-American texts seek to move the role of the grandmother beyond the purely celebratory domestic sphere” by imagining her outside of the kitchen (39). Williams, for instance, imagines his grandmother playing a *dirbakeh*, a drum traditionally played by men, while Melhem imagines removing her mother from the kitchen and placing a pen and paper in her hands (40). Similarly, as Dounia takes over the narration of the novel she acknowledges the extent to which she is transgressing the gendered norms of her family. As she steps out of the kitchen and tells her own story, she also rewrites her husband’s. This revision of the family’s history suggests one more possible way for Arab Americans to negotiate the conflation of food and language within the body of the matriarch.

The family within *Le bonheur* has experienced a series of displacements. For Dounia, the first displacement came at age eighteen when she married her husband, Salim, and left her native village for her husband’s. After twelve years of living as a foreigner within her

husband's village in Lebanon, the family moves to Montreal, where they live for fifteen years before returning to Lebanon for another ten years. Eventually, they return to Montreal again just as the Lebanese Civil War is about to break out. Throughout the decades, as the family has moved back and forth between Lebanon and Canada, Dounia has had four children.

In Canada, sitting around the dinner table with her husband and children, Dounia silently serves the food she has cooked. Her husband, Salim, dominates the conversation and recounts family histories as Dounia sits quietly by his side. Beyond the dinner table, her adult daughter, Myriam, attempts to tell these same stories by writing a book about her mother. Separated from her children by experience (growing up in a small Lebanese village versus a metropolitan Canadian city) and language (Arabic versus French), and unable to tell her own story, Dounia dwells on her relationship with her offspring and feels incapable of passing a cultural legacy to her children. Questioning the constructions of Salim's oral narrative and Myriam's written one, as well as her own agency within the domestic sphere, Dounia examines food as an avenue for distilling heritage and instilling it in future generations.

As the novel begins, Dounia claims the kitchen and food as her domain saying, "I'm not good with words. I don't know how to speak. I leave that to Salim. Me, I provide food."<sup>80</sup> Within the domestic space of the kitchen she has complete control. She "improve[s] dishes, invent[s] new recipes, new ways of doing things," and wonders if this is really so different from the creative process of telling stories.<sup>81</sup> Like with Mama in *Lebanese Blonde*, for Dounia food and communication become intimately intertwined, as her preparation of

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<sup>80</sup> "Je ne suis pas très bonne en mots. Je ne sais pas parler. Je laisse la parole à Salim. Moi, je donne à manger" (14).

<sup>81</sup> "j'améliore les plats, j'invente de nouvelles recettes, de nouvelles façons de procéder, parfois" (14).

food takes the place of words: “My words are the branches of parsley that I wash, that I sort, that I chop, the peppers and zucchinis that I empty in order to stuff them better, the potatoes that I peel, the grape leaves and cabbage leaves that I roll.”<sup>82</sup> She argues that these preparatory acts—washing, chopping, and rolling—allow her to express herself. Like the manipulation of words that allow her husband and daughter to transform her stories into something “important” and “extraordinaire,” her ability to cook provides her with a creative and generative space in which she can tell her story. This manipulation of food, she reasons, is not so different from the manipulation of language, and she retreats into silence while wielding power in the domestic sphere.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond discursive storytelling, Dounia has largely given up all communication that is predicated solely on words. Language, both spoken and written, separates her from the wider Francophone and Anglophone Canadian societies. This inability to transcend her monolingualism and effectively manipulate language leaves her marginalized and alone: “Impossible to talk to the living, like talking to the dead. I was alone in a cold desert.”<sup>84</sup> Further, the heritage of silence imposed upon her by her father and reinforced by her husband creates a similar rupture between her and her children. Largely silent and completely illiterate, Dounia’s relationship to language is strikingly different than it is for her children. While Dounia insists on monolingualism and silence, “I hardly speak my own language and

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<sup>82</sup> “Mes mots sont les branches de persil que je lave, que je trie, que je découpe, les poivrons et les courgettes que je vide pour mieux les farcir, les pommes de terre que j’épluche, les feuilles de vigne et les feuilles de chou que je roule” (14).

<sup>83</sup> “s’il y a autant de différence dans les mots” (14).

<sup>84</sup> “Impossible de parler aux vivants, comme de parler aux morts. J’étais seule dans un désert froid” (34).

some words of French and English,”<sup>85</sup> her daughter Kaokab is a professor of languages. Another daughter, Myriam, is a novelist and stands in contrast to her mother’s illiteracy: “She writes books, I only know how to write my name.”<sup>86</sup> She asks herself if these people with whom she can barely speak are truly her progeny, or perhaps “the neighbor’s children as they say.”<sup>87</sup> The intergenerational violence that engendered Dounia’s silence continues to echo in her relationship with her children, as these linguistic ruptures render them little more than strangers to her.

As Myriam begins to write a book about her mother the two are pushed even further apart, and it becomes apparent just how antagonistic Dounia’s relationship with language is. Rather than being a powerfully generative act that could have bridged the generational divide imposed by silence and created a space in which Dounia can finally tell her story, Myriam’s novelistic project becomes a space of violence and appropriation. Despite the stated intentions of the mother-daughter novel project to tell Dounia’s history, this attempt at an intergenerational and text-based narrative of Dounia’s life further erodes her linguistic agency. Far from an empowering experience, Dounia feels as though her daughter is “sucking her blood.”<sup>88</sup> For Dounia, her daughter’s extraction of stories becomes a vampiric act, taking something from her that is as vital as the blood Kathleen sucks from Materia’s breast in *Fall on Your Knees*.

As Myriam writes, Dounia becomes acutely aware of how language separates them.

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<sup>85</sup> “moi, je parle à peine ma propre langue et quelques mots de français et d’anglais” (12-13)

<sup>86</sup> “Elle écrit des livres, moi, je sais seulement écrire mon nom” (12)

<sup>87</sup> “les enfants de la voisine comme on dit” (13)

<sup>88</sup> “Pour écrire son livre, Myriam me sucerait le sang” (125)

Their two languages, French and Arabic, create stumbling blocks as they sit side by side in Myriam's office: "Even if I love her and she loves me, sometimes I feel like I'm in the presence of a stranger: her way of hesitating when she speaks Arabic, putting French words in it, and even her way of thinking doesn't resemble mine at all."<sup>89</sup> This bilingual division is larger than a simple disruption of communication between two speakers; Dounia notes it even in the way her daughter thinks—that private inner space that for Dounia has been transformed into foodstuffs. Myriam has developed a flexible relationship with language, one that allows for bilingual substitutions during the speech-act, while Dounia has done away with language altogether, and fallen silent.

Within the textual space of her novel, Myriam, like Salim, alters Dounia's past. Through Myriam's writing, Dounia's history is externalized, becoming a dialogue between mother and daughter. As Myriam transcribes her mother's story she creates a new version of the past—one that Dounia resists. Dounia feels violated by Myriam's probing, saying, "she wanted to know my truth, always further, ever deeper, ever more to the heart, and at the same time it seemed that she wanted to disguise it, change it, make it more extraordinary."<sup>90</sup> As Dounia and Myriam embark on the task of telling Dounia's story, Dounia's voice is both reclaimed out of the silence and silenced all over again. Although Myriam's extraction of Dounia's memories gives voice to her history inside a world dominated by language, Dounia is stripped of her agency. Twisted by her daughter, the words and the story becomes

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<sup>89</sup> "Même si je l'aime et qu'elle m'aime, j'ai l'impression parfois d'être en présence d'une étrangère: sa façon d'hésiter quand elle parle arabe, d'y mettre des mots de français et surtout sa manière de penser qui ne ressemble pas à la mienne" (25)

<sup>90</sup> "C'est qu'elle voulait connaître ma vérité, toujours plus loin, toujours plus au fond, toujours plus au cœur, et en même temps on aurait dit qu'elle voulait la déguiser, la changer, la rendre plus extraordinaire" (124-125)



Myriam's: "She put words in my mouth."<sup>91</sup> The story that is then told is not Dounia's, but rather belongs to a narrator born out of the conversation that takes place between the two women. This relational narrator and the story she narrates exist in the fragmented space created by the memories that are exchanged between the mother and daughter. Just as Salim's retellings around the dinner table render the stories more "important" while silencing Dounia, Myriam's search for her mother's truth transforms the stories into something "more extraordinary" and strips Dounia of her agency.

As Dounia struggles to reconcile the narrative heritage her daughter seeks and the culinary heritage she has offered in its place, Dounia begins to question the origin of her silence. She asks: "What happened to cause my words to turn into grains of wheat, of rice, into grape leaves and cabbage leaves? Why do my thoughts change into olive oil and lemon juice?"<sup>92</sup> Eventually, Dounia locates the answer in a moment of domestic violence. Shortly after her marriage, while still in Lebanon, a young and pregnant Dounia pleads with her new husband not to leave on a journey with her father. Already seated on horseback, Salim violently kicks Dounia in the face and silences her. Enshrined within traditional metaphors for power and gender—Salim positioned above and on horseback, Dounia located below, on foot and pregnant—Dounia's linguistic agency is suddenly stripped from her. Turning to her father, Dounia's appeal is met not with a rebuke of Salim, but rather of her own mother, as her father spits, "Cursed are they who gave birth to you!"<sup>93</sup> Couched in this scornful

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<sup>91</sup> "Elle me mettait les mots dans la bouche" (124)

<sup>92</sup> "[q]u'est-ce qui est arrivé pour que mes mots se transforment en grains de blé, de riz, en feuilles de vigne et en feuilles de chou ? Pour que mes pensées se changent en huile d'olive et en jus de citron ?"

<sup>93</sup> "Maudits soient ceux qui t'ont enfantée !" (142)

dismissal of the daughter is an explicit rejection of the mother via her role as reproducer. As Dounia stands before her father and husband pregnant and on the verge of becoming a mother herself, she surrenders to the gendered violence that surrounds her. She gives up her ability to speak, and retreats into her prescribed role as mother and caregiver.

Seeking to finally break the silence, Dounia begins to interrogate the nature of motherhood. Unlike others' positioning of the mother's body and breastfeeding as a conduit for heritage, Dounia asks, "My children came out of my belly, I fed them from my breast, that's for sure, but apart from what I cannot deny, what makes me their mother?"<sup>94</sup>

Challenging a construction of the mother as "culture bearer" that relies on the consumption of her body, Dounia turns back to language. She realizes that "[she] fed them, that's all, [she] did not talk to them, [they] never spoke together" and concludes that feeding her children, whether from her breast or from the labor of her hands, is not enough.<sup>95</sup>

As Dounia's relationship to food and language shifts, the narrative structure of the novel takes a synthetic turn, and the narrator constructed by Myriam and Dounia's joint-novelistic project is overtaken by Dounia's individual voice as she begins to tell her own story. Following her reclamation of not only the narrative act but also of the novel itself, she begins to recount stories about her husband that he has never shared with his children. In doing so she disrupts the family narrative and dictates her husband's legacy. This new narrative voice is strikingly different from the one that preceded it, and Salim is no longer

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<sup>94</sup> "Mes enfants sont sortis de mon ventre, je les ai nourris de mon sein, c'est sûr, mais à part ce que je ne peux nier, qu'est-ce qui fait que je suis leur mere ?" (83)

<sup>95</sup> "Je les ai nourris, c'est tout, je ne leur ai pas parlé, nous n'avons jamais parlé ensemble" (103)

presented as a magnetic and powerful icon of the family but as desperate and on the verge of suicide. On his way to kill himself, he flips through a book and reads “a story that opened his eyes and heart like the right key in the proper lock.”<sup>96</sup> In this moment the potency of narrative is acknowledged: “You never know when a book, a word, a phrase can fall into someone’s lap at the right time and help them switch to living.”<sup>97</sup> Like the poetry of authors D.H. Melhem and David Williams examined by Fadda-Conrey, this ending—filled with the saving power of words, Dounia’s reclamation of her voice, and a humbler but more human Salim—imagines a place for the matriarch outside of prescribed gendered spaces. Unlike Joseph’s theories of relational selfhood and Chehade’s *Loom*, *Le bonheur* resists female silence by establishing a challenge to the patriarchal inscription of Arab American identity within the body of the matriarch and the placement of that female body within the domestic sphere.

## 6. Recasting Gender Roles in Geha’s *Lebanese Blonde*

In *Lebanese Blonde* Geha takes up the same critical stance as Farhoud, Melhem, and Williams, but rather than removing the mother/grandmother from the kitchen, the novel rearranges gendered expectations within the kitchen itself and places the responsibility for passing on traditional recipes into the hands of a man. *Lebanese Blonde* tells the parallel stories of two Arab US American immigrants: Sam and Teyib. Having moved to Toledo,

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<sup>96</sup> “Salim, qui aimait tant lire, a commencé à feuilleter le livre et sans s'en rendre compte a lu une histoire qui lui a ouvert les yeux et le coeur comme la bonne clé dans la bonne serrure. Il a repris courage et il a décidé de continuer à vivre...” (151)

<sup>97</sup> “On ne sait jamais quand un livre, un mot, une phrase peut tomber au bon moment dans la tête de quelqu’un et l’aider à changer à vivre...” (151)

Ohio, with his parents when he was eight, Sam has adapted to life in the United States but struggles to reconcile his heritage with his desire to fit in to larger society. When he agrees to take part in a cousin's scheme to smuggle hashish into the United States, he travels back to Lebanon for the first time. There his path crosses with Teyib, the son of a desert goat herder, who steals his passport and uses it to travel to the United States. Back in the US, Sam and Teyib's paths cross again, and Sam's family takes Teyib in when they discover he is an excellent cook. Teyib eventually teaches Sam to prepare Lebanese food, an act that allows Sam to embrace his heritage while moving out of the ethnic enclave in which he was raised.

Sam's relationship with his mother, Mama, acts as a foil to his later relationship with Teyib. "Practically sold" into marriage (185), Mama has spent her life as a domestic commodity cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. She is monolingual and illiterate, and after the death of her husband she is both dependent and isolated. She has not integrated into the larger US American society and cannot "do the bills, the shopping, the driving around" (145). In order to function she relies on Sam and must "navigate daily the guilty waters between gratitude and resentment" (6-7). With little social capital, she uses food to wheedle favors. The Lebanese food she prepares serves two functions: it foregrounds knowledge that she alone possesses (Sam does not know how to cook), and it allows her to assert herself. When angling to be driven somewhere, she lays out a *maza* for breakfast. As Sam enters the kitchen and sees the number of dishes—"olives and pickled turnips, wilted chard in lemon and olive oil, quince preserves, cold fava beans with chopped onion and coriander, two different dishes of *jibni* cheese, one soft and milky, the other pungent and crumbly"—each plate becomes a rebuke for his neglect (120). Setting more food down on the table, Mama steps toward Sam and he flinches. He expects her to strike him, but instead, "she bang[s]

down in front of him a saucer of *bizri*” (120). A culinary censure replaces the expected physical reproach of the slap, and the tiny fish form their own assault. Normally the intricacy of the dish makes it a special treat, but here the sacrifice of time on the part of the mother adds a bitter poignancy to her anger.

The violence of these two actions—the one that Sam expects but that does not occur, and the one that does—parallel each other, and the rest of Mama’s food takes on the form of admonishment: “The *maza* spoke for her, the goat cheese and pickled eggplant, the *zaytoun* and *bizri* and quince jam. The fresh-baked *tlamit zaatar* releasing steam as it accused him: *A mother puts this effort out for you, and all she asks is such a small favor in return. Mama. Her strongest arguments were wordless*” (122). As the food itself begins to speak, it fills the absence of verbal communication between mother and son with Mama’s domestic labor. The fresh-baked bread stands in for her, accusing Sam, releasing steam like little puffs of air escaping from a mouth, forming into words of reproach. While Mama asserts herself via her cooking, her agency is transferred to the foodstuffs she places on the table and she is subsumed. She will die within the Little Syria of Toledo, never having learned to support herself and without agency.

Although Sam has spent his life eating his mother’s food, he does not learn to cook from her—instead he learns from Teyib. Having arrived in the United States alone, Teyib enters Sam’s family by way of the kitchen when he is invited by the women to help them prepare dinner. Donning a “frilly apron,” he begins cooking for the family, regularly infringing on gendered domestic space as he does so (181). Eventually Sam is also drawn into the kitchen when he delivers a package of meat and Teyib hands him an apron: “Teyib thrust an apron at Sam, another of Aunt Njela’s frilly ones, and set him to work...” (219). As

Sam learns to roll grape leaves dressed in a woman's apron, he enters the domestic space that both controls and is controlled by his mother. In this moment of gendered transgression, Sam comes to accept the parts of himself that he has struggled to reconcile. Learning to cook affords him the connection to his heritage that he has searched for throughout the novel, and his ability to negotiate both traditionally feminine and masculine roles ultimately allows him the freedom his mother never had, and he leaves Little Syria.

In the final vignette of the novel Sam, now a married man with two daughters, teaches his youngest to roll grape leaves. As Mama's granddaughter learns to work her fingers around the leaves, she seeks her family's culinary history and presses her father for a narrative account of the material heritage currently in her hands:

*"How did you learn to make grape leaves, from Sitti?"*

*"My mom was a terrific cook, but no, these are my cousin Teyib's grape leaves. The stuffing recipe, even how we're rolling them, just the way he rolled them."*

*"He? A guy showed you how to make these?"*

*"And why not?" Sam lets his voice project a greater offense than he actually feels. "A guy's showing you right now." (283, italics in original)*

This exchange, full of incredulity at a male presence within the family's culinary lineage, speaks to both the past and the future of Arab American identity and gender constructs. Learning to cook by her father's side, this young woman will not suffer the fate of her grandmother who was confined to the house, dependent and childlike, with food as her only form of social capital. Her older sister is already away at college, and with hands that can roll grape leaves but also do so much more, her future is hers to make.

## 7. Conclusion

The postcard that I brought home from the restaurant Sitti now sits at my desk, the woman on the front watching me as I work. The words on the back, which I have turned to face the wall, conjure memories of my own sitti in the kitchen, her hands gnarled with arthritis. As the postcard says, my sitti was a beloved figure in our family. She taught me how to roll grape leaves, spice *kibbeh*, and sweeten *baklawas* with orange blossom syrup. But the eyes of the woman on the front of the postcard haunt me. She looks rigid, confined within the space of the photograph and trapped in layers of family history. Like the tribute to Arab American foremothers offered by the restaurant Sitti, the North American novels *Las Tres Primeras Personas*, *Fall on Your Knees*, *Loom*, *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, and *Lebanese Blonde* acknowledge the domestic labor of the Lebanese matriarch. More than just honoring hands that cook, though, these texts also raise questions about the consequences of constructed gender and ethnic identities. The descriptions of cooking and consumption within these novels suggest that women can be politically empowered through making, eating, and serving food—but they also intimate that when women's bodies appear as sites of creation and ingestion of food they are transformed into political tools for the construction and maintenance of an ethnic community's identity. Within these narratives the producer and the produced converge and conflate until the physical body of the matriarch becomes edible and is consumed, and in these moments fiction both reflects and contests heterogeneous Arab American constructions of national, ethnic, and gendered identity.

#### IV. CODE-SWITCHING AS QUEER IN RABIH ALAMEDDINE'S *I, THE DIVINE* AND RANDA JARRAR'S *A MAP OF HOME*

##### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I charted the role of the matriarch in Arab American identity construction. I discussed the conflation of the mother's physical body with the food that she produces and examined the linguistic consequences of that conflation in the female silences of five texts from Canada, Mexico, and the United States. These depictions of the Arab American female body and her silence suggest complex intersections of identity categories as Arab American subjects seek cultural citizenship within North America in myriad ways. In this chapter, I turn to texts that queer this gendered discourse through non-normative characters and narratives, and in doing so question the cohesion of the nation-state. This chapter considers Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001) alongside Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) using narrative theory and queer of color lenses. In addition to presenting queer characters, these two texts queer normative narrative structures via alternative modes of narration and storytelling that challenge the legacy of the linear novel.<sup>98</sup> I argue that *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home* disarrange the future-oriented novelistic form as they explore and question the inherent queerness of time in the experience of trauma, displacement, and

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<sup>98</sup> The use of non-normative narrative structures is in no way unique to these two novels. Within the Arab North American diaspora a variety of authors play with time and the novel structure to explore the complex nature of immigration. See especially Carlos Martínez Assad's *En el verano, la tierra* and Abba Farhoud's *Le fou d' Omar*, both discussed in Chapter 1.



immigration. In this reorganization of the novel, these simultaneously queer and Arab texts defy demands for conformity to storytelling norms—an act that parallels their disregard for heteronormative constructions of nationhood and assimilation to that nation through traditional forms of citizenship as the desired outcome of immigration.

Both *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home* revolve around a gender-queer female protagonist, and this queering of gender is accomplished, in no small part, through the characters' language choices. As the women in these novels code-switch between Arabic, English, French, and Spanish, and acquire a masculinized facility with slang and cursing in all four, they construct a selfhood that defies the gendered categories their families insist upon and seek to replicate. As each narrates her story, this queered voice slips between narrative persons, queering time within the novel and suggesting an inherent queerness of Arab American histories. Drawing on a queer of color critique, my analysis of *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home* exposes the extent to which Arab Americans are implicated within the United State's racialized discourse of heteronormativity. Ultimately, I argue that these two novels, through their queering of language, gender, and narrative, challenge the historical shift Jasbir Puar has termed *homonationalism*.

Despite a rapidly expanding Arab American literary scene that illustrates the heterogeneity of the Arab American experience, Jarrar and Alameddine are two of the only Arab American authors who write queer characters. Mejdulene Shomali, in writing about gender and sexuality in the Arab diaspora, suggests that “while Arab American cultural production is flourishing, and texts that deal explicitly with queer content certainly exist, the materiality and possibility of ‘queer Arab America’” is elusive (Shomali 1). In addition to a dearth of representation for queer Arab Americans, she argues that “the categories lesbian,

gay, bisexual, and transgender [do] not always find traction in Arab and Arab American representations of sexuality” (Shomali 1). Understanding the complex constructions of a queer gender identity within Jarrar’s and Alameddine’s works requires a broad view, one that takes into account the historical intersections of race, gender, and sexuality within the Arab diaspora. In this chapter I discuss Jarrar’s *A Map of Home* and Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* in relation to the novels’ presentations of gender, language, narrative structure, and national belonging.

## **2. The Queer Language of Gender**

*A Map of Home* follows Nidali Ammar’s migrations across the globe as her family moves from one country to another in search of a home. Eventually, after passing through a number of countries in the Middle East, her family settles in the United States, where Nidali attends high school and is later admitted to her first-choice college. *A Map of Home* tells the story of a young woman caught in constant liminal space as the definitions of language, gender, and nation shift around her. Told primarily from a first person perspective, the words that Nidali uses to describe the national spaces through which she moves reflect and refract in her descriptions of self. As Nidali shifts between countries and cultures, she recasts herself using language. Similarly, Sarah Nour el-Din in *I, the Divine* struggles to tell her own story. Raised in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, Sarah moves to the United States as an adult and explores her identity and memory through writing a novel. Like *A Map of Home*, *I, the Divine* is primarily told from a first person perspective, but as the narrative voice slips questions are raised about history, memory, and the formation of self in relationship to others. Written entirely in “first chapters,” the novel begins again and again as it struggles to

tell its own story. The complicated narrative voices that both *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home* elaborate are born out of the protagonists' discomfort with the prescribed categories in which each finds herself, including *male / female* and *Arab / American*.

The uneasiness constructed within these two texts surrounding gender categories is most poignantly illustrated in the birth stories of each woman. Both Nidali and Sarah are born to parents who expect, for a variety of reasons, that they will be male. When they are born female, both families must reconsider their expectations, from choosing new names for the infants to renegotiating the gendered expectations within the family. *A Map of Home* opens with a first-person recounting of Nidali's birth that queers gender, memory, and life itself. The novel begins:

I don't know how I came to know this story, and I don't know how I can possibly still remember it. On August 2, the day I was born, my *baba* stood at the nurses' station of St. Elizabeth's Medical Center of Boston with a pen between his fingers and filled out my birth certificate. He had raced down the stairs seconds after my birth, as soon as the doctor had assured him that I was all right. I had almost died, survived, almost died again, and now I was going to live. While filling out my certificate Baba realized that he didn't know my sex for sure but that didn't matter; he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was tucked safely in Mama's uterus amid floating amniotic debris, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle). (3)

When Nidali's father returns from having filled out the birth certificate, he discovers his mistake and rushes back to the nurse's station where he invents a new name by amending

Nidal (a common name for Palestinian boys) with an *i*—the grammatical marker for female gender in Arabic. This fabricated name, through grammatical gendering, bridges an assumed male identity of the fetus while in the liminal space of the womb and the female sex made apparent following her entrance into the world. Baba's name choice carries enormous cultural weight and pins his understanding of his own Palestinian identity onto his progeny. The heritage embodied in this name is gendered, though, as there is no equivalent name for a girl. Upon discovering that his first child is in fact female and unable to disentangle the questions of heritage and gender that are conflated within the name, Baba makes a unique choice that is available to him only via linguistic manipulation. Wielding grammatical gender as a tool he invents a new name, one that can simultaneously encompass his relationship to Palestine and the unexpected sex of his first child.

Like *A Map of Home*, *I, the Divine* begins with the question of its protagonist's name. Sarah Nour el-Din's entrance into the world parallels Nidali's in multiple ways, not least of which is that her family expected her to be born a boy. *I, the Divine* begins with a short chapter, abandoned after only a paragraph and the fragment of a sentence. In it, the reader is introduced to a story that will be repeated again and again. It begins, "My grandfather named me for the great Sarah Bernhardt." (3). In later chapters the reader learns that it is Sarah's grandfather who names her because no female name had been chosen prior to her birth. Her mother, having been given a prophecy by a fortune-teller that the baby will be a boy, is utterly surprised by Sarah's sex. Further, it is only the promise of a male baby that has kept Sarah's parents' marriage intact. Like the deep ties between intergenerational Palestinian heritage and gendered offspring presented in the story of Nidali's birth, Sarah's unexpected sex threatens the social dynamics of her family and community. A non-Druze and a non-

Arab, Sarah's mother, Janet, is an American who is viewed by her in-laws as an interloper and usurper. She has been relying on the fortune teller's promise of a male heir to cement her place within the family and her belonging within the larger Druze community. When Sarah is born female, Sarah's grandfather uses the opportunity to "get rid" of her mother: Sarah's father, Mustapha, divorces her mother, and Janet leaves Lebanon, and the family, permanently.

As children both girls continue to inhabit the queer gendering of their births, and, like the central role naming plays in the conflict of their births, language continues to play a primary role in each young woman's negotiation of gender roles. Writing about femininity in Arab American families, Nadine Naber argues that the reproduction of cultural identity is gendered and that a "daughter's rejection of an idealized notion of Arab womanhood could signify cultural loss and thereby negate her potential as capital within this family structure" (88). Naber defines this idealization of femininity as an insistence on virginity and "heterosexual (ethno-religious) endogamous marriage" and suggests that these pressures form a "yardstick that police[s] female subjectivity in cultural nationalist terms" (92-93). Despite this, Nidali and Sarah occupy queer spaces within the constructed gender norms of their families and cultures by manipulating the languages that they speak.

For Nidali, gender is only one of the binary categories she negotiates daily, and it is through a multilingual engagement with the world that she understands concepts of home, nation, and sexuality at a young age. Growing up, Nidali is gender ambiguous—she wears a "boyish haircut" but "girly earrings" (23), and strives to "be the best boy" while simultaneously looking "like a princess" (22). Her sexuality, too, is ambiguous, and she wrestles frequently with the question: "What did it mean that I liked both boys and girls?"

Throughout the novel, Nidali explores her sexuality with both men and women, and in her confusion about the nature of sex and attraction she links her desires for her partners to her desire for home. In the moments before her first kiss with a girl she locates her memories of home within the physical space between the two sets of lips moving toward one another, saying “It felt like a mini-pilgrimage, my traveling the space between our heads, like running down the street when my legs were shorter, when I had another home...I longed for that time again, for home. I imagined the apartment in Kuwait...” (174-175). In this space Nidali surreally recalls her home, the physical attributes cracking and exploding, the surrounding grass catching fire, and the sand shifting and floating up to sky. As the birds in the sky “stop, like time” her lips finally find her partner’s. Later, although confused about her burgeoning sexuality that stands outside the binary of “homo” and “hetero” attraction, Nidali takes refuge within memories of the kiss:

I replayed that kiss over and over in my mind, tried to figure out what it meant that I like both girls and boys. It was bad enough to like boys! It was bad, bad, bad, and I was bad, and Baba told me so as his hands slapped and his feet kicked and his house slipper struck my skin over and over again. But he thought I was bad because I hadn’t come home straight after school...Yes, I deserved to be punished I thought to myself. Punish me. And then it didn’t hurt because the memory of the kiss, of the way it transplanted me back home, made the pain loosen and drift away from me... (179)

This kiss, like Nidali’s other sexual experiences with both men and women, recalls a sense of belonging that allows her to transcend her feelings of displacement. As the kiss stops time and cracks space, the sexual act queers more than sexual categories. In relocating “home” within the kiss, Nidali transgresses the borders of nations she has been forced to cross when

fleeing her home on account of war.

Nidali's sexuality is only one way that she constructs a unique sense of home and belonging; another equally important way is through language. At age seven Nidali speaks Arabic—both the Palestinian and Egyptian dialects—at home, and English at school. The British school she attends is described with biting Fanonian irony as teachers deride the pupils, and the class reads stories about skiing while wiping sweat from their brows (11). Within this context Arabic is indulgent, enjoyed only when the school day is interrupted by emergency air raid sirens and the class breaks free of the British teacher's linguistic control, erupting into speech and “grateful to have these three minutes to gossip in our own language” (12). The classroom, then, functions as a microcosm of shifting political and linguistic boundaries as a result of the instability of war. An air raid siren's intrusion into the school day breaks the colonial control imposed by the education system as the students stage a momentary linguistic rebellion. It is within this (post)colonial and multilingual milieu that Nidali spends her childhood years, and her understanding of linguistic borders fractures.

Outside of the rigid linguistic expectations of school, Nidali finds phenomenological ruptures within the linguistic spaces she inhabits. On weekends Nidali sleeps in, lying in bed on a set of sheets that feature the English alphabet. Caught in the liminal space between sleep and waking, she considers, dreamlike, the English over which she sleeps:

I stared at the C, which was big and yellow, and at the word ‘CASTLE’ beneath it. If you whisper the word castle to yourself over and over again while lying in bed and pretending to be asleep— castle, castle—it ceases to have any meaning at all. Your head will stop projecting an image of a castle and the

word itself will disappear. (58)

This dissociation of language takes place in Arabic as well, as Nidali moves to her maternal language: “Then I’d repeat a question to myself, ‘ana ana, ana ana, ana ana?—Am I am I am I am I am I am I?’ over and over again.” (58). As Nidali moves from the English of her bed sheets to her maternal language the dissociative moment is amplified. More than the unyoking of the linguistic signifier from its sign, the question Nidali asks herself in Arabic unhinges her sense of self and reverberates to the very core of her being. This linguistic slippage allows her to separate her mind from her body, freeing her mind “to feel like it was slipping...floating.” In asking “Am I?” until the linguistic dissociative effect takes hold she is able to find new spaces of understanding: “When I’d tricked my mind, it would float away, and I could see that I *am* just I. I’d see myself from outside my own mind: my life, my body, and I was not half something and half another, I was one whole, a circle. It would scare me so much I’d bring my mind back and shiver” (58-59). In this moment of linguistic rupture, the lines that define Nidali are erased and she is whole. Nadine’s queer sense of time, self, and her orientation within the world is based on her ability to manipulate the way language constructs her and her world view.

In *I, the Divine*, Sarah similarly queers gender, and like Nidali she does so by manipulating language. Placed in an all-boys school, Sarah excels at academics, soccer, and practical jokes, but does not know how to apply make-up. In addition to forming the backdrop for Sarah’s genderqueer childhood, the all boys’ school echoes the colonial education Nidali receives and affords a space for queering language. The school is introduced via three early chapters that retell Sarah’s experience with the educational system in Lebanon. The first of these retellings begins: “At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I



was moved from an all-girl Catholic school to a boys' school. My father decided I needed to have English, not French as my primary language, so he transferred me to the best school in the city. It was all boys until I showed up" (4). Here language trumps gender, despite the rigidity that the social and bureaucratic context of a school normally implies.

Beyond just the school system's allegiance to a specific language, though, what Sarah's father is selecting is a colonial history and contemporary global access. It is what each of these languages represents—their imperial presence within the Middle East, the cultures that they embody, and the access that they grant—that preoccupies Mustapha. Prioritizing one linguistic empire over another, he decides that speaking English is more important than speaking French, to the extent that he is willing to transgress gendered space and send his daughter to an all boys' school. In the next chapter this hierarchy of colonial history, language, and gender is revisited, as the narrator notes that she "left those wacky Carmelite nuns and entered an American-bankrolled school where I was the only girl in the whole class" (5). The following chapter echoes the first even more closely, stating "At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I was moved from an all-girls Catholic school to a boys' school. My parents had thought an English education would be better than a French one" (7).

The colonial languages of English and French are not the only ones that queer Sarah's gendered upbringing. Sarah's native language, Arabic, plays a crucial role in her ability to transcend the binaries of gendered society. Upon arriving at the new all-boys English school, a classmate asks Sarah "Are you a Lesbian?" (7). Within this strictly gendered space, Sarah's attendance at an all-boys school is so bizarre it can only be explained via sexual queerness. Rather than defend her heteronormativity, Sarah defends herself with a colorful display of language: "My response was swift: 'Your mother's cunt, you brother of a whore.' The

Lebanese dialect is filled with delectable curses, a luscious language all its own, of which I was a true a poet” (7). In this response Sarah linguistically queers the social interaction taking place. Switching from the prescribed educational language of English to Arabic she steps outside of the sanctioned linguistic code of the educational system. Further, as she defends her female presence within the all-boys’ school she does so by using vulgar language to queer the space and the social interaction. In response to her facility with the profane, Fadi, the boy who originally questioned her presence by questioning her sexuality, accepts her: “Fadi’s reaction was an ear-to-ear grin, hands coming together in a single clap, and a look signaling welcome-to-my-world” (7). Sarah’s linguistic posturing, then, is a success. It is through language that she queers space and social norms and this grants her access and acceptance within the male space of the school.

Outside of school, though, Sarah has less success negotiating the norms of society. Unable to conform to the gender identities of her community, she is a constant source of pain for her stepmother. Her tomboyishness provokes a nervous breakdown in her stepmother (36), and Sarah’s failure to adequately perform a feminine gender becomes a repeated point of contention between the two. Within the family Sarah’s gender queer behavior is understood through heritage, specifically the fact that her mother is American:

I had always been a little odd, which people blamed on my mother, but she was not at fault. My sisters were normal. People could not blame my father. My half-sisters turned out to be more normal than normal. Except for being gay, my little brother was probably the most normal of us all. I was the strange one. (5)

Like Nidali, Sarah’s status as “half Arab” and “half American” forms the beginning of her queerness. Unlike with Nidali, though, Sarah’s queerness is connected exclusively to her

gender, and does not extend to sexuality. The two homosexual characters in the text—Sarah’s brother, Ramzi, and her best friend, Dina—form foils for Sarah’s gender queerness. As illustrated in the quote above, oddness and strangeness within the family are not connected to sexual preference. Ramzi, despite being gay, is the “probably the most normal.” Similarly, it isn’t until another girl, Dina, joins Sarah’s school and teaches her how to dress, style her hair, and wear make-up that Sarah adopts a femininity that suits her stepmother. On account of being the impetus of Sarah’s transformation, Sarah’s stepmother is extremely fond of Dina, and even years later—after Dina has come out as a lesbian—the two retain a close relationship. This gendered conversion and the acceptance it grants underscore the differences within the text between gender, sex, and sexuality where Dina and Ramzi’s homosexuality is forgivable but Sarah’s queering of gender is not.

The strangeness of Sarah’s lack of femininity as a child is borne out in her “inadequacies as a mother, as a wife” later in life (22). After marrying, Sarah and her husband, Omar, move to the United States temporarily and Sarah becomes pregnant. Echoing the women in *Las Tres Primeras Personas*, *Loom*, *Fall on Your Knees*, *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, and *Lebanese Blonde* analyzed in the previous chapter, Sarah is consumed by motherhood and struggles to find herself within the role. While pregnant, Sarah’s experience of reproduction is grotesque:

She feels as though she is being eaten alive from the inside, something is slowly devouring her. A vampire sucks her soul. She must not allow herself to think these thoughts. The bats must be fought back, turned back to the dank caves from which they come. She feels the baby is changing her, transmuting her, into something she no longer recognizes. The real her is being slowly consumed, ingested, day by day, hour

by hour, minute by minute. It starts in her belly and emanates outward, spiraling insidiously, overpowering her mind, vanquishing all her defenses. She must stop thinking these thoughts. This is her baby and she loves it. (212)

This description of “consuming” the mother is far from metaphorical. As Sarah’s body produces an offspring, it is literally ingested in the process. Further, this consumption of the mother does not stop at the physical body. Sarah feels that her soul, her very essence of self, is being taken by the baby. She distinguishes between what she is becoming as she carries the infant inside her and the “real her.” More than just being “devoured” physically, the baby is “transmuting” her. The queer gender identity that she inhabits is challenged via the process of reproduction and becoming a mother. The baby fulfills the heteronormative demands of her family, but at the cost of her sense of self.

Unlike the women examined in the previous chapter, though, Sarah does not fall silent. Rather, she negotiates her gender identity and the gendered expectations of those around her via a manipulation of language. Trapped by her pregnant body within her marriage and the expectations of her family and culture, Sarah positions herself as separate from her husband by code-switching between Arabic and English:

“Did you lose a mitten?” She asks.

“*Mitten?*” She had used the English word. “What is mitten?”

“It means a glove without fingers.”

“I know what it means. I know exactly what it means. Why do they use a different word? Why did you use it?”

“Because mitten is different from a glove and you lost a mitten. That’s why.”

“Couldn’t you have used the Lebanese word? I mean when did *we* start differentiating

between a mitten and a glove.” (214, original italics)

The linguistic shift that takes place signals a deeper shift taking place within Sarah and within the gendered dynamics of the couple’s relationship, and Sarah’s shift from Arabic to English provokes a retrenching of “us” and “them” binaries on the part of her husband. Similar to the code-switch between Arabic and English in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* discussed in Chapter 2, in which Khadra reorients the power structure of the conversation with her fiancé by switching to English, Sarah uses language to shift the gendered construction of her relationship. Trapped within her pregnant body, she feels as though she is being devoured by motherhood and the implications it carries for her body as a site of defining cultural and national identities and is powerless to stop the change. Language, though, allows her to signal her cultural allegiance and in doing so queer the relational gender identity she is trapped in. Shortly after this exchange takes place, the baby is born and Sarah’s husband announces they are moving back to Lebanon. Wanting to finish the college degree she has started, she chooses to stay in the United States. Her husband divorces her and returns to Lebanon without her, taking the baby with him.

### **3. Undoing the Heteronormativity of the Novel**

Sarah’s and Nidali’s queer linguistic constructions of gender extend beyond the framing of their characters, though. As the narrators of their respective novels, each woman’s language choices also restructure the narrative that they inhabit. In both *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home*, narration shifts between first, second, and third persons. In this section I will analyze the formal elements of each novel to examine how Alameddine and Jarrar offer their protagonists narrative dominance over the text. In *A Map of Home* the narrative person shifts

from first to second and then third as the narrator describes the traumas of immigration and rape. Similarly, *I, the Divine* is constructed as a novel in first chapters, meaning with every chapter the novel begins again. As the novel searches for its own narrative voice to tell a story about war, immigration, and rape, the narrator shifts between first, second, and third person and between English and French. I argue that the purposeful use of language and narrative techniques in these texts allows for more than an enactment of queerness within the Arab American novel; rather the novel itself becomes a queer space.

In *Cruising Utopia* (2009) José Esteban Muñoz argues that the contemporary focus on gay rights, same-sex marriage, and gays in the military limits queer politics within a normative sense of time. Rather, he expresses a vision for queerness as a blueprint for the future, and he conceptualizes queer time as a rejection of “straight time,” which conflates “here” with “now” and “then” with “there.” In his early work, *Disidentifications* (1999), Muñoz suggests a theory of identity formation for minority subjects who have been placed outside white heteronormativity. In negotiating the systemic and historical trauma inherent in being placed outside the dominant ideology, Muñoz suggests these minority subjects disidentify with that ideology. They neither assimilate to nor reject the ideology; rather, the “‘disidentificatory subject’...tacitly and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form” (12). Through the act of disidentifying, the subjects participate in and modify mainstream culture, thereby subverting the mainstream via their insertion. In doing so, these subjects create “counterpublics,” which Muñoz describes as “communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere” (146). Through their disidentification with mainstream categories such as white and hetero, these groups map utopian visions of social relations.

Beyond just the inclusion of queer characters and plots, the narrative structures of these two novels illustrate Muñoz's theory of disidentification. In queering the narrative structures of their novels, these authors take the genre of the novel as a cultural form, and "work on, with, and against" it. This disidentification with the linear storytelling of the novelistic form allows for a representation of the queerness inherent in diaspora that already unyokes "here and now" with "then and there" and rejects "straight time." In Alameddine's *I, the Divine* each chapter is the first, and with every chapter the narrative starts anew. This structure allows for a non-linear account of trauma that replicates the chaos of the original violation (the rape). Similarly, Jarrar's *A Map of Home* explores liminal spaces that open within a non-linear narrative, while simultaneously stretching this queering of time to other categories, as Nidali also undoes the borders traced on maps, unhooks the signifier from its linguistic sign, and ultimately frees her mind from her body.

Upon arriving in the United States, Nidali continues to understand the binary spaces she inhabits linguistically. Beyond a tool that can unyoke her mind from her body, Nidali also realizes the potential for language to connect discrete times, spaces, and experiences. Sounding so much like Edward Said's meditations on language in *Out of Place*, Nidali wistfully states: "I wished, then and for many months later, that I could translate the way I was, my old way of being, speaking, and gesturing, to English: to translate myself" (225). This admission encompasses the struggle for identity undertaken not only by Nidali-as-character but also by Nidali-as-narrator. In the previous section, I analyzed the existential relationship between language and Nidali's sense of self. However, as the novel progresses Nidali's struggle to define herself is extended into the very text of the novel itself, and the narrative disintegrates into post-modern fractures as the narrative voice is lost and spins

between first, second, and third person.

The intersections of Nidali-as-character and Nidali-as-narrator begin when Nidali's conflation of language and self is extended to the material world. As Nidali struggles to define herself within the unstable borders of nations and languages, she finds congruencies between solid things, like food, blood, and text. Food and blood, two substances that hold mythic weight when defining culture and heritage (as explored in the previous chapter), replace language for Nidali, and both are transformed into text itself. When Nidali's paternal grandfather passes away the family travels to occupied Palestine to mourn. The day after their arrival Nidali makes cabbage rolls with her grandmother while her grandmother tells folktales and family stories. In this novel, in which education thematically recurs again and again, often driving Nidali's self-development, this is a different type of education, one in which Nidali learns about her family and culture. Outside of institutional walls her illiterate grandmother becomes her teacher, cooking with her and telling old stories passed down through generations. This oral legacy is accentuated by the preparation of food, as the cabbage rolls and the garlic cloves that flavor them transform into a text: "When I looked into the pot, the rolls and cloves reminded me of dashes and commas" (101). This connection between these two bodies of knowledge—oral histories versus written texts, and cultural legacy versus institutionalized education—is made through food, and the food that Nidali has helped to prepare and will later consume also becomes her text.

Later in the novel, this substance-as-text metaphor recurs. This time Nidali and her family have fled to Egypt following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. After discovering that they will not be allowed back into Kuwait due to their ties to Palestine, her father has applied for jobs in the United States. Having secured a job at an architecture firm in Texas, the



family is about to move again. Sitting up late Nidali listens as her maternal grandfather, mother, and aunt talk late into the night. At one point, tired and hallucinating, she stares at streaks of blood from decades of smashing mosquitoes against the blank whiteness of the walls. The blood does not just make up stains along the wall, though. In Nidali's delirium and the liminal space of this summer beach apartment that the family has been temporarily living in, the blood transforms into commas. As Nidali sits late into the night, on the eve of her departure from the Middle East, listening to her relatives talk, the blood that marks decades of the family's inhabiting the apartment transforms into text: "So I sat on the couch with the tea that Sonya made me and watched the wall while Mama and Geddo and all of Alexandria talked on its balcony, filling in the words between the blood's punctuation marks on the blank page of the white wall" (210). Once the decision has been made to leave the Middle East and resettle in the United States, Nidali is caught in limbo between countries, cultures, and languages. As she sits awake on her last night in Egypt these spots of the family's blood, sucked out by mosquitoes and spread across the walls over decades, transform into the breaks between a text that comes to life on the very walls of the dwelling she is about to leave.

Near the end of the novel this conflation of the material world and text and the linguistic disassociations discussed in the previous section bleed over into the narrative style. Beyond Nidali's own dissociation at a character level, the narrative voice begins to break apart in the final chapters and the constructed nature of the text as a material object is made apparent. Until this point the novel has been narrated by Nidali in the first person. Chapter 13, however, ends with a narrative slip. As Nidali struggles to reinvent herself in the United States, the linguistic games that she plays with herself spin into the text of the novel. She says: "I felt splintered, like the end of a snapped-off tree branch. I had even taken to talking

to myself, keeping me company, narrating my own movements. In this way, *me* became *her*, *I* became *Nidali*, *you*, *she*” (231).

The following chapter extends this abstract comment into narrative praxis, letting go of the controlled first-person, past-tense narrative voice, and slipping into the second person and present tense. It begins: “That fall you move with your family to America, you are diagnosed with TB...” (233). The chapter continues in the same way, using the second person to address Nidali in the present tense and relate moments within the story that are outside of the otherwise linear timeline. The voice in this chapter rambles, reeling through episodes that have already been related as well as new material. The main event of the chapter, though, is an episode that is not told anywhere else in the novel, and which precipitates a shift in the power dynamics of the family. When Nidali’s father attempts to restrict her social life, she runs away. Using the act of leaving as a method for consolidating power (a significant strategy considering her history as a refugee), Nidali is able to negotiate with her parents. As her father agrees to her terms, Nidali allows her parents to come and get her, and the novel returns to the standard first person, past tense narration.

A few chapters later, though, the narrative voice splinters again. This time sliding between first, second, and third person, and past, present and future tenses, the chapter fragments into smaller vignettes. The first rupture within the chapter describes a rape. The vignette begins, “When a boy asks you on a date and you say yes, and he says you should come over to his house, and you say you’ll have to sneak out because you’re not allowed to go on dates, he’ll say, ‘Just say you have an after-school activity, we can date during the day. I understand.’ Don’t go” (244). This striking narrative shift, so far into the novel, coupled with a sudden stream of consciousness lacking in punctuation, is jarring, and this narrative

rupture reflects the sexual trauma which Nidali has experienced.

The narrative, as a cohesive discourse, takes a while to recover itself. The following vignette uses a third person limited narrative style to describe Nidali's brother, rather than Nidali, and the rest of the chapter shifts between third and first person, in addition to a brief shift back into the second person, although this time the narrative "you" is directed at Nidali's father. This vignette, despite being addressed to Nidali's father, is no less about Nidali. If the first dissociative vignette related her trauma, this one relates her repossession of herself in the face of violence at the hands of a man. It cautions her father, "don't be surprised when your daughter runs out of the house after you're done beating her up and calls the cops." Once Nidali, the character, has reclaimed a sense of power, Nidali-as-narrator reclaims the text, and in the following chapter narration begins again in the first person, present tense.

Similarly, in Alameddine's, *I, the Divine*, Sarah struggles to narrate trauma. The novel is written as a series of first chapters, usually narrated in the first person by Sarah herself, but occasionally narrated in the second or third persons. Constructing a novel out of first chapters raises questions about narrative cohesion and what it means to tell a story and, like *A Map of Home*, the formation of the text raises questions of narratology—how do we tell a story imbued with trauma; how do we even begin? As the novel begins again and again the reader is made aware of the construction of the narrative act in a way that is not present in a future-oriented novel. The narrative author, Sarah, begins again and again in an attempt to tell trauma, specifically a brutal rape that she struggles to confront. As she narratively gets closer to the event, pieces begin to fit together and the story emerges.

*I, the Divine* is as much about events of Sarah's life as it is about the process of

narrating, though, and the novel is an artistic experiment with the chaos of narrating trauma. As the text is restarted again and again, a layered fictional Sarah emerges, one who both figures as a character within the novel, and one who stands outside the novel, writing it. Within the novel, Sarah is also a writer, and there is slippage between the fictional author and the character of Sarah, but key constructions of the text separate the two. Certain chapters repeat the same story with small variations, implying that the narration of each chapter is unreliable and the text itself is not authoritative, although the created author standing outside it is. Throughout the novel Sarah's narrative search for herself results in changing attitudes towards her family, her history, and her nation.

As Sarah and the text circle the traumatic moment at the heart of the novel—a violent rape perpetrated by three men at gunpoint—her narration linguistically disintegrates. One of the most poignant false starts to the story she is trying tell is related in French. Only two paragraphs, it is one of the shortest chapters of the novel and is followed by a rewriting in English where it is retold and expanded. The French chapter, titled “Premier Chapitre,” begins: “Il faisait chaud ce jour-là” (192). This first sentence is repeated faithfully in the English version, which begins: “It was hot that day” (193). The second sentence of the two chapters deviates slightly, though, as the English version provides similar but more expansive information: “Elle avait porté sa longue robe noire et fleurie” and “Sarah wore her long black dress with a flower motif, tiny yellow-and-white daisies and red poppies” (192, 193). From there the French and English echo each other, occasionally stating exactly the same thing, occasionally adding small embellishments that are left out in the other language. After two paragraphs the French ends mid-sentence: “Il faisait tellement chaud qu’elle se sentait au bord de l’évanouissement...” (“It was so hot that she felt on the verge of fainting...” 192, my

translation). This final sentence is not repeated in the English version—perhaps because the suggestion of fainting recalls too starkly the trauma she is slowly attempting to recount, as during the rape Sarah repeatedly faints and is finally left unconscious in the dirt by her violators.

Months later, after Sarah has confided in her best friend who takes her to have an abortion, the two girls play Pictionary with friends while the Lebanese Civil War rages in the background. When a drawn card prompts the teenagers to draw “rape,” Sarah is forced to confront her trauma. As bombs drop on the streets outside, the chapter closes with a deeply felt question:

For the rest of her life, she would try and figure out why a game of Pictionary would have the word *rape* in it.

How does one draw rape? (201)

This question, when asked within the context of a novel struggling to “tell rape,” raises the question: how does one express trauma via any medium?

This twinning of writing and drawing is present elsewhere in the text, and setting up drawing or painting as the artistic foil for writing allows questions to be raised and posed about the narrative choices of the novel. After Sarah’s mother dies, she discovers a stack of paintings her mother began but never finished: “There were only ten of them, all of them seemed abandoned after a couple of strokes. Some were left mid-stroke. So many false starts. I began to cry” (263). This collection of abandoned starts presents the reader with a moment of dramatic irony, as she sits with a collection of false starts in her own hands, some also abandoned mid-stroke of the sentence. A *mise-en-abyme*, the series of unfinished paintings act as a miniature for a novel that also cannot seem to start. The twinning of painting and

writing as corresponding modes of expression makes Sarah's question "how does one draw rape?" all the more poignant (201). If the mise-en-abyme of the unfinished paintings is showing the reader how to understand the unfinished chapters, then the word *draw* can be substituted here for *write* as the novel self-reflexively asks how to tell its own story.

The questions that the formal elements of *I, the Divine* raise about how to write rape can be extended to trauma and the nation writ-large. Syrine Hout reads Sarah's rape as a metaphor for the trauma visited on Beirut by the Lebanese Civil War, and in doing so Sarah's inability to narrate her trauma becomes Lebanon's choice to not teach the war as part of the education curriculum. Looking specifically to the space in which Sarah is raped, Hout suggests the staging is suspiciously reminiscent of the Green Line, which was the symbolic focal point of the division of Beirut during the war. This locating of Sarah's rape transforms her personal tragedy into a representative trauma symbolic of "the fates of many innocent civilians living along that bloody stretch" (Hout 336). Following the war, Lebanon has been forced to face the same questions surrounding trauma and narrative that cripple Sarah's attempts to write her novel. The country's inability to write an unbiased historical account has led to the decision to write nothing in the history books, and the silence that surrounds what happened in the war is emblematic of the trauma experienced by the country.

Although Sarah's fifty attempts to start her book, and especially the two attempts that constitute the scene of her rape, employ the hallmarks of trauma writing, including "obsessive repetitions of images and scenes, temporal fragmentation and narrative indirection" (Hout 336), Sarah (and Alameddine) eventually accomplishes what Lebanon cannot. As Sarah repeats her beginning, telling and retelling her story, she is able to narrate the trauma that cannot be told using a future-driven plot. In doing so *I, the Divine*

disidentifies with narrative. Unlike the identifying act of writing a linear novel, or the counteridentifying act of foregoing the creation of a narrative altogether (such as Lebanon's approach to narrating the war), Sarah produces a queer narrative that is able to finally tell her story through disidentification.

#### **4. Queering the Nation**

Building on the readings of *I, the Divine* and *A Map of Home* as queer narratives and Hout's suggestion of reading novels alongside national narratives, I turn now to the role of queerness in Arab American lives on a global scale. Beginning with a close reading of *A Map of Home*'s major motif—maps—I examine how Nidali's queer body exists in relationship to the nation within the queer text of the novel.

Throughout the novel, Nidali's construction of self and text are paralleled by her repetitive drawing of the borders of Palestine. Within *A Map of Home* the textual power of maps functions on both macro- and micro-levels. Maps of the Middle East order Nidali's understanding of geo-politics, just as an invented map of her high school cafeteria gives meaning to the school's social hierarchy. These global and local reflections of power reflect both the broad and individual constraints placed on Nidali's life as she struggles to construct a map of her own and order her world.

The global powers that are reflected in the visual illustration of a map also organize Nidali's daily life. At school Nidali understands the hierarchal structure of the social system in relationship to a global map.

People sat in the student center in between periods and for lunch, and this student center was like a map of the world: the white kids with money, the ones who showed

up in their Beamers and their Path Finders, sat in the top left; the white people with no money, the ones who drove Metros, sat in the top right; and the thespians, who were also white, sat in the middle (around where France would be). Then the black people sat in the bottom center; the Latino kids sat in the bottom left; and the nerds sat on the bottom right..." (221)

As Nidali lays the ethnicity and wealth of her classmates over the political map of the world (the wealthiest white kids correspond roughly to the location of the United States, less wealthy white students correspond to the location of Eurasia, black students to Africa, Latino to South America, and nerds to Asia and the South Pacific), she locates these global constructs within her daily life. Unable to locate herself within this map, though, Nidali spends lunch "in the bathroom," which, "On the school's map of the world the bathroom stall was at the South Pole" (221). Nidali's understanding of herself relies on her ability to understand the constructing elements of a map: namely the dividing lines and the spaces that they intersect.

Before leaving for the United States, Nidali's understanding of the lines on a map reflects her queer negotiations of other binary categories. As Nidali's family flees towards the Iraq-Kuwait border, she is shocked to learn there is no fence, no line in the sand, nothing to stop the physical transition between two countries. As she begins to recognize the "clearly marked thin black line" on a map as fabricated political constraint rather than physical boundaries, her understanding becomes starkly metaphysical, and she remarks that in real life "the closer you get to the straight line the more expansive it is" (147). There is no physical border between the two spaces, nothing to stop a transition between the two spaces, "it could have all been the same country" (147). This reinterpretation of the division between countries



as an expansive liminal space questions the geopolitical control of nations, and as Nidali practices drawing a map of Palestine her realization standing at the Iraq-Kuwait border translates onto the page.

Like Nidali's dictatorial control over her narrative, the power attributed to lines on a map constructs a geopolitical reality that is intimately connected to the perspective from which they are created. This has been especially true for the Middle East (a name fraught with its own map-making implications) whose carving by colonial powers has had lasting effects. Showing Nidali a photograph of himself, her grandfather instructs her:

And here I am on our family land in the South [of Egypt]. That man standing with me helped us make an accurate map of it. The English had made one in 1898, but we started over. Do you know that a large-scale map creates a better relationship between people and their land? I know they didn't teach you that in the English school in Kuwait because they knew that power is the knowledge and command of land, and they wanted that knowledge and power for themselves! So here I am standing on the land, and you should learn that when it comes to maps, accuracy is always a question of where you stand. (188)

In this photograph embedded in the family album—itsself a map of the family past—Nidali's grandfather stands on the very land that he is mapping. The photograph allows for the unmooring of space and time as the past is recalled and the landscape of the family's land is frozen within the text of the photograph. Within this queer space of the photograph, Nidali's grandfather questions the process of translating a physical space into a text, and identifies the inherent consolidation of power in such an act.

Moving from Kuwait, to Egypt, to the United States, Nidali experiences the shifting

stance that her grandfather alludes to, and her understanding of Palestine from its 1967 borders to the present day dissolves. When she asks her father if she has drawn the map correctly, he responds dismissively, “who knows?” explaining how the map of Palestine changes year to year. And when Nidali asks what this means, he states, “I mean...there’s no telling. There’s no telling where home starts and where it ends” (193). As Nidali studies the map she has drawn and attempts to integrate this new understanding of “home” she begins to erase the lines. When she finishes she surveys the now blank page, and says “The whiteness of the page blended with the whiteness of my [bed]sheets. ‘You are here,’ I thought as I looked at the page and all around me. And oddly, I felt free” (193). This erasure of national lines allows for the erasure of ethnic lines, and echoes Nidali’s experiments with language disassociation. As Palestine comes cartographically undone, just as Nidali’s languages come untethered from meaning, Nidali transcends the binary categories within her life and reorients herself. This cartographic and linguistic experiment merges into a philosophy of self, one in which boundaries and divisions lose all meaning and their erasure allows Nidali to move beyond her sense of “half and half” and to be “whole.”

The intersection of queered themes—queer gender, queer language, queer narrative, queer maps—in *A Map of Home* echoes the work of scholar Sara Ahmed. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed interrogates the *orientation* half of the phrase *sexual orientation*. She asks: “What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as orientated?” (1). Orientation, she suggests, is a question of space—to orient oneself means to locate oneself using landmarks, but Ahmed asks why and how this emphasis on directionality has become inherent in questions of sexuality. She theorizes sexual orientation as not just a question of desire, but the spatialization of desire, as well as the sexualization of space. She begins with

phenomenology on account of the centrality of orientation to questions of consciousness: if phenomenology argues that “consciousness is always directed ‘toward’ an object,” the argument is constructed around implicit notions of space and orientation (2). By drawing on concepts of orientation from both phenomenology and queer theory, Ahmed demonstrates how “bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space” (5). Ultimately this bodily spatialization is considered for how the body inhabits both space and time, and also how concepts of space and time are dependent on the presence of a body to define them.

In an earlier work, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), Ahmed discusses migration as an event that requires a reinhabiting of the skin as different environmental features (landscape, air, smell, sound) create impressions upon the surface of the skin, and these new impressions reshape the body. Orienting the migrant body is grounded first in a sense of disorientation. Feeling out of place and a loss of a sense of home results in “the lived experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home” (10). Ahmed defines *home* as an intimate space in which the body is extended and expanded until the space is saturated with the body. This intimacy creates new contours within the livable space and renders the strange familiar. Orientation of the body within the space is grounded in the process of familiarizing the body to the space, and disorientation occurs when this extending of the body fails and the strange is not rendered familiar.

For the Arab diasporic subject, this process of reorienting oneself in migration is complicated by colonial legacies that define *East* and *West* as separate and oppositional. Ahmed argues that Orientalism is spatially formatted, and this spatial formation, already

associated with specific places, comes to be associated with specific bodies, rendering proximity and distance lived experiences of the body. Beginning with the many definitions of *orient* (“The word can mean: to place so as to face the east; to place in any definite positions with reference to the points of the compass or other points; to adjust in relation to new circumstance or surroundings; to turn a map so that the direction on the map is parallel the direction on the ground; to turn toward the east or in specified direction” [112]), Ahmed locates the historical concept of orientation within “the Orient.” This etymological provenance reveals the privileging of certain directions: “In other words, even if orientations allow us to establish which direction we face, the concept ‘points’ us in one direction more than others: it ‘points’ towards ‘the east’ (112).

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said lays out the historical and cultural constructs that create an Orient and, in turn, an Occident. The Orient, as portrayed in European paintings, writings, architecture, and so on, comes to embody that which is not Europe: “The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said i). As Europe invents the Orient, it also invents boundaries that circumscribe and locate that which is “European” and “interior,” and that which is “not European” and “exterior.” Ahmed argues, “In a way, Orientalism involves the transformation of ‘farness’ as a spatial marker of distance into a property of people and places,” and drawing on Said’s revelation of the Orient as “a world of romance, sexuality, and sensuality” Ahmed suggests that this “farness” becomes a wished for, exotic place. This desire renders the exotic not only far but also “future oriented, as a place we long for and might yet inhabit” (Ahmed 114). Within their queering of gender, narrative, and space, *A Map of Home* and *I, the Divine* question this

Orientalist construction. Nidali and Sarah's queer gender subverts both Orientalist perceptions of Arab women and Arab notions of femininity and womanhood while the narratives they construct challenge a linear future-driven orientation.

These queer themes extend beyond these two texts, though, and the intersections of Arab American constructions of gender, narrative, and national belonging exist within a global and transnational framework. In her 2007 monograph, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar suggests that gay and lesbian acceptance has become an international yardstick by which a country's right to national sovereignty is determined. Challenging the feminist and queer scholarship of the 1990s that depicted the nation-state as a heteronormative construct and the queer subject as inherently outsider and outlaw to that state, Puar examines how Western countries construct an international narrative of tolerance for the queer subject as essential to the modern nation-state. Calling this phenomenon *homonationalism*, Puar argues US imperialism and foreign intervention are justified, in part, through a rhetoric of progressive multiculturalism. Homonationalism, she suggests, is "a facet of modernity and a shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states" and that this shift is "a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality" (337). As state practices shift, Islamophobia becomes entrenched, and gay rights are centralized within human rights campaigns, certain states are labelled either "gay-friendly" or "homophobic." This convergence of historical power structures echoes earlier settler colonial practices, such as Orientalist justifications of violence for the protection of women. At its core, Puar's homonationalism is a critique of the rhetoric surrounding gay rights and how that discourse reifies a narrative of modernity that grants citizenship—both legal citizenship

and cultural belonging—to certain populations at the expense of other populations. Specifically, Puar argues, “the narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the back of radicalized others” (337).

*I, the Divine*’s author, Alameddine, poignantly illustrates how the forces of homonationalism personally intersect for queer Arab Americans in interviews where he tries to explain his identity. In 2014 he joked that he no longer considered himself gay. “I’ve transcended that,” he said, “I’m creating a new sexual and political identity: I’m grumpy. It’s post-post-post gay” (Alameddine and Harris). In his invocation of “grumpy” as a new identity category, Alameddine invokes the irreverent to demonstrate how sexual identities and political identities intersect. Grumpy is—obviously—neither a sexual nor a political identity, but by pointing out the ridiculousness of identifying it as such, Alameddine illustrates the ways in which “gay” can be performed simultaneously as both a sexual and political category. However, it is not the construction of queerness as performative rather than immutable that bothers Alameddine; it is how normal—and normative—being gay has become. He continues:

A lot of it has to do with the feeling...I mean, of course I’m gay. But am I gay like everybody else is? I feel like more of an outsider than I feel “gay.” The more the gay community gets co-opted by the dominant culture, the more I feel like a double outsider. As an example, it’s funny: now when I go through TSA, through this whole book tour with painted fingernails, TSA will let me pass just like that—*whee!* Because I’m no longer a threat. As an Arab I’d be more of a threat to them. And I’m thinking, when did we, when did *I*, become so acceptable? (Alameddine and Harris)

As Alameddine sorts through the shifting landscape of US American dominant culture and identity politics, he invokes another identity category: race. Within the global crucible of the airport, his identities as a gay man and an Arab man compete and the intersection of race and sexuality is re-figured as both identities fluctuate. Rejecting the dominant culture's acceptance of the gay community as co-option, Alameddine repositions himself as an outsider. He describes this shift in US identity politics as a personal loss, his newly found non-threatening status ironically reifying his sense of not belonging. As a result, Alameddine turns to his Arab identity to justify his place as an outsider and, at least within the temporary and transitory space of the airport, his ethnicity supersedes his sexuality in the performance of his chosen outsider identity.

Alameddine's construction of self as a queer Arab American man takes place within local contexts as well, though. In contrast to the homonational global construction of queer acceptance that relies on a demonized Arab "other," within the United States the social movements advocating for acceptance of Queer Americans and Arab Americans have relied on parallel narratives and have had similar trajectories within the US political and cultural landscape. Marc Boucai argues that "Arab and queer subjectivities can pass and/or cover as normal, as good, as worthy of heteronormative and white privilege and full citizenship, if they adhere to the narrative benchmarks (monogamous marriage, procreation, the accumulation of capital) that have become common sense" (Boucai 1). Ultimately, Boucai suggests that:

[T]his rhetoric about good Muslims and bad Muslims, good gays and bad queers, makes clear that citizenship is not only about legal certification but has affective contours. Far more than a green card or a legal designation, **citizenship** has been

theorized in recent years as being multicultural, transnational, flexible, and dissident. Moreover, recent work on queer and Arab citizenship shows how citizenship is less about a piece of paper than it is about feeling like a member of American society, feeling as if one ‘belongs.’ This sense of belonging is affective, a felt sensation more than something tangible, as elucidated in recent writings by queers of color. (Boucai 5)

This felt sensation of belonging is achieved in *A Map of Home* and *I, the Divine* through writing. Nidali and Sarah explore the ways in which the aspects of their gendered and transnational identities fit within their communities through the constructions of their narratives. As these two women write their way into being, these texts challenge both the gendered practices at work within Arab families and the global gender and sexual norms homonationalism is predicated on.

In her article with Amit Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag,” Puar asks “If certain forms of queer and progressive organizing remain tied to forms of nationalist and imperial domination, how can queers of color both here and across the globe disrupt the neat folding in of queerness into narratives of modernity, patriotism, and nationalism?” (130). In Jarrar’s and Alameddine’s work, this neat folding in is disrupted through queer language practices. In using non-linear narrative techniques and queer language to present characters who challenge the dichotomies of gender, these authors answer Puar’s question in praxis. It is the texts themselves that disrupt this folding in of queerness into narratives of modernity, patriotism, and nationalism as they revise narrative time and geopolitical space. Ultimately, it is only through rewriting herself again and again that Sarah ultimately finds herself and by the end of the novel arrives at a certain level of comfort with who she is. Similarly, as Nidali queers



cartographic and narrative perspectives in *A Map of Home*, she finds power in knowledge. In the unmooring of lines on a map and the untethering of the narrative voice that tells her story, Nidali finds herself outside of a specific country, culture, or language. As the novel ends she chooses to pick up a pen that will allow her, like Sarah in *I, the Divine*, to write herself into being.

## 5. Conclusion

This use of language as a tool in the construction of personal and national identities takes on spatial dimensions when considered within the context of the novel as a physical object. The novels that Sarah and Nidali (as implied authors) create for themselves constitute a space in which each woman can belong. The metafictional significance of the spatiality of the novel as a site of belonging for Arab Americans is illustrated in texts like Abla Farhoud's *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998), which ends with a chance encounter with a book written in Arabic changing an Arab Canadian character's mind about committing suicide. Similarly, Bárbara Jacobs's *Las hojas muertas* (1987) describes the importance of books to an Arab Mexican family's father. Depressed and isolated, the father finds belonging within the books he reads next to a window overlooking a bridge. Unable to metaphorically and literally cross the bridge—which symbolizes connection between the nations he has inhabited—the father reads voraciously. It is within books that he finds a space that can negotiate the disparate worlds in which he is caught. In his final moments, rather than cross the bridge he crawls underneath it and buries himself in the dead leaves piled up there. Covered in "*hojas*" (meaning both the leaves of a tree and the pages of a book in Spanish), he dies as his daughter recounts the times he chose to read rather than participate in family

events. In the next chapter I extend this theorization of the Arab American novel as a powerful tool and examine how these novels, through language, create and constitute their own spaces.

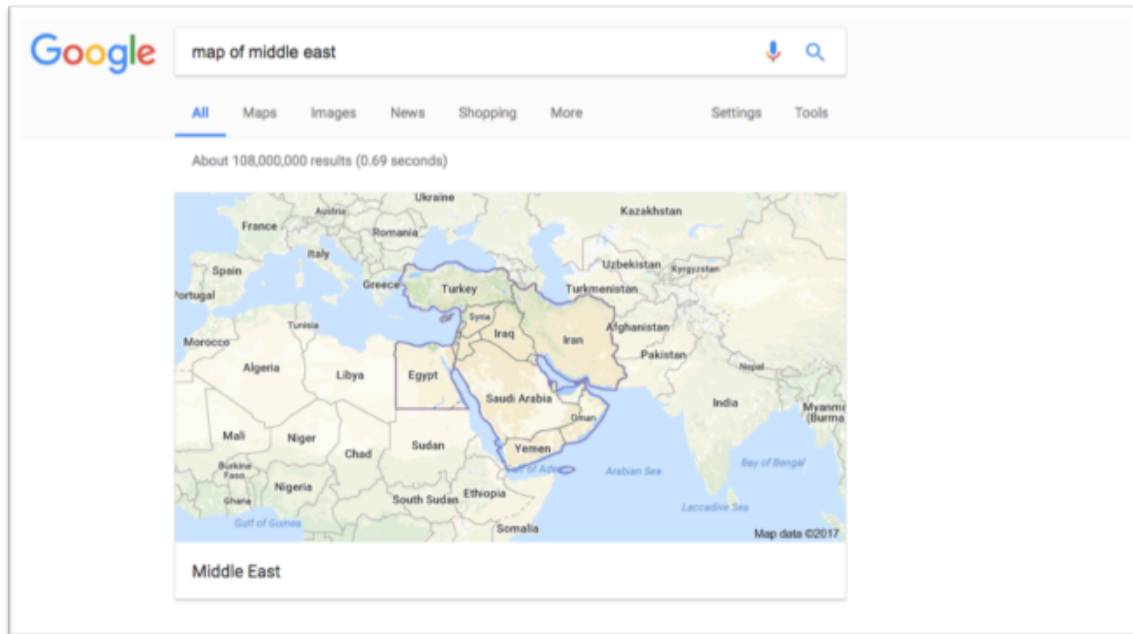
## V. MODIFYING LANGUAGE, MODIFYING SPACE: GEOPOLITICAL AND LINGUISTIC GEOGRAPHIES IN CANADA, MEXICO, AND THE UNITED STATES

“I am both a stranger and a native to the same land, to the same mother tongue.” –Etel Adnan

### 1. Introduction

Where *is* the Middle East? Most people, if given a map, would not be able to identify the specific countries that make it up. But there is a reason the Middle East is hard to find on a map; when it comes to maps, accuracy is not a question of black and white lines. It is one of perspectives. We talk about the Middle East as if it is a discrete geographic space with a singular definition, but there is no uniform definition of the Middle East.

Compare Google’s definition of the Middle East (fig. 5) with the map provided by the World Atlas (fig. 6). There is a substantial shift the countries that are included and excluded; in contrast to Google’s map, World Atlas removes Egypt while including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This cartographic discrepancy is not unique to Google and World Atlas, though. Every website and every atlas groups these countries together in a slightly different way. The Encyclopedia Britannica, for instance, includes Libya and Sudan to the west, while only Afghanistan remains in the east (fig. 7).



**Figure 5.** Screenshot of Google.com search for “map of middle east.”



Figure 6. World Atlas map of “Middle East.”



**Figure 7.** Encyclopedia Britannica’s map of “Middle East.”

The mutability of maps is nowhere better described than in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,

The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a mediation.

(1987; 12)

Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate how maps act as cartographic projections that serve ideological purposes. In *A Map of Home* (2008), Nidali returns to this metaphor of a mutable

map again and again as she flees with her family from first one war and then another. In one instance she sits with her grandfather looking at a family photo album, and as her grandfather explains one of the photographs he also explains the importance of maps to postcolonial subjects. He says:

And here I am on our family land in the South [of Egypt]. That man standing with me helped us make an accurate map of it. The English had made one in 1898, but we started over. Do you know that a large-scale map creates a better relationship between people and their land? I know they didn't teach you that in the English school in Kuwait because they knew that power is the knowledge and command of land, and they wanted that knowledge and power for themselves! So here I am standing on the land, and you should learn that when it comes to maps, accuracy is always a question of where you stand. (188)

Colonial and imperial map making practices are built on this assertion that “power is the knowledge and command of the land.” Nidali, though, ultimately finds power in a different type of knowledge, one acquired through a manipulation of language. As Nidali erases the borders of Palestine, she uses language to create a queer self and narrative that challenges the geopolitics of maps. But rather than finding belonging in erased cartographic space, is it possible to acquire a “knowledge and command of the land” that is grounded in language? Is it possible to create belonging by controlling a linguistic space?

In Chapter 4, I analyzed Rabih Alameddine's and Randa Jarrar's use of language in queering the nation-state through their production of non-linear narratives. Expanding on that argument to consider how Arabic is used to define space—and by extension belonging—within the nation-state, this chapter discusses three representative texts from Canada,

Mexico, and the United States. Within these texts language is fundamental to immigrant notions of spatial belonging as characters manipulate language and language choices to create distinctly Arab spaces within North America. I argue that Jorge Nacif Mina's *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* (1995), Denis Chouinard's *L'ange de goudron* (2001), and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) create space through Arabic code-switching, and that the space that is created by each of these authors reflects specific cultural contexts in regards to immigration and belonging within each nation.

*Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* collects the stories told by Mina's father over the years about his life in Lebanon and his immigration to Mexico. In the final pages the first-person narrator, Elías, gives an account of his death, autopsy, and ascension into heaven. As Elías enters paradise, the afterlife is described as a never-ending conversation in Arabic. This shift from life to death and Spanish to Arabic illustrates the extent to which language played a role in Elías's life-long and unsuccessful search for belonging within the nation of Mexico. In the film *L'ange de goudron*, by director Denis Chouinard, an Arab family similarly searches for belonging in Canada as they apply for citizenship. Using language to modify the physical space of the nation, the film suggests belonging can be found through an acceptance of transnationalism, rather than a shallow espousal of multiculturalism.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, by Mohja Kahf, language plays a comparable role in defining communal spaces and what it means to belong. Born in Syria, but raised in Indiana, protagonist Khadra's trajectory throughout the novel encourages the reader to consider carefully the nature of migration, the Muslim faith, and multilingualism. Focusing on the novel's unusual presentation of Arabic, primarily its use of italics, I argue that the text



engages in a pedagogical act: Because of the way that the text is presenting the Arabic language, readers cannot help but learn Arabic as they read. While *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* ultimately uses language to construct a belonging separate from nation-state, *L'ange de goudron* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* create spaces of linguistic inclusion within each nation. By invoking a higher power of acceptance in a religious afterlife, *Crónicas* suggests that Arab belonging within the Mexican nation is irrelevant when compared to the true belonging found in an Arabic-speaking heaven. In contrast, *L'ange* and *Tangerine Scarf* manipulate language to insert Arabic into the linguistic landscape of North America, an act that shifts the rhetoric of belonging for Arab immigrants by normalizing the presence of Arab bodies within Canada and the United States

## **2. Jorge Nacif Mina's *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México***

In the final chapter of *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México* the narrator describes entering the afterlife. Although catalogued as a “chronicle”<sup>99</sup> written by Jorge Nacif Elías, the text depicts a first-person account of Elías’s death, autopsy and ascension into heaven. Actually written after Elías’s death by his son, Jorge Nacif Mina, the novel blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction as the character of the father/narrator blurs the divisions between life and death. As Elías conceptualizes heaven and the afterlife, he does so specifically through language, and it is Arabic that defines “paradise” as space of eternal belonging.

Mina writes in a “*nota aclaratoria*” at the beginning of the text that *Crónicas* is not

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<sup>99</sup> A popular genre in Latin America, although practically unknown in the Anglophone world—*crónicas* are short autobiographical pieces that tend to be both meditative and memorializing and include personal observations and confessions.

meant to be a literary work. Rather, it collects and transcribes his late father's stories and is meant simply to pay homage to the family's favorite storyteller. (The author, however, admits to a few "datos ficticios" that were indispensable in crafting a cohesive narrative.) Considering this note, the text is presumably a biographical one and therefore principally a work of non-fiction. Imagine the reader's surprise, then, upon arriving at the final chapter to find the first-person narrator recounting his moment of death and beyond—including being cut open, embalmed, interned, and ascending into heaven.

When Jorge Nacif Elías arrives in Mexico, he is fourteen years old and searching for the family that left him behind in Lebanon at age seven. Traveling to Mexico City, he is caught in a monolingual silence, unable to communicate with those around him. Greeting a fellow traveler on the train with a nod of the head, he is suddenly thrust into a conversation in which he cannot participate: "he said something to me that I didn't understand, despite focusing intensely on his words, but I answered him: 'Jorge' and, in my language, '**Kifak, MasalJer**' (How are you? Good afternoon.); the man looked at me confused and didn't say anything else" (19).<sup>100</sup> As Elías continues traveling inward into Mexico he moves further and further into silence and is engulfed in loneliness: "I continued to reflect on my thoughts during the journey, thoughts which tortured me because they forced me to relive my first experiences in Veracruz, the solitude, the feeling of strangeness and foreignness, the occasional insults from boys with whom I couldn't communicate" (18).<sup>101</sup> Moving through

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<sup>100</sup> "me dijo algo que no entendí, aunque puse mucha atención en sus palabras, pero le conteste: 'Jorge' y, en mi idioma, '**Kifak, MasalJer**' (¿cómo estás?, buenas tardes); el hombre me miró desconcertado y ya no dijo nada." (Bold in original; translation in original.)

<sup>101</sup> "Continué reflexionando en mis ideas durante el trayecto, las ideas que me atormentaban porque en ellas se revolvían mis primeras vivencias en Veracruz, la soledad, el sentirme

the Mexican landscape, Elías meditates on his new reality as an immigrant. He describes himself as “a being between two countries,”<sup>102</sup> with Lebanon forming his soul, and Mexico the space in which he will now survive.

Elías’s construction of an Arab Mexican identity echoes the bifurcated identities in Carlos Martínez Assad’s *En el verano, la tierra* (1994) and Héctor Azar’s *Las tres primeras personas* (1977). For the characters in these texts, immigration to Mexico is characterized by loneliness and silence. In place of the transnational identity claimed by immigrants in the United States and Canada, the Middle East and the Americas are figured as geographically antithetical, with places like Lebanon becoming unachievable constructs that exist within a solely imagined space. Described as an “invention of God” in *Las tres primeras personas*<sup>103</sup> and as “paradise” in *En el verano, la tierra*,<sup>104</sup> the Middle East becomes a utopia—a literal “no place.” While these constructions are characterized by their position as outside of geography and space, in the conclusion of *Crónicas* Elías is able to return to this “paradise” through his death.

Like his arrival in Mexico, Elías’s final breaths are marked by solitude and silence. As the hours pass in the hospital, he is wrapped in loneliness. His loved ones are not with him, and his isolation is crafted in silence as much as physical distance. Moments before his

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extraño, extranjero, el recibir esporádicamente insultos de muchachos con quienes no podía comunicarme.”

<sup>102</sup> “un ser entre dos países”

<sup>103</sup> “Sabe que el Líbano y el paraíso son inventos de Dios.” (65) I take up the “invention” of Lebanon within *Las tres primeras personas* in Chapter 3.

<sup>104</sup> “México es un país pródigo, pero Líbano es como el paraíso.” (21) See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the construction of a memorialized and non-existent Lebanon in *En el verano, la tierra*.

final breath he says in a rush, “Hours passed, I felt very alone in that recovery room, I couldn’t say anything, *I couldn’t say anything*, quiet, very quiet, worried about my loved ones whom I couldn’t console, wondering what would be happening with them in that cold waiting room” (122).<sup>105</sup> Elías’s final hours are marked by an inability to speak; as the narrative turns to stream of consciousness punctuated by short clauses, the narrative voice turns inward and exclaims in rapid succession that it cannot speak, that it cannot break the silence. As a cold wind wraps around him, he sees in an instant all of his life, and he breathes his last.

The narrative does not stop there, though. Instead, the now disembodied narrative voice describes the postmortem moment, saying “they moved my body and took it to another location, there they left it for a long time...” (123).<sup>106</sup> Following a narration of the autopsy, he describes and comments on the preparations for burial. While his family lowers him into the ground a destabilization takes place: “they lowered me into the tomb, the movement caused the body to slide from one spot to another without control” (124).<sup>107</sup> Within this sentence, as the body becomes unmoored and slides, there is a narrative distancing. What was “*mi cuerpo*” a page earlier becomes “*el cuerpo*.” Grammatically, then, a separation takes

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<sup>105</sup> “Pasaron las horas, me sentía muy solo en aquella sala de recuperación, no podía decir nada, ¡no podía pedir nada!, quieto, muy quieto, preocupado por mi gente a la que no pude consolar, pensando qué sería de ellos en esa fría sala de espera.”

<sup>106</sup> “movieron mi cuerpo y lo llevaron a otro lugar, ahí lo dejaron por mucho tiempo...”

<sup>107</sup> “me bajaron al sepulcro, el movimiento provocó que el cuerpo se deslizara de un lugar a otro sin poderlo controlar...” Worth noting here is the grammatical shift in bodily position, which I have not quite captured in the translation. While the narrator continues to describe being lowered into the tomb in the first person, his body becomes *the* body. Although it is common in Spanish to describe body parts using *the* rather than a possessive pronoun, the grammatical agency in the verbs also shifts. The movement of the body is described in the passive voice, and the final verbs, which translate to “to be able to control it,” are left in the infinitive and unconjugated, making it unclear who or what is the subject.

place between the “me” that is lowered and the body which slides.

As Elías’s consciousness separates from the physical self, he transcends the physical world. Leaving behind the loneliness and silence that characterized his life as an immigrant in Spanish-speaking Mexico, he enters into a heaven that is imagined as a linguistically welcoming space. His mother-in-law, who became a surrogate parent when he never located the family that abandoned him in Lebanon, invites him to move from the darkness into heaven with a code-switch: “all of a sudden, when the darkness frightened me, through the lamentations of those that remained outside, I saw Ketrín, my mother-in-law, who took my hand and smiled, saying to me: **-aHla u saHla-** (Welcome)” (124).<sup>108</sup> As he suddenly becomes afraid, his mother-in-law reaches through the fabric of the physical world—light and dark, sound and silence—and ushers him into heaven. This celestial space is imagined as interior, while the living remain “outside.” Further, Elías’s crossover into the eternal is marked by a switch to his native language. As his mother-in-law introduces him to the family members who await, he sees his father-in-law and begins to cry. His father-in-law embraces him, “and we started a conversation without end” (125).<sup>109</sup> Heaven and eternity for Elías is imagined both as a physical space and as a linguistic one—as a return to his native language. In *Crónicas* the unachievable Lebanese paradise in *Las tres primeras personas* and *En el verano, la tierra* is ultimately found through language.

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<sup>108</sup> “de repente, cuando la oscuridad me daba miedo, tras las lamentaciones de los que quedaban afuera, miré a Ketrín, mi suegra, que tomaba mi mano y sonreía diciendome: -**aHla u saHla-** (Bienvenido).” (Bold in original; translation in original.)

<sup>109</sup> “e inciamos una plática sin final”

### 3. Denis Chouinard's *L'Ange de goudron*

Elías's loss of identity and inability to find linguistic and spatial belonging within the Mexican nation-state stands in stark contrast to the characters in Denis Chouinard's Canadian film *L'Ange de goudron*. Vincent Desroches, writing on *L'Ange de goudron*, analyzes the film's Algerian "inscriptions" on the Quebecois landscape. Situating his critique as a discussion of the implicit power involved in being able to control a space, Desroches analyzes both the intentional efforts of characters within the film to take over Canadian spaces and the symbolism behind unintentional efforts that result in a questioning of what it means to belong to a geography. *L'Ange de goudron* integrates Arabic into the very fabric of the film, embedding it repeatedly into the mise-en-scène. Etched into Quebecois architecture, Quebecois flesh, and Quebecois geography, Arabic not only ties the Algerian characters of the film to the geopolitical Canadian space, it embeds them into it, planting them within the soil.

*L'Ange de goudron* tells the story of a recently arrived Algerian family, the Kasmis, in Montreal, Quebec. The Kasmi family is in the process of applying for Canadian citizenship, and the rhetoric of citizenship—or, what makes a good citizen—plays a crucial role throughout the film in establishing the theme of belonging. The major narrative conflict arises when the Kasmis' teenage son, Hafid, becomes involved in an activist group called Crisco. Crisco plans to steal the passports of a group of immigrants who are scheduled for deportation because they believe that if they destroy the passports the Canadian government will be unable to send the now paperless immigrants back to their home countries. Hafid travels to an airport in the north to destroy the passports. Ahmed, Hafid's father, and Huguette, his girlfriend, team up and follow Hafid north in an effort to change his mind and

bring him back. The climax of the film takes place at the airport, as Hafid destroys the passports, is captured by the police, beaten, and left to die in the snow. This ending, embroiled in violence, devoid of hope, and set in the transitory space of an airport, suggests one set of potential answers to the questions raised throughout the film about multiculturalism, nationalism, citizenship, and belonging.

The use of language throughout the film, though, suggests a different set of potential answers. In contrast to the plot of the film, the uses of the Arabic language challenge a Canadian multicultural framework that demands complete assimilation—and, in doing so, restructures Canadian space. From spoken Arabic to written Arabic, the film inserts the language into the architecture and infrastructure of Montreal as well as into the wild spaces of snowy, windswept mountain ranges in the north. The presence of this language suggests that the racialized bodies that it is tied to do have a place within this national space.

Chouinard, along with Philippe Falardeau and Hugo Latulipe, belongs to a group of filmmakers that has been hailed as the *nouveau cinéma engagé*. This concept of a Committed Cinema, one that takes sides with an intentional political purpose, fits with Chouinard's self-perception as an artist. In a 2001 interview Chouinard commented on his cultural motivations, saying

We are so numb by the rhetoric that Canada is the best country in the world, that everything is cool and beautiful. We do not allow ourselves to see the shit around us. We are asleep. I think that the filmmaker is there to offer a lucid look and say that we must rectify things so that society is in perpetual

questioning and in perpetual evolution. (Porter B1)<sup>110</sup>

By casting art as a form of civil activism, Chouinard sets up his film to question and interrogate Canadian society. Chouinard states, “I have always been shocked to see how the multiethnic character of Montreal is absent from our cinema, our television, our literature” (Lussier C1, quoted in Boffa).<sup>111</sup> Bill Marshall explains this Quebecois anti-multiethnic sentiment in his monograph *Quebec National Cinema* (2000): “Quebec nationalists have been wary of the mosaic or salad-bowl vision, since French language and culture in both Canada at large and in Quebec thus run the risk of becoming just another ingredient, with the old threat of disappearance and assimilation to an overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon North America not far off” (Marshall 264).<sup>112</sup> When first released, *L’Ange de goudron* enjoyed a modicum of critical success. The film’s success at film festivals and in academia, however,

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<sup>110</sup> “On est tellement engourdis par le discours ambiant que le Canada est le meilleur pays au monde, que tout est cool et beau. On n’accepte pas de voir la merde qui est autour de nous. On est comme endormis. Je pense que le cinéaste est là pour offrir un regard lucide et dire qu’il faut rectifier les choses de façon à ce que la société soit en perpétuel questionnement et en perpétuelle evolution.”

<sup>111</sup> “J’ai toujours été choqué de constater à quel point le caractère multiethnique de Montréal est absent de notre cinéma, de notre télévision, de notre littérature.”

<sup>112</sup> Studies done by firms, such as Léger Marketing and MBA Recherche, found Quebecers to be overwhelmingly in favor of limiting immigration to those whose country of origin was similar to their own. Language especially played an important role, as Quebecers felt the immigrants’ command of French was a leading factor in granting immigration. The most common reasoning for responders who reported they were in favor of some immigration “mais seulement si celles-ci proviennent de certains pays prédéterminés” was a desire “Pour un meilleur contrôle de l’immigration / Évite les indésirables / Augmente la sécurité nationale” and a feeling that “Il y a un problème d’intégration et d’acceptation de notre culture par les immigrants.” Reasons given by the twenty-two percent wanting to eliminate immigration included, “Il y en a trop” and “Pour protéger la culture et les coutumes québécoises.” Both groups indicated strongly that they felt immigrants posed a threat to Quebec’s culture, especially the French language.



did not translate into popular success.<sup>113</sup> Released just days before September 11, the film flopped at the box office. Rather than beginning a conversation about ethnicity, immigration, and racism as the director had hoped, the tragedy overshadowed the film and the public steered clear out of unease.



**Figure 8.** Still image from *L'Ange de goudron* of a movie theater converted into a mosque.

The film begins with a black screen and a voice praying in Arabic. This first sound, the sound of chanted Arabic, preempts the introduction of Arab bodies, which happens visually moments later as the black fades into a medium-length over-the-shoulder shot of

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<sup>113</sup> Originally, the film was projected to do well, as it had been well received on the festival circuit. In 2001 it won several awards, including the Best Canadian Film at the Montreal World Film Festival and the Golden Kazoo at the Kalamazoo French Film Festival, as well as being nominated for three Genie Awards. It was also popular at festivals in Europe, making a good showing in both Paris and Berlin, and winning the Ecumenical Jury Award in 2002. The film's public reception, though, was disappointing, and Chouinard and critics have pointed to the political turmoil in the wake of international terrorism as crippling the film's chances.

Muslim Canadians at prayer. This staged introduction of first language and then bodies gives primacy to the pivotal role language will play in the film. Similarly, the mosque in which this group is praying is located inside an old Canadian movie theater. The temporary trappings of the mosque, with an Arabic script sign mounted over the old marquee, show the integration of Islam into the existing architectural framework of Montreal and signal the theme of cultural fusion prominent throughout the film (fig. 4). Until this point there has been no dialogue, and the sound of prayer in Arabic has dominated the film. As Ahmed, the father of the family, steps out of the movie theater-turned-mosque, however, he enters a different Montreal, and the linguistic code of the film switches to French.

The next scene reinforces this divergence from the cultural integration symbolized by the mosque. Walking home, Ahmed locates his son on a snowy soccer field. Hafid has skipped evening prayers to play soccer with his friends. The sudden change in linguistic code from Arabic to French reinforces the cultural-split taking place as Ahmed leaves the constructed space of the mosque, but it also highlights another important theme: the generational split taking place within the immigrant family. As the film progresses, this question of generational difference becomes central, and in every pivotal scene the question of Algeria as home is eventually raised. The struggle between the two generations—with Ahmed as the father and Hafid as the son—to understand each other hinges on this conception of where the space of home is located.

The film continues in this mode of alternating between a suggestive layering of cultures and a schism between immigrant generations. After the soccer match, father and son return to the family's apartment and the film again suggests the possibility of Canadian and Algerian sensibilities co-existing in immigrant lives. As Ahmed watches a hockey game on

TV—a sport that could not be more Canadian—the walls around him are decorated with material remnants of Algeria: framed Arabic calligraphy and a tapestry depicting a turreted building. Ahmed then tries on the suit he will wear for the naturalization ceremony where he will receive his Canadian citizenship, and as he does so he sings the Canadian national anthem interspersed with Arabic. For Ahmed, it is clear, Canada and Algeria can exist side-by-side within the life that he has built; both can be home.

As Hafid's involvement in the activist group Crisco is introduced into the plot, the peaceful coexistence of cultures that has been constructed around Ahmed is challenged. When Hafid is caught on film breaking into a government office and that footage is played on the evening news, Ahmed becomes explosively angry. This volatile reaction, taking place inside the family's apartment, results in a line being drawn between the spaces of Canada and Algeria. As Ahmed rages, his daughter Djamila states poignantly, "but we aren't in Algeria here."<sup>114</sup> This concept of *here* being in opposition to *there* sets up the primary conflict of the film. Spatially orienting Canada and Algeria geographically, placing one in North America and the other in the Middle East, suggests that space is immutable and fixed. But when we look at these two spaces, these two lands, through the lens of language rather than geography, possibilities arise for positioning immigrant bodies within national spaces. Like the integration of the mosque into the Canadian movie theater, the placement of Arabic script onto Canadian space suggests belonging for Arab bodies.

When Hafid goes missing following his break-in at the government office, Ahmed and Huguette, Hafid's Anglo Canadian girlfriend, decide to pursue him together, and the two set off towards the airport in the north where Crisco is planning to destroy the passports. As

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<sup>114</sup> "Mais on est pas à Alger ici, papa."

they journey into rural Canada, the visual representations of Algeria that were inserted into the architecture and urban spaces of Montreal shift. Inside long shots of snowy Canadian landscapes, Arabic text and music connect *over there* and *over here* and suggest a possibility for integration and multiplicity. As Ahmed and Huguette, after a long day of pursuing Hafid, settle into a hotel room, Huguette turns on the television. A montage of television programming symbolically layers black and white footage of snowmobiles speeding across a frozen landscape with close up shots of Huguette's face, and then the Canadian national anthem. As Huguette and Ahmed fall asleep, the camera pans down the length of a Huguette's back while extra-diegetic Arabic music begins to play. Sweeping over Huguette in a bird's eye view, the frame reveals an Arabic script tattoo she had done earlier in the film. This image, with the black Arabic lettering on the white skin of the Canadian citizen's body, dissolves into the Canadian landscape and, coupled with the montage of landscape and national anthem that proceeded it, suggests Huguette's body as a site of national identity formation. Her back, representative of the physical, geographic realities of Canada, places the Arabic tattoo in a suggestive position. If Huguette embodies Canada, then the layering of Arabic script onto her skin indicates the possibility of incorporation for the Arab community into the geopolitical space of the nation.

This hopeful imagery is fleeting, though, and the climax of the film does not reflect this suggestion of national space as mutable through language. As the film nears its end, Hafid succeeds in stealing and destroying the passports of the group of immigrants about to be deported, only to be caught by police and brutally beaten. The beating takes place on the frozen tarmac of the airport, and the scene of police punching and kicking Hafid lasts several

minutes. One of them shouts, “I’ll show you how it works here.”<sup>115</sup> This angry reference to *here* by government representatives places Hafid outside of Canada and figures him as foreign and other. Following his death, Hafid’s lifeless handcuffed body continues to lie on the frozen ground. As a bird’s eye camera lingers on Hafid’s lifeless body lying on the ice, the viewer hears a voiceover by a female voice, which belongs to a judge who, in the next scene, is legally conferring citizenship on the rest of Hafid’s family. When contrasted with his dead body lying on the frozen Canadian runway, this scene, filled with melancholy and poignant tragedy, does not suggest that there is a place within the geopolitical space of Canada for an Arab body that does not conform to the prescribed rhetoric of multiculturalism and Canadian citizenship.



**Figure 9.** Still image from *L’Ange de goudron* of the Kasmi family gathered around Hafid’s headstone.

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<sup>115</sup> “Mon sacrement! Je vais te montrer comment ça marche ici!”

But, in keeping with the film's alternating themes, the following scene, which frames the Kasmi family from behind, standing at a freshly dug grave in the snow, once again contradicts this melancholic construction of citizenship through the visual rhetoric of Arabic script (fig. 5). Naima, the mother, and Djamila, the daughter, are positioned to the left of the frame, with Ahmed to the right, leaving a gap just large enough for one person, through which a new headstone with an Arabic inscription can be seen. As Naima prays in Arabic, Huguette enters the scene, and Ahmed motions for her to step into the gap left between the family members. In this moment a dual insertion takes place. Hafid's body enters the ground and becomes a part of the geography of Canada, his burial space marked by Arabic etched permanently into stone. At the same time, Huguette steps into the space left within the family, and Arabic, in the form of her tattoo, marks her as well. The writing on the headstone recalls the writing tattooed on Huguette's back and, in both cases, provides a permanent reminder of the presence of Algeria in Canada, while Huguette and Canada are also inserted into the space of the Kasmi family. With Hafid's death, the film acknowledges the reality of ethnic belonging in North America—liberal multiculturalism demands conformity and there is no room within the national space for an ethnic body who refuses to conform. But, it is through language that the film offers a challenge to the rhetorical framework that undergirds liberal multiculturalism. In etching Arabic permanently onto stone and into the flesh of the Canadian citizen, the film suggests that there is room for ethnic plurality within the nation state and that a transnational identity can be forged through language.

#### 4. Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* follows Khadra Shamy from childhood until her mid-twenties. Raised primarily in Indiana, Khadra is Muslim and much of the novel is dedicated to explorations of faith-based practices, such as veiling and Quranic recitation. As the novel progresses, Khadra goes to college, gets married, gets divorced, has an abortion, returns to Syria for a time, and then eventually moves to Philadelphia where she finds work as a photographer. In Chapter 1 I took up the question of Khadra's use of language to negotiate a racial, national, and religious identity. Here I will continue that argument to suggest that the very novel itself—the *physical object*—becomes the space in which Khadra finds belonging. Through its language choices, including representations of dialectal English and Arabic, the text establishes a translingual identity for not only Khadra, but for itself.

The first line of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is dialogue. The word "Liar" is spoken like an accusation and is produced in reaction to a "highway sign that claims 'The People of Indiana Welcome You'" (1). The next line describes the as-yet unidentified owner of the disembodied voice as "olive-skinned" and "dark-haired." The third line reveals a Quran on the car seat next to her. Within these first three opening lines of the novel questions of belonging, race, and religion are all raised before the protagonist is even identified. In this way bigotry is set up along racial and religious lines as these social markers efface the protagonist's personhood from the very beginning. The paragraph goes on to provide the contradiction that drives the narrative conflict: this still unnamed woman grew up in this place. It is because of her knowledge of Indiana that she knows with certainty that the "Welcome" sign lies and that she is, in fact, not welcome. Her comprehension of her social standing within this society is deeper than the superficial information imparted by the sign,

and because she has been kept on the periphery of Indiana's society she perhaps knows Indiana better than it knows itself.

As a character, Khadra's knowledge of Indiana and her right to claim Indiana as home is repeatedly demonstrated through language. When the Shamys first arrive in Indiana, they are greeted by children throwing beer bottles at their doorstep, and as Khadra's father, Wajdy, naively endeavors to set things right, language as a marker for belonging takes center stage. Walking over to the neighbor's house to discuss the children's violent behavior, Wajdy believes in "the innate goodness of people, and in the power and sweetness of communicating with them" (6). His "stiff British textbook English, in an Arabic rhythm" blocks him from entering the dominant linguistic space, though, and his attempt at interacting with the parents of the children as a fellow adult in the community is met with hostility. The neighbor takes his children's side and shouts "OFF MY PORCH—BACK WHERE YOU PEOPLE CAME FROM!" For the linguistically unacculturated Wajdy, the power of communicating with people fails as a tactic. Implied in the neighbor's rejection is a construction of belonging that is grounded in being native to a place and in performing that nativity through language. Despite being able to speak English, Wajdy's "British textbook" speech with its "Arabic rhythm" removes him from the dominant discourse community of Indiana.

As Khadra grows up, this question of belonging continues to be understood through language. In addition to Standard English, in which most of the novel is written, Kahf places regional American dialect into the mouths of her characters. Initially, the representation of local pronunciation and word choice is limited to Khadra's neighbors, but as the novel progresses and the members of the Shamy family linguistically acculturate to Indiana they



begin to employ various localisms in their speech. The pronunciation includes momentary lapses into representations of dialect during dialogue, such as, “her parents are real strick” (86) and “she’s prejadess” (123). This pronunciation becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses and is directly referenced on occasion by other characters. When Khadra moves to Philadelphia, her new boyfriend identifies her speech as rural American due to her accent: “He found it ridiculous that she said ‘yuh huh’ like a hick. ‘My Hoosier girlfriend,’ he teased when he introduced her to his friends” (342). Outside of the state, Khadra’s use of dialect linguistically marks her as belonging within the space of Indiana.

Within the state, though, Khadra’s local American English is not enough to achieve a sense belonging. Having moved as an adult to Syria and then to Philadelphia, when she returns to Indiana she is still searching for “where she comes from.” As she fails once again to find acceptance, the novel creates a linguistic space that represents her experience by incorporating Arabic into the text. Beyond forging a translingual identity for Khadra, though, the use of Arabic code-switching within *Tangerine Scarf* constructs the novel as a translingual space. Arabic is initially presented in ways that reflect the most common forms of incorporating foreign languages in multiethnic texts: words are italicized, which visually offsets them from the surrounding English, and they are usually accompanied by some kind of translation, often as a quick parenthetical aside.<sup>116</sup> What makes this text unusual, though, is that this representation of the second language only happens the first time a word occurs. After the first instance of a particular Arabic word, the word is then left in regular typeface.

For example, when a young Khadra and her friends are learning to pray, one of the community elders explains to them the importance of *nia*. When Uncle Taher lectures

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<sup>116</sup> See Chapter 2.

Khadra and her young friends, he says, “You want to focus. You want to hold on to your *nia*—your purpose and intent” (37). Here *nia* is represented in italics, and an aside offset by a dash explains its meaning. In this example the children are learning how to pray, and as they begin Uncle Taher interrupts. “It’s not the hundred-yard dash,” he says, giving an extra context clue to the meaning of *nia*. In this moment the reader is undergoing the equivalent of the experience that the children are having in their lesson. The reader, too, is learning, as this new Arabic word is acquired and added to recognition vocabulary. The assumption that the word has been added to the reader’s vocabulary is made clear when two paragraphs later *nia* appears again, but this time it is left untranslated and unitalicized: “‘Do everything with *nia*,’ he admonished, as the children filed out.” (37) The Arabic lesson is now over, and Uncle Taher assumes the girls, and by extension the reader, has learned the meaning of *nia*. In this recurring pattern, italics draw attention to new words as something for the reader to pause at, mull over, and assimilate. Once that has happened, the word is integrated into the text, appearing in regular typeface, and becomes part of the language of the novel.

This form of linguistic instruction takes place throughout the novel. As words are translated and taught, they move out of the marked foreign space of italics and into the regular typeface that indicates linguistic belonging within the novel. One such paragraph provides a description of the movement and flow that accompanies Islamic prayer and the Arabic words used to describe each position:

... You went into *ruku*, the bow, with your knees locked and back straight as a table—someone should be able to put a full glass on your back without spilling. You whispered your *subhana-rabial-atheems*, looking down at your toes in their own little lines. Here comes the signal to rise—

*“Sami allahu li man hamida,”* everyone rose from ruku. (32-33)

The term *ruku*, after having been italicized and translated the first time, appears in normal script the second time, indicating the expectation that readers have learned this new vocabulary word and are now able to read it and understand it as part of their own language. The word has been borrowed into the English text of the novel and now makes up part of the base language, creating a form of American English in which Khadra can find belonging.

This incorporation of Arabic into English takes place on a syntactic level as well. Beyond simply moving from italics to regular typeface, Arabic is blended into English grammatically. Words like *Imam*, which in Arabic is a noun and means the person who leads prayers in a mosque, is turned into a verb and placed in the past tense by being marked with the English tense marker *-ed*: “When the portly Uncle Abdulla imamed, his curly-haired little girl Sabriya giggled...” (33). The same thing is done with the word *hijab*. From a noun meaning veil, it is turned into an adjective with an English suffix given to denote the role the word plays in the grammatical construction of the sentence: “hijab’d” (323). Similarly, after Khadra’s brother’s band has their show cancelled by the Mosque elders, one of the band members shouts, “We’ve been fatwa’d. We’ve been given the ol’ Salman Rushdie” (412). The term *fatwa* has moved out of its original appearance earlier in the text as an italicized foreign word, where it was marked graphically to set it apart from the English, into an unmarked space—in other words, unitalicized—in which it blends in with the English, and eventually is grammatically integrated as it is marked not with an Arabic morpheme, but rather the English past participle marker *-ed*. The two languages are blended at the level of words and become intertwined in a way that makes them impossible to separate.

The language in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* creates a linguistic identity that

operates on two levels in the novel. The first function of dialect and code-switching within the text takes place at the narrative level and helps illustrate the creation of a personal identity for Khadra as she negotiates her identity as Syrian American, Muslim, and Midwesterner. The second function of language in the novel takes place at the level of the reader: the interleaving of linguistic codes within a single text forces the monolingual reader into the role of the immigrant by challenging the ability to understand and participate in the constructed community of the novel. Turning the experience of exclusion on the very people who perpetuate it, within the space of the novel the experience of being othered is reclaimed and subverted. Kahf is careful, though, in this act of subversion to avoid setting up group identities as diametrically opposed. Rather, *The Tangerine Scarf* teaches the reader how it is meant to be read: the text itself is a map for understanding. As it is read, the novel creates in its readers a linguistic community who now share a common vocabulary that includes Arabic words and phrases. Via the careful typographic representation of language and translation in the text the reader is invited to enter a third linguistic space and transcend perceived dichotomies.

In both *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *L'Ange de goudron* the linguistic intersections seen on screen and in the text reflect the transnational identities of their speakers as they seek to modify and alter the space around them. Within these texts the Middle East and North America are conceptualized simultaneously as discrete and disparate entities, and entities that can be combined and integrated when Arabic is entwined into the geographies and cultures of the texts. As Arabic is carved into stone and tattooed onto flesh, its speakers become inextricable parts of the landscape and social spaces of their new countries. Further, as readers actually learn Arabic, linguistic boundaries are blurred and

Arabic becomes embedded within the linguistic and literary space of North America. By providing visual representations of transnational and translingual identities, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *L'Ange de goudron* demonstrate the ways in which communities in social conflict grow apart from and move closer to each other via language.

## **5. Conclusion: Edward Said and the Novel as Space**

In *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre argues that society “produces a space, its own space” (31) and whoever does not fit into this hegemonic societal space is rejected—either isolated or evicted. The texts in this dissertation, and their reshaping of the linguistic spaces of the nation reorganize social geography. In *For Space* (2005), Doreen Massey defines the three pillars of space. First, space is “the product of interrelations” and created “through interactions.” Second, these interactions are the result of individual trajectories coming into contact, making space a site of multiplicity. Therefore, space and multiplicity rely on one another, as “without space,” Massey claims, there can be “no multiplicity,” just as “without multiplicity,” there is “no space.” Finally, space is perpetually being made, always “under construction” and “never finished; never closed” (9). As the characters in these texts interact within the North American linguistic space they introduce a new thread of multiplicity: Arabic.

In *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México*, *L'Ange de goudron*, and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* the insertion of Arabic into the dominant linguistic system of the nation (Spanish, French, and English respectively) confirms Massey’s argument about the unfinished and unclosed nature of space. The languages in these texts are integral to the evolution of both national and personal spaces. For Elías in *Crónicas de un inmigrante*

*libanés en México* language creates a space of belonging outside of the nation, while language in *L'Ange de goudron* redefines physical spaces within the nation. In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* language itself becomes the space of belonging as the English and Arabic used to create the novel evolve together. As language is constructed as space in each of these texts, Arabic challenges the societal production of a homogenized space on which a national imaginary is predicated.

The relationship between space and narrative has a long history in the field of postcolonial studies. As Edward Said says in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993): “The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.” (7). Of course, this is the central argument of much of Said’s work: that narrative played a central role in the colonial project. It was through narrative that colonialism was socially justified and culturally perpetuated. He argues that it was the cultural production of colonial narratives that “allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated” (7). Taking up this same argument in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), he states, the “practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be quite arbitrary.” (54). More than the black and white lines that divide up space on a map, how cultural difference is presented in narrative matters: “It is enough to set up these boundaries in our own minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’” (54).

In his memoir, *Out of Place* (1999), Said uses this idea of the narrative control of

geography to explore his own spatial belonging. Interested in how language shapes identity, he discusses how his seemingly mismatched names—*Edward* and *Said*—contribute to his life-long sense of not belonging. Similarly, growing up he is unsure which language he spoke first—English or Arabic—and he therefore never feels that either truly belongs to him. He experiences this uncertainty about his names and languages as an “instability,” and rather than markers of identity, names and language become “meanderings” and “interruptions” in his search for a space in which he feels he belongs (5). Throughout *Out of Place*, Said conflates geography and language in his discussions of displacement. He writes: “To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years” (217). According to Sobia Khan, Said’s memoir is an attempt to untangle these uncertain geographic and linguistic meanderings: “His memoir, then, becomes not only a chronicle of his journeys as he crosses multiple national boundaries that complicate his sense of identity at each border crossing, but also an attempt at answering that pregnant question: ‘What are you?’” (129). Khan argues that it is the text of *Out of Place* that creates a space for Said to belong, saying, “His memoir not only becomes a chronicle of his transnational existence, but also becomes the space through which he tries to find a ‘place’ to belong” (126). In the preface to *Out of Place*, Said himself addresses this construction of the space of exile as integral to the constructing of his memoir. He says: “The main reason...for this memoir is of course the need to bridge the sheer distance in time and place between my life today and my life then” (xii). In her essay, “Edward Said’s *Lieux de Mémoire: Out of Place* and the Politics of Autobiography,” Iona Luca expands on this metaphor of the bridge and argues for understanding *Out of Place* as a location of memory. Grounding her reading

of *Out of Place* in Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, Luca discusses the text as both a narrative about space and also as space itself. Drawing on a Deleuzian notion of the text as a space of continuous becoming, she discusses the text as a "location" which occupies a "third space," and as a text that "opens up in-between spaces where new forms of art, experience, and political action emerge" (141).

Like Said's memoir, Arab American literature occupies this third space, and these texts not only reshape the way we think about language and space, but change the languages that construct them and in doing so modify the cultural space around them. While characters like José in *En el verano, la tierra* and Radwan in *Le fou d'Omar* navigate destabilized narratives that reflect the instability of an immigrant's belonging within North America, Nidali in *A Map of Home* and Sarah in *I, the Divine* use that narrative instability to write their way into being. Using Arabic, the texts of *Crónicas de un inmigrante libanés en México*, *L'Ange de goudron*, and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* not only imagine alternative spaces in which Arab bodies can find belonging, they forge those spaces. In carving out a linguistic space within the nation for themselves, these characters and narratives create their own geographies.



## VI. CODA

By way of conclusion, I'd like to go back to the beginning. Growing up, I asked my grandmother on more than one occasion to teach me Arabic. Her answer was always the same: *no*. If I pressed her, she would say that she didn't speak Arabic. As a child this confused me, because she sang in Arabic. The food she cooked had Arabic names. When we were out in public she insisted we tell her we had to go to the *shushma* so strangers wouldn't know we were talking about *the bathroom*. I eventually stopped asking.

When my grandmother's family immigrated to the United States, another branch of the family went to Ecuador, another to Australia, and another to New Zealand. A hundred years later we are all still in touch. During my first year of college the Ecuadorian cousins came to visit, and as we sat eating dinner I interpreted for my grandmother so she could speak to her nephew, Roberto. Imagine my surprise, after years of hearing that my grandmother "did not speak Arabic," when the careful back-and-forth of English and Spanish suddenly dissolved into Arabic. Turning to my grandmother, I practically shouted, "I thought you didn't speak Arabic!" Confused, and completely serious, she responded, "I don't." Even in that moment, as I pointed out that she was *currently speaking Arabic*, she still would not admit that she spoke anything other than English.

At the time I didn't know what to make of my grandmother's denial of Arabic. In some ways I still don't, but this dissertation has been an attempt to unravel and understand

why diasporic subjects make the language choices that they do. When I first applied to graduate school, it was not with the intention of studying Arab American literature, though. To be honest, I didn't yet know there was such a thing. Rather, I applied to the PhD program at UNC Chapel Hill to study code-switching in Latina/o literature. I was living in the Dominican Republic, and the only place I saw people discussing the questions I had about migration and language was in relationship to the Latina/o population in the United States.

Once I got to graduate school, I stumbled across Thérèse Soukar Chehade's *Loom*. There is a moment in the novel where the protagonist, Emilie, marries a man who promises that they will stay in her home village in Lebanon. Having married for love, she is shocked when her new husband reveals on their wedding night that he has no intention of keeping his promise to her, and they will be moving away immediately. I was stunned. This was a story I had heard many times—this was my family's story. During their brief courtship, my great-grandfather told my great-grandmother that he wanted to take her on a honeymoon to the United States. Following the wedding, the two boarded a steamship and left Lebanon behind. It wasn't until they had crossed the Mediterranean and reached France, though, that my great-grandfather told my great-grandmother the truth: They were moving to the United States, and they would not be returning.

I started collecting books by Arab American authors, and when I approached my director about the possibility of changing the topic of my dissertation she was supportive. In the four chapters that I devote here to reading novels from Canada, the United States, and Mexico, I probe the wide variety of language choices that Arab American authors make when writing their stories. At its heart, this project is about the negotiation of identity through language. Although language is a fraught symbol for signifying ethnicity, as Carlos

Martínez Assad's *En el verano la tierra* shows us, it is also a powerful one. In these novels Arabic marks characters as both foreign and other and serves as a tool for subverting fixed ethnic, national, and gendered affiliations. What I have shown in these readings is how each of these texts comes to terms with the challenge that my grandmother faced: expressing oneself through a language that also acts as a cultural symbol. My grandmother's decision to express herself only in English is a choice that many Arab American characters make as well. In order to belong, they give up. But the texts in this study have forged a different path. Far beyond eschewing Arabic or using it only to give an "exotic flair," they implode and restructure the terms of dominance. They create a space in which the boundaries of language are questioned and transnational identities are forged in translingualism.

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