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THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH ALONE

by

Aiya Sakr

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2015

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Critical Introduction

Through Word of Mouth Alone

*There was always something wrong with how I
was invented and meant to fit in with the world.*

— Edward Said

Thesis Topic and Purpose

When I was five, my parents walked my older brother and me into what would become our bedroom. It had walls of bare cement, and they told us we could choose to paint it whatever color we wanted. My brother, the seven-year-old self-declared animal and nature expert, and I, his loyal follower, chose forest-green walls for trees, a gold-yellow ceiling for the sun, and dirt-brown carpeting for earth—mimicking the environment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from which we had just moved to Amman, Jordan. That room, with its colored reminiscence of the world of my early childhood, would serve as the backdrop to the stories my father and I would create together with the characters he adopted; Andy the raccoon, Otty the otter, and Supercamel the, well, camel were both my childhood friends and the earliest figures of my imaginative realm, linkages to my earliest memories—albeit broken—in Philadelphia. Later, as a teenager, the room served as a canvas to my solitary expression. My brother having moved out years before, I adorned its walls with black marker and white chalk. Delicate filigree flora soon grew out of my bookcases, my desk, my closet and my windows like field bindweed. I called it doodling. The room remained like that, green walls and floral doodles, until I left to complete my Master's Degree in English in Logan, Utah. I was twenty one.

Having lived in Jordan from the ages four to twenty one, I can say that, in a sense, I grew up there. But I never felt like I fully belonged in its culture. In Philadelphia, my parents made

sure my brother and I spoke both English and Classical Arabic. As such, our speech became often a regular mixture of both. In Jordan, learning Colloquial Arabic was like learning a different language. At school, I felt at home in my English classes and took pride in outshining my non-native speaking schoolmates. My school friends were proficient speakers of English or had some sort of connection to America. I spent hours on online forums, chatting with friends from the United States, England and the rest of Europe. I read series of fantasy books most of my peers had never heard of, and upon entering my undergraduate career and with my father's insistence that I stay and study English literature in Jordan, I made a deal with him to send me back to America for my Master's Degree. Jordanian culture to me, with its great emphasis on a highly stratified social decorum, felt alien and artificial. Because colloquial Arabic functioned as a third language to me, reading and engaging in this milieu rendered me stiff and awkward. I never knew which phrase was appropriate, or how many times to kiss a cheek; nor was I ever quite warm enough to the random acquaintance. My true passions, reading and writing, though admired from afar, were not activities the population generally pursued. As such, especially during my undergraduate career when my closest school friends left for Canada and the United States, my books sat on my shelves gathering dust, while my writing was shown to very few. I felt stuck in an English program where people didn't read. I was angry, I was lonely, I wanted to go "home."

And yet, I still loved Jordan. I loved the fabric of the city of Amman and I loved its architecture. I loved exploring the seven hills surrounding it like guardians—their cobblestone streets, their old limestone buildings imposing and inviting. I loved the steep staircases of many steps I could take from the hills to downtown—a labyrinth of crisscrossed streets and climbing alleys. I loved the way it engulfed the Roman Amphitheater, commissioned by Marc Antony

nearly two millennia ago, when the city still carried its Greek name, Philadelphia. A hill in and of itself, the amphitheater is invisible to the wandering eye, until I turn the random corner. I loved visiting the side *souqs* and hole-in-the-wall shops my mother and grandmother told me about, several generations old. I loved buying vegetables, fabric, and Palestinian embroidery from men who'd inherited their shops from their fathers and uncles, whose purpose in life is to pass on the family business. I loved the two competing Juicers: *Abu Adnan* and *Palestine*, identical in everything but name and human element, across from each other on a single sidewalk, a slim alleyway in between, their method of marketing consisting of yelling at potential customers walking up or down the sidewalk: "Orange juice for half a dinar!", each entrapping passers-by closer to their side. I loved the organic simplicity of it all. Outside of Amman, I loved my grandfather's farm on the east bank of the Jordan River, filled with citrus trees, date palms and other fruits; I loved the oak forests of Ajloun's rolling hills, crowned by a castle of Salahaddin, built during the crusades; I loved the rose city of Petra and the black cliffs of the desert valley Wadi Rum. Jordan's wild places, and the urbaneness of Amman, had become as big a part of my making as Philadelphia before them.

So when I left Jordan on August 15, 2013, I left with a heavy heart. I had letters from friends packed in my carryon, to be read on the plane, while my father, at the airport, took picture after picture until I reached security check and could be seen no more. Later, when he sent them to me, my eyes were red and puffy. What I didn't realize then is that I wasn't just weeping for leaving my family and my best friends. In my heart I carried forest-green walls, olive trees, cobblestone, and the echoing call to prayer.

On a Saturday night in late August, less than two weeks after I had reached Logan, Utah, the second year composition graduate instructors at USU held a welcoming potluck for the first

years. Seventeen of us first years had just been subjected to a weeklong crash course workshop on how to teach freshman composition. It was exhausting, it was exciting, it was terrifying. When my turn came to introduce myself with my name and something “weird” about me, I stood up and said, in a shaky voice, “Hi, name is Aiya Sakr, you don’t have to worry about pronouncing that last name, it’s in Arabic.” Cue laughter. “I’m from Amman, Jordan, and, what I used to think was weird about me there, my obsessive reading and love for writing, is not so weird here. So in a sense, I feel more at home here than I do back home, and I guess that’s pretty weird?” More laughter. I sat down, relieved and happy to be out of the spotlight.

That night was the beginning of my recognizing the different parts of my identity. In the semester to follow, new challenges emerged. I would struggle with issues of self-perception and alienation. I shied away from discussions about religious and cultural differences. I felt lost, undefined, quite unlike the sure-footed—albeit somewhat resentful—woman I was in Jordan. How much of me is Arab and how much of me is American, and how? It was a long time before I was able to assert myself as an Arab-American Muslim woman and define what that meant for me. More importantly, it was a long time before I realized I even could define myself in such seemingly contrasting terms. American culture has allowed me the freedom to explore who I am.

What I attempt to do in this thesis then, is explore the interaction between the Arab, the Muslim, the female, and the American facets of my identity, and come to terms with the space that emerges from that interaction. Within that space I find the expected feelings of nostalgia for family and friends, from whom I’m separated by half the world, and for places and the meanings they carry. I also discover the disconcerting feeling of leaving home wherever I’m going. In a very real sense, my growth as a young woman of two cultures adds layers of cultural and religious complexity to the alienation from the once-familiar, and the frustration with aspects of

upbringing now become less necessary, which are common to the coming-of-age experience. The poems in this collection are my attempt at reconciling the Arab and Muslim facets of my background with a revived American identity and my burgeoning womanhood.

Influences

Emily Dickinson

I consider Emily Dickinson my principle poetic inspiration. As a poet, I connect with Dickinson in that I am, like she has done, attempting to create a personal space in which to explore the different facets of my identity. As an Arab-American, I feel I stand on shaky ground in attempting to navigate two distinct—and seemingly opposing—cultures. I am driven to create a personal space of common ground between my two cultures, so as to explore what it means to be an Arab-American woman. The social discourse in both Arab and American cultures has been male-dominated, albeit in different ways, and though I don't share the social challenges that forced Dickinson to express her femininity subversively, as a Muslim-American woman, my voice is still surprising.

Prolific as she was, writing nearly a poem a day in the year 1862, Emily Dickinson never formally published any of her poems willingly. Among the many attempts at explaining the reasons behind that, Martha Nell Smith, in her essay "A Hazard of a Letter's Fortune," says, "Dickinson's careful distinction between the terms 'publish' and 'print' served as a witness to the fact that she published her poetry in coterie fashion by using her letter-writing to at least ninety-nine correspondents as her primary distribution medium" (241). Dickinson then, by distributing her poems in correspondence, managed to establish a readership for herself with whom she could safely interact. In doing so, she created a space for self-expression that

traditional publication and the patriarchal culture of her time did not offer. She says, “This is my letter to the World / that never wrote to Me -” (Fr 519).

Within that space, Dickinson was freer to explore and reveal herself, to tell the story of her own development. She says, “The Soul selects her own Society - / Then - shuts the Door -” (Fr 409), indicating that the poet’s soul, the most intimate part of her being, chooses her own society, culture, friends, acquaintances and values, implying that she is then comfortable and free to explore herself; the soul, being the innermost private part of the being, is also the most obscure. As such, within that society, the poet has the space and the freedom to explore her own soul.

That space created is not only important to Dickinson’s self-expression, but also for the exploration of the numerous aspects of who she is. In her poetry manifesto, she says:

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous of Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –
 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
 Impregnable of eye –
 And for an everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels of the Sky –
 Of Visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise – (Fr 466).

It is clear that throughout this poem, she explores the expansiveness of the soul, poetry being the perfect medium for her to do so. In this expansiveness, Dickinson embodies a multitude of identities. In “My period had come for Prayer –” (Fr 525), she forges her own spiritual route, forsaking the Calvinist ideals she grew up with, while embracing and personalizing the transcendentalism of her age. In “A Bird, came down the Walk –” (Fr 359), she is the nature explorer with a child’s eyes, whereas in “The Spider holds a Silver Ball –” (Fr 513), adopting the

spider persona for which she is known, she examines the cultural ideals of her time and questions the dominance of patriarchal values over a woman's creative expression. Ultimately, the several identities Dickinson embodies are in fact facets of a living, breathing, moving, changing "soul."

Like Dickinson, I am driven to create a personal space of common ground between my two cultures, so as to explore what it means to be Arab-American. This thesis documents my experience in coming of age: leaving home, marrying someone of another race and culture, which is fertile ground for crafting a poetry of dual-cultural identity and self-discovery. This is clearly demonstrated in my poem "Dampened Prayer," below:

As she rinsed the shampoo off of my body, my mother's rich Classical Arabic demanded that the *shirreer*, the evil version of me slink down the drain. I would watch, giggling and enchanted, sometimes cheering along. My wicked counterpart, shed like snakeskin, invisible yet present amidst the discarded foam and dirty water, slowly washed away. My mother would then wrap me in my pink towel and declare me fresh and good.

I was fresh and good.

Yesterday I stepped out of the shower, hair dripping onto glistening skin, forming a puddle below me. A stray hair or two clung to my thigh, a different towel draped over my face, this time green patterned with grey. My mother would approve. With eyes shut, I wondered if the water was not quite hot enough. Could my Classical Arabic ever be as rich?

Here, through the comparison between my mother and my self, and our differences of language, I am attempting to explore ideas of cultural and physical distance, maturity, mortality, and loss. The context of the poem implies physical distance between my mother and me, and I employ this distance as a poetic motif to create a lyrical space in an attempt to bridge the gap between us, to explore the changes I have undergone in my time away, while experiencing a sense of nostalgia, and more acutely, loss, of the closeness my mother and I once shared.

Structurally, Dickinson's poetry influences mine through her manipulation of the shape of the poem on the page to complicate or add a layer to the textual element, especially in her

scrap poems. In “The Wheels of Birds,” revealed in *The Gorgeous Nothings*, edited by Marta Werner, Dickinson writes the stanzas in different directions so that the envelope on which the poem is composed has to be turned around in a full circle to be read fully, like a wheel. In my own poetry, I often make use of the shape of the poem to complicate the meaning it conveys. The subject of “Graffiti 2” is the painting over of the forest-green walls of my bedroom white.

My room is pain-
ted white
old
friend. Ov-
er all my
let-
ters on
the walls.

Remem-
ber paint
splashes
and
splat-
ters. Now
I am paint-
ed too.

Believe m-
e I nev-
er meant
to have
painte-
d over you.

Here, the words of the poem are arranged in columns as though they were graffiti about to be painted over. The apology in the poem, to the green walls and my old self who loved it, is ephemeral; though I know I will grow to accept the change in the room, and the change in myself, the poem on the wall is my farewell to an old self, and knowing that it exists beneath the new paint will always be a source of comfort.

Mawlana Jalal Al-Din Rumi

I connect with Rumi chiefly because of our shared spiritual Sufi perspective. In his poetry, Rumi emphasizes love, Sufism’s principle tenet—the kind of love that is passionate and

all-consuming, that eventually leads to union with the Beloved. Because he yearns for the One, the ineffable, Rumi's love is also all-encompassing and all-embracing; there is no place for religious divisions in his poetry. Similarly, in my poetry, I embrace the message of love in an attempt to break down religious barriers in the face of the legalistic discourse prevalent in Islam today.

Born in 1207, in the city of Balkh—in modern-day Afghanistan—Rumi moved with his family and settled in Konya, in modern-day Turkey. Already the head of an Islamic spiritual school, a position he'd inherited from his father, he met a wandering mystic—or Sufi—by the name Shams of Tabriz. According to Akhtar Qamber in “Rumi: mystic extraordinary,” Shams became Rumi's spiritual master/companion and they shared an intense and passionate spiritual relationship for four years or so. After Shams' sudden and mysterious disappearance, Rumi began expressing the longing and love he felt for his lost companion through poetry. The intensity of his longing was translated into a yearning for, and transcendent love of God, whom Rumi calls the Beloved. He also began to blissfully dance—or whirl—becoming the founder of the whirling dervishes (156).

Rumi's poetry is intimately engaged with the established religious discourse of his time, which was dominated by a powerful block of religious scholars who emphasized rigid orthodoxy, legalism, and a literal reading of sacred texts. In “An Islamic Language of Toleration: Rumi's Criticism of Religious Persecution,” Cyrus Masroori illustrates the complex political and religious climate of Rumi's time. Interestingly enough, the dominant voices within Islam in Rumi's time—including Sunni groups and orthodox Sufism—characterized Islam as a religion of strict obedience and a rigid ritualistic performance. As such, anyone outside the bounds of what they considered “true Islam,” such as minority sects and non-Muslim groups such as Jews and

Christians, were persecuted, though for non-Muslims life was much easier than for the so-called “deviant” sects within Islam, including Shi’ites, and the rising movement of the “rejoicing” Sufis (246). The school Rumi inherited from his father had been one of orthodox Sufism, but the meeting of Shams, a wandering rejoicing Sufi, ignited a complete shift in his spiritual perspective away from emphasizing the outward ritualistic dogmas of the religion, toward an enlivening of the heart (Masroori 247).

Because of his position as a spiritual teacher and a devotee of love, Rumi chose not to confront this orthodox ideology head-on, but rather to counter it in subversive and subtle ways through his poetry. He did this by, first of all, adopting a viewpoint that is vast and expansive, accepting different ideologies and people from all walks of life. In her book, *Beshara and Ibn ‘Arabi*, Suha Taji-Farouki, using the Beshara School in Scotland as her case study for a modern view on Sufism, quotes Peter Young, the founder: “Rumi’s language of Love crosses all boundaries with insouciance. This is because the Reality of Love is above all things and present within all things” (134). This language of love that accompanied Rumi’s accepting nature enabled him to construct a subtle shift of religious context through the rhetoric of his poetry. The name Allah which scholars of the time had associated with the idea of a distant, all-seeing, Just God, who was to be feared, Rumi transforms into the Beloved, thus creating an intimate relationship of love between God and the worshipper. As such, he creates a kind of dialogue with the rigid religious ideology, conveying a sense of looking beyond, a sort of “yes, and...” He says, in Colman Barks’ *The Essential Rumi*:

Lo, I am with you always means when you look for God,
 God is in the look of your eyes,
 In the thought of looking, nearer to you than your self,
 or things that have happened to you
 There’s no need to go outside.

Be melting snow.
Wash yourself of yourself. (76)

Here, Rumi quotes the Bible, specifically, Matthew 28:20. Jesus speaks, before his ascension into heaven, in the voice of God. He says, simply, “I am with you always.” Rumi then references the Qur’anic verse 50:16 that says, “We are nearer to him [man] than his jugular vein.” Here, Rumi’s inclusionary spirit is displayed very clearly; he utilizes both biblical and qur’anic sources in the same lines—putting them on equal footing and speaking to believers of both faiths—to convey the same message: one of love, acceptance, and reassurance in a God who transcends religious divisions. Having conveyed that message, he then invites them to rejoice in the love of that transcendent Oneness by seeking the Sufi concept of self-annihilation: “Be melting snow. Wash yourself of your self.” He says, “melt yourself away, seek to be one with God.”

In my own poetry, I am reckoning with existing Islamic discourse, which is similar to that of Rumi’s age, but in my time the rigid, dogmatic and literalist voices have another component that has come to loudly dominate the Islamic world: fundamentalism. In order to subvert this dominant perspective, I must, like Rumi, employ subtlety in reaching beyond the terms and contexts of that perspective. I also, like Rumi, am more concerned with the journey of the heart and reaching for oneness, for the unseen, as in my poem “Graffiti 3:”

<p>A day after my wedding, I walk into my bedroom, where my forest has been razed to the ground. Painted white, my father says, to celebrate a new life, a new beginning. With a henna-laced hand, carefully marked by a woman the day before for <i>Baraka</i>, a blessing of happiness, I trace what is left of it; on the East-facing wall, a filigree flower in white chalk, marked by an earlier self. A mere doo dle, it rests in a four by four inch square of forest-green, by the window, in itself a window into another world. My father left it in memoriam, but of what, I cannot say. In a few weeks, I’ll be in another home, my henna faded, a different</p>	<p>fertility, prosperity and left of it; on the East-facing white chalk, marked by an dle, it rests in a four by four en, by the window, in itself a ld. My father left it in cannot say. In a few weeks, my henna faded, a different</p>
--	---

life begun. But on that East-facing wall of my bedroom, the chalky skeleton remains. Oh you who belong to that other world, can you hear me?

Here, I use the white space in the middle as a visual representation—a window into the unseen, the unknown. In the lines themselves I describe two windows, one of which is an actual, physical window, the other a square of green paint within a white wall, “itself a window into another world.” I am unsure of what that world is or what it contains, but it is nevertheless familiar, lovable. It evokes an acute sense of yearning. I end the poem with the line, “Oh you who belong to that other world, can you hear me?”

In another poem, “The Serpent,” I evoke direct religious imagery in discussing the story of Adam and Eve and their descent to Earth from both biblical and qur’anic accounts in relation to Kaa, the snake from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, which my father adopted as a character to tell me bedtime stories as a child. I include the second, fourth and fifth stanzas below:

*

Really,
Adam and Eve only ever heard a whisper,
“You will either be angels or immortals,”
the voice tells them. A bite and they
are ready for Earth.
Serpents only ever lived on Earth.

*

And God said,
“No burdened soul will
bear the burden of another.”

iv.

I am crossing the Rockies and
it’s been years since I’ve been
on a train. “Tunnel ahead,”
the conductor says and
for ten long minutes,
nothing to look at,
Nothing to see.
In my absence

Kaa has grown. Kaa has
 grown and swallowed what I forgot—
 swallowed my bedroom walls,
 my forest green, my sun,
 my Earth.
 Do I yearn to return?

Here, by positioning the serpent in the biblical and qur'anic accounts of the origin story in contrast to the python in Kipling's seminal novel *The Jungle Book*, I am attempting to break down religious barriers and weave together origin myths, as Rumi wove together verses from the Qur'an and New Testament in the poem above, to examine what might emerge from this cultural and religious interaction—and what emerges is a journey toward the unknown, the unremembered, the unseen secret behind creation. Adam and Eve are the primordial children in both the biblical and qur'anic accounts of the myth—innocent, unlearned, dependent—and by positioning the speaker as the child me, I am able to see through their eyes. At the end of the poem, the serpent has swallowed what I have forgotten, and I wonder not only whether I want to return “there” but what it is I want to return to at all, toward God, toward childhood? Is there a difference?

Structurally, Rumi's poetry influences my own through his use of expansive imagery that is focused internally and speaks to the soul. In the poem above he uses the image of melting snow, a natural phenomenon that dominates the world when it occurs. Melting snow is an indicator of changing seasons, of spring, of reinvigorated life. Rumi uses that connotation to tell the reader, “wash yourself of yourself,” turning the image inward, into the reader's own being. In my poem, “On Rainbow Street,” I converse with the personalized city of Amman. A section of it says,

She tells me
 how our love has ended—

I say God is love. She laughs
 and points at the rising moon—
 says God is further away.
 I say that's not what Abraham
 meant when he saw the moon
 go down. God was in
 his dreams.

Here, when Amman laughs at the idea that God is love, she points to the moon to prove her point. I then attempt to take the moon, her same image, and bring God closer than she had perceived—like Abraham, God is in the most intimate part of all our being, in our dreams.

Mahmoud Darwish

As a prominent Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish's poetry influences mine because it is centered on the ongoing Palestinian plight that is my heritage. I am Palestinian on both sides of my family. Where Darwish is often angry in his poems, perhaps because he is so close to the issue, being an exile himself, in my family, my grandfathers are the exiles. The distance from the issue complicates my view; I am not as angry nor as heartbroken, but I nevertheless experience feelings of unrootedness and displacement passed down through the generations which I attempt to navigate in my poetry.

Labeled "The Protest Poet," Darwish was born in Galilee in 1941, shortly before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. His village, one of thousands, was razed to the ground to build Israeli settlements. Darwish fled the country with his family as a child and became an exile, unable to return for twenty six years. His poetry takes on the Palestinian cause, and with vigor and assertiveness, he challenges the legitimacy of the state of Israel, mourns for the loss and displacement of his people, and exhibits nostalgic thoughts for the life the Palestinians lived. The excerpt below is taken from a poem called "Counterpoint," translated by

Fady Joudah. It is an elegy for Edward Said, a prominent Arab intellectual and postcolonial writer, who died in 2003. Like Darwish, Said believed in and fought for the Palestinian cause. Unlike Darwish, he was not exiled from his homeland, but left it willingly after finishing high school in Jerusalem to live in The United States where he attended college and eventually became a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University in New York, a post he held until his death. Darwish says about Said:

On the wind he walks. And on the wind
 he knows who he is. There's no ceiling for the wind
 and no house. The wind is a compass
 to the stranger's north.

He says: I am from there, I am from here,
 but I am neither there nor here.
 I have two names that meet and part,
 and I have two languages, I forget
 with which I dream. For writing I have
 an English with obedient vocabulary,
 and I have a language of heaven's dialogue
 with Jerusalem, it has a silver timbre
 but it doesn't obey my imagination (39-52).

Here, the speaker attempts to decipher the subject's identity. In the first stanza, he connects him with the wind, because the wind is neutral territory. On the ground, Said is subject to borders and restrictions, he is forced to limit himself within a single identity. But on the wind he is free to roam, because the wind blows over all disparate lands and countries, and encompasses them all. Here, there is also an allusion to a popular motif in Palestinian resistance poetry; the issue of borders. For the wind, there are none, and so it is free to roam what it considers its one unified land; Palestine. The idea is taken a step further in the second stanza where language is introduced. Though Said has two languages that at first seem interchangeable, "I forget with which I dream," it is soon revealed that they are not. Assuming the languages are Arabic and English, it becomes obvious that each language has its own flavor and impact on

Said. Conveying two different cultures, English for him is easy and malleable, the language he writes in. But Arabic, fashioned of a denser clay, is the one he struggles to control, and indeed admits he cannot, because it is the language of “heaven’s dialogue with Jerusalem,” alluding to its rich heritage and religious significance. It is, after all, the language the Qur’an was delivered in, and Jerusalem is a city that has deep roots with all the Abrahamic religions.

I chose to include this poem as part of the literature that informs my thesis for the close thematic relationship between them. Language, religion, and culture are elements central to the heart of my writing, and I align my identity, with its duality, in a way similar to the way Said aligns his. Though this poem is not representative of Darwish’s collective work, it nevertheless demonstrates elements typical of his writing. In the passage above, for example, while Darwish discusses the issue of a dual identity, he does so by discussing several issues at once; on the surface level, he is discussing Said, the man, and on a more subtle level, through his bilingualism, the man embodies the histories, political conflicts, religions and landscapes of the cultures he belongs to. What I aspire to learn from Darwish, then, is his balance of different cultures in one poem, and the way he weaves different elements of different cultures into one cohesive whole. Whether it be language, religion, or politics, Darwish is able to unify them all in the same space without any of them being out of place.

In my poem “Jordan Valley,” I am reckoning directly with my identity as a Palestinian and the implications associated with that identity. I begin by describing my grandfather, and his life that has quite literally been uprooted, and how he tends to his plants on the other side of the Jordan River, in the Jordan Valley. Then I describe my mother and her heritage: how she too, turns westward in search of something lost. Then I say,

But I am, at best a quarter farmer. All I know
is summer harvest. Guiltless juices run down my chin,

stick my hair in clumps, stain my fingers with the essence of the earth
 below. Later, I will wash myself.
 I will not know how my grandfather smears his face
 with sticky fingers, how he stands there in the sun,
 brown and earthy, face streaked brown and gold.
 I will not see his deep breathing, his soft chant: home.
 I have gone too far west, too far to watch anything grow.
 The land of dreams for me, is simply the land of dreams.

I admit that my own Palestinian identity is watered down, diluted. As a third generation Palestinian who only crossed the border for the first time at the age of twenty-three, this summer, I can do nothing but admit that I “have gone too far west” to truly understand the pain of displacement. My own mixed identity allows me to have several homes even as I share the lingering nostalgia and longing for a home that can’t be reached as my grandfather, mother, and the entire Palestinian-heritage community share.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Out of all the poets I look to for inspiration, Naomi Shihab Nye is perhaps the closest to me in terms of cultural perspective. Born in Missouri to an American mother and a Palestinian father, Nye spent a part of her adolescence in Jerusalem, getting to know her father’s family. She utilizes in her poetry certain aspects of Arab and Palestinian culture intertwined with her dominant American identity. As a poet, I relate to Nye because, like her, I attempt to build bridges between two disparate cultures. I also have a sense of displacement, and it is from that unrootedness that I gain my unique perspective; I am both an intimate part, and yet stand apart from both Arab and American cultures—a participant and an observer. As such, I attempt to build on Nye’s work as the explorer of the space between cultures, the in-between.

Her visit to Jerusalem was, according to Ibis Gomez-Vega, in her essay “The Art of Telling Stories in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye,” “an experience that filled her with a deep

sense of belonging and, thereby, displacement” (245). The deep impact wrought by this sense of displacement on her cultural identity has given her the ability to experience intimately the diverse cultures of the places she’s visited around the world. Self-described as “the wanderer poet,” Nye’s extensive travels—throughout Europe, Asia, the Americas and the Middle East—have allowed her to connect with people on a personal level and, as such, as described in the interview in *Children’s Literature Review*, “[she] uses her writing to attest to our shared humanity” (125).

Perhaps Nye’s malleability of spirit can be observed most clearly in her exploration of the two cultures most directly related to her: the Arab and the American. Gomez-Vega says, “As a poet she is, at heart, a storyteller, one who focuses on the lives of everyday people, especially her own relatives, to understand the world around her” (245). Nye looks upon her Arabic heritage and creates a narrative from her family’s past—thus weaving a tapestry of traditions easily relatable to the Western reader. As such, through storytelling poetry, she attempts to bridge the gap between two politically polarized and culturally distinct peoples. In “The Words Under the Words,” Nye describes her grandmother in Jerusalem. She brings in multiple aspects of Palestinian/Arab culture, including a description of grape vines, flat bread, Joha, the folkloric hero, Allah, and even alludes to the Palestinian uprising with the line, “and our pockets full of stones.” But she also includes references to places outside of Palestine; her grandmother’s son is “lost to America.” She awaits letters and “knows the spaces [her family] travel[s] through / the messages [they] cannot send” (19-21). As such, Nye employs distance not only not only to convey her grandmother’s longing and loneliness, but more than that, that distance acts as an invitation, a bridge, for the Western reader to connect to the elements of Arab culture that might seem foreign to them in the poem.

In my poem “On Leaving,” which explores the mixed feelings about leaving Jordan for Utah, I reckon with the feelings of simultaneous tenderness and unrootedness. The last stanza, after describing how, like items of clothing, the streets and staircases of Jordan no longer fit, says,

Even in the fading twilight
are a pair of outgrown streets
and child-sized, outdated, pinching staircases
still not beautiful?

While I recognize my need to leave, possibly replacing Jordan with something that fits me better, I still recognize its beauty and have a place for it in my identity. As such, in this poem I begin to recognize my state of in-between-ness, and it is because of that that I am able to be in a constant state of simultaneous attachment and detachment.

From Nye, I learn how to include diverse, complex ideas and images in a single poem, threading them together with a strong central theme. While my tendency as a poet is to emulate Dickinson in writing small poems with multiple, expansive, meanings, both the complexity of the subjects I am tackling and the limited and often caricatured awareness of Arab culture predominant among my American audience necessitate that my writing be more concrete and descriptive. The nuances of *Taraweeh*, for example, the special Ramadan prayer, cannot be rendered appropriately in a single stanza.

In “Hugging the Jukebox,” Nye ties together the story of young Alfred with the expectations of his grandparents, along with the climate and culture of Honduras and the challenges faced living in a coastal town plagued by hurricanes. She accomplishes this by expanding the poem to two pages, giving the elements room to breathe through characters involved in a narrative form. I emulate her in several poems in this collection, one of which is “Praying *Taraweeh* on the Balcony.” In this poem, I unravel the elements of a particular scene I

would have otherwise been tempted to condense. Stretching the moment into a narrative scene has instead allowed me to meditate not only on the physical act of prayer—a ritual of particular structure in Islam—but also on the meaning of Ramadan prayer in particular, and on my personal relationship with such diverse themes as family, heritage, spirituality, and urban life.

Li-Young Lee

A Chinese-American poet, Lee populates his poems with carefully chosen elements drawn from his Chinese heritage, helping his American readers understand a culture not their own by offering an intimate connection with its features. I am drawn to his poetic world-building and the way he can make the foreign familiar. I never feel like he is exoticizing his Chinese heritage, but rather inviting me as a reader to understand it a bit like he does.

Lee writes, in his book *Rose* about the death of his father and his struggle to reconcile himself with it. The son of immigrant parents, Lee uses Chinese myth and culture, his father's connection to them, and his by extension, to attempt to understand his father, come to terms with his death and finally let it go. The father then, in this book, is the central theme, though not all the poems discuss him directly. In "Eating Alone," Lee uses simple imagery and simple language to convey that immense sense of loss. The poem starts with the speaker cooking, describing his bare garden at the end of autumn. Then the scene shifts to a previous memory of walking in the same garden with his father, whom he had seen that morning, "until I came close enough / to see the shovel, leaning where I had / left it, in the flickering, deep green shade" (Lee 33). Here, the father is essentially a ghostly figure, just out of reach, grounded in intimate detail and simple language. The power in Lee's poetry is his frankness; he does not attempt to dress his language with florid vocabulary or metaphor. Instead, he invites the reader into his own life, sharing

details that might normally be dismissed as mundane. In “My Indigo,” the speaker talks about an indigo flower he seeks. But he has come too late, it’s getting dark, and he cannot find it. Instead, the speaker addresses the indigo directly: “Little sister,” he says, “You unfurl yourself shamelessly / toward the ground. You burn. You live / a while in two worlds / at once” (31). A quick Google Image search confirmed the existence of several types of flowers indigo in color, leaning toward the ground, but interestingly enough, in the poem, the flower is never specified (though irises and roses are). The speaker identifies with a female figure, a sister, and, showing compassion for her, he feels the need to save her, though he knows he cannot. He cannot even find her. This elusiveness of the female figure, her presence on the edges of the poem, just out of reach, is echoed throughout the book, sometimes in direct relationship with the father, sometimes not. Either way, the melancholic sense of loss is not quite resolved.

As a poet, I draw from Lee in several aspects. First of all, while the struggle I explore in my thesis is not as tragic as his, nor is my tone as melancholic, I share his nostalgia for something gone, something missing, and the issue of filling the void and redefining himself after his loss. From him I hope to learn the subtle ways in which he conveys that nostalgia, especially through showing his readers glimpses of his multi-cultured outlook, both own his American culture and his father’s Chinese one influence the way he sees the world. His subtlety, paired with the simplicity of his language, makes his poetry all that much more intimate and approachable, while at the same time, conveying the Truth of his message.

In my poem “Urban Planning,” I am attempting to reconcile conflicted forces pulling me in different directions.

Extract the
foundations of
my thoughts

Build me a citadel
 on the
 side of
 your mountain.

We can call it
 home.

Undiluted nature
is divine

But if the Nabateans carved a city out of stone

 why

 can't we?

On the one hand, I have the addressee, my then fiancé, a native of Utah, dreaming of a simplistic organic farm life in the place in which he grew up. He speaks to the part of me that grew up in Philadelphia, the nature-loving me that would love nothing more than to share his dream. On the other hand, the urban side of me that grew up in Amman pulls me toward architecture, toward global culture. To reconcile these two sides I turn to my own past; the Nabateans were the ancient Arab people who, around the year CE 37, built the city of Petra, or more accurately, carved it into the sides of the sandstone hills surrounding the Dead Sea. The solution to my conflicting motivations is compromise: a city carved into nature is still part of nature. Like Lee, my own history becomes a lens integral to my own being and through which I can interpret the world.

Like Lee, in my poem “Downtown” I ground the themes in a place brimming with culturally specific details: an iconic busy falafel house in the center of Amman. I allow the poem to explore such cultural features as mannerisms, dress, foods and the ways they are prepared and eaten. Moreover, in order to increase a sense of simultaneous familiarity and foreignness for my

readers, I pepper the poem with transliterated Arabic terms for the things I'm describing, allowing the reader to taste the language as they would the falafel and hummus.

My poetry then finds its place amongst the poetry of Dickinson, Rumi, Darwish, Nye, Lee, and poets like them, through a mixture of their influences; Dickinson guides me in creating a personal space of common ground between two disparate cultures, standing my ground as a woman poet in a male dominated discourse; Rumi inspires me to embrace the language of love in the face of dogmatic, religious tradition; Darwish urges me to navigate my own unrootedness, passed down from my grandfather's sense of displacement; Nye allows me, as a participant and an observer, to stitch the fabrics of my two cultures together, exploring the space between them, the in-between; Lee, finally, teaches me to employ elements drawn from heritage to create new symbols through which I explore both what is lost through cross-cultural transformation, and what is gained. My poetry, through both my unique perspective as an Arab-American woman, and my poetic style that contains both the subtle, and the narrative, the familiar, the foreign, enables me with a range of distinct yet related modes of expression. In a society where the dominant media others Arab and Islamic culture, genuine voices are needed to better articulate the Arab American Muslim experience. With a language of love and a fondness for subtlety, I intend to fill that gap.

Timetable

This thesis will abide to the following schedule:

Proposal Defense	April 3 rd , 2015
Thesis Body Completed	October 2015
Revisions Completed	October 2015
Thesis Sent to Committee	October 2015
Thesis Defense	Nov. 18 th 2015

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