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Mapping the Arab Diaspora: Examining Placelessness and Memory in Arab Art

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Abstract

Currently, the Middle East is experiencing adversity and instability due to political upheaval, war, and mass displacement, and has become the focus of international attention. This project investigates the ways contemporary Arab art utilizes creative expression to allow Arab diasporas and non-diasporas to negotiate their identities, promote collective memory, and reconcile fragmented and traumatic experiences. This investigation comprises a discussion of discourses regarding defining “diaspora,” “home” and “placelessness,” identity and popular media, contemporary Arab art, collective memory, and, briefly, temporality. The diversity of terms and histories are a testament to the impossibility of exploring diasporic conditions in a simple and straightforward way.

Keywords

Arab diaspora, placelessness, belonging, Islamic art, modern Arab art, collective memory, Marita Sturken, Wafaa Bilal

Dedication

...to the struggle

Acknowledgments

I have drafted my acknowledgments many times over never capturing the full scope of my appreciation. I wish I can devote many more pages to honour everyone individually. I must begin by wholly thanking my mother for supporting me through this journey and for encouraging her many friends to pray for my success and health. I am convinced their collective prayers have summoned the entirety of the spiritual realm to stand by me during moments when my own faith had trembled.

I am deeply grateful for my supervisor and mentor, Prof. Tim Blackmore. Pursuing a master's degree has always been my dream, if you had not pushed me to apply I would have lived with great regret—thank you. Your unwavering faith in my abilities is the well from which I draw resilience and self-love. Since stumbling into your office in first year, you have mentored and inspired me to remain stubbornly authentic, to express myself without fear. I still fill with joy when you encourage me to explore ideas and questions endlessly—your office is a sanctuary from a cruel world. Your interactions with students have taught me to remain open to the world as I grow and better myself. I look forward to passing on all that I have learned from you. Truly, I am forever indebted to you and privileged to be your student.

I want to thank Prof. Randa Farah for, unknowingly, being my role model. I am honoured to have taken your class, it opened a door to different discourses and critical perspectives that are present throughout my project. Outside the class, you introduced me to Arab literature and fed my hunger to learn more. Importantly, I continue to be in awe at your command the spaces you enter. You showed me that Arab women can be fearless, exciting, and filled with adventure. I aim to lead a similarly exciting and authentic life.

Prof. Carole Farber, words cannot express how valuable your insights were in developing my project. You are a wealth of knowledge and an extraordinary professor, I cherish your contributions to this project. I am deeply grateful that you allowed me to spend time in your office in December 2016, your words during that time resonate with me.

I want to extend gratitude to Larsen Burchall for providing relief from the painful weight of this project, reminding me to take care of my body and spirit by way of food and laughter. Thank you to Rose, my beautiful cat, for sleeping on my notes as I worked through long nights and raising a paw when I was overdue for a break. Thank you to my indispensable colleagues for respecting, challenging and aiding me throughout this process. To all my dear friends who picked me off the ground, brushed the dust off my shoulders and insisted I try again, I promise to be as great of a friend to you as you were to me. I wish I can repay your labour. A humble and special thanks to Prof. Warren Steele for kindly pushing me to find my authorial voice despite my protests. Special shout-outs go to Darryl Pieber, Jennifer Opoku, and datejie green who dare to live their truth and courageously press ‘reset’ on life.

As I conclude, I want to acknowledge all people of colour that were unable to access or continue their university education. I need to acknowledge their struggle for space and the suffering they endure within the academy—they should not be forgotten. As I write, current students of colour may be questioning if they should go on as world politics seep into their daily lives and classrooms, contributing to difficult mental health situations. I pray they find reason or hope to continue in their journey. Further, I give thanks to my ancestors for lending me strength when I had none, for working through me to express trauma that defies language. I have written my soul into this project tucked with a silent prayer that it plants seeds of hope in someone from a different time and place.

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Introduction

Growing up, I revelled in stories and memories as told by my great-aunts, grandmothers and cousins in all-women spaces. These memories coincided with important political, social and economic moments in Kuwait's history. They spoke of slow introduction of western influences and banal houseware and trinkets. One of my mother's fondest memories was watching "Little House on the Prairie" and translating the dialogue to her great-aunts; sometimes her great-aunts would improvise a storyline since they did not know English. This memory was regularly retold around the time "Little Mosque on the Prairie" was released, which had an impact on her when she saw herself reflected in the show she had grown up watching. "Little House on the Prairie" became emblematic of the memories she had of a time when she was a child sitting with family, re-introducing the show and basing the storyline in the Muslim experience merged her experiences as a Muslim woman as it brought up memories of the past.

After completing my undergraduate education, on the road back to my hometown, Ottawa, I discovered that my parents had not shared memories of the family's immigration story with my two youngest brothers, who were not born at the time. My mother was hesitant about sharing the stories, suggesting we leave the past alone, something I am not able to do. I began with my memories encouraging her to contextualize and expand on different situations. I took this opportunity to ask some questions I had about the Gulf War, questions that had been haunting me for some time. The memories shared on this drive did not have any traces of homesickness or to return to the past: 26 years later these memories remained emotional and packed with unresolved trauma. They are memories that are pushed into silence.

Memory has always played a pivotal role in the development of my character: the way I understand my life is informed by the wild strength of the women in my family as described in stories over coffee and pistachios. I never questioned whether shared memories were true and I never dismissed family memories when they contradicted Kuwait's dominant history, I always handled the sharing of memories with appreciation,

trust and thirst for more. The last few years of my education introduced me to the vocabulary and theories necessary to delve into the role of memory and the multiple techniques for vocalizing memory.

Reorienting my Perspective

This project began with an entirely different topic; I was interested in exploring the representation of Muslim Arab women in news media. I worked tirelessly on the topic and when I asked about my motivations, I explained that I wanted to give back to the Muslim Arab community even though I never truly felt included or part of it. The topic manifested out of a desire to belong within the Muslim, Arab community despite being an unconventional Muslim, Arab woman. In my desperation, I had become inauthentic and dishonest with myself. As a deeply self-reflective individual, deceiving myself so I could mould into a topic that does not fit instigated great sorrow because I lost touch with myself. It quickly became apparent to my supervisor, Prof. Blackmore, and I that this project was truly not a good fit. As we considered an alternative topic, we found ourselves re-visiting artist Zarina Hashmi's series titled *Home is a Foreign Place*.

In my fourth year of undergraduate, Prof. Blackmore, two other students, and myself participated in a directed reading course interested in race, feminism and art from the east. During the course, I stumbled on a transcript of an interview with Zarina Hashmi. It was then that my deep desire to investigate 'home' and memory from many years earlier came rushing towards me. I continued to engage with the literature in the second term of my masters, taking an anthropology course specializing in memory and identity construction.

It was an odd situation sitting in the office—much later—with Prof. Blackmore trying to find a new topic, but we were only able to think of Zarina Hashmi's series. Specifically, I found myself replaying an interaction with Prof. Blackmore when I first shared Hashmi's interview and work. At the time, we sat around the office and remained puzzled as to what complaints Hashmi could have when she lived a life full of adventure and travel. Frustrated, Prof. Blackmore asked "what more does she want," before I could think I found myself responding with "home, she wants to find home." Hashmi was born and

partially raised in India before the partition caused her family to move to Pakistan, a strange country to her. She later married a diplomat, never spending more than a couple of years in a country. The series *Home is a Foreign Place* commented on placelessness and feelings of not belonging to any place that resides in the present. Since the partition, India is no longer Hashmi's home and neither is Pakistan because she was not born or raised there—the place she considers home pre-dates 1947. This series included pieces that focused on fragmenting the city and stripping it down to a single black line that reflects the borders. Other pieces were words written in Urdu, a dying language that was once spoken by Hashmi's family. Hashmi is an artist who has been displaced in time, her home does exist in the present but has been lost in the past. Temporal displacement has profoundly impacted Hashmi's life and work, indeed home almost always changes dramatically and commonly becomes the subject of myths that reflect on home as it once existed.

Following my supervisor's advice to spend the next couple of weeks pushing through material in search for a more coherent topic, I started with Hashmi and filtered out topics and terms that existed outside a coherent narrative. Throughout the weeks of scavenging, I stumbled on articles that labelled what I had felt for so long: placelessness, uprootedness and feeling of not belonging. I delved into the term diaspora, expanding beyond my superficial understanding to include a range of definitions and how it impacts identity formation. I lost myself in books that contained Arab art that I have not seen previously. At the end of the two weeks I had a topic that was intimately tied to a part of my life I had never explored. I returned to Prof. Blackmore still needing guidance, but with a new sense of curiosity and a soul that had been reinvigorated.

Methodology

As I mentioned under the section "Re-Orienting My Perspective," I recognized that I was drawn to art, memory and home. Using these three terms, I headed to the university library and sifted through books, articles, and videos on these topics. The purpose of this exercise was to find a topic that satisfied my curiosity and to identify any gaps that I could fill through a research project. By exploring different sources, it became clear that there were limited resources and information that focus on contemporary Arab art and

how the artwork unpacks the Arab population's experiences of trauma and collective memory.

After I settled on a research topic—the idea of seeking home and reconciling trauma through contemporary Arab art. I returned to the library and began reading interviews with Arab artists alongside their work. Starting with the artists allowed me to identify that many of them shared similar motivations and purpose of their art, and most happen to live in multiple locations but remain attached to their homeland. I was intrigued by this pattern among these artists and walked down a path of questions such as: what constitutes a diaspora? Why is there a common feeling of not belonging? Why do many Arab artists focus on memory or trauma?

Searching for answers, I began to read books specializing in different aspects of diasporas, place/placelessness and how they impact feelings of not belonging, the discourse on trauma. I would pick up a book or an article only to find a few more terms or theories that needed to be investigated, the list would grow as I jumped from one source to another. In some cases, I drew from past course work that focused on memory and identity, using the reading list as a launch pad for further research into the topic or pick out an article from the list for in depth reading. Throughout this process, it became evident that very few resources were available that directly related to Arab diaspora, Arab art, and placelessness, although most of the resources are able to create a framework to address the project.

The other aspect of this dilemma, is that it became clear to me that I could only discuss the topic in a nuanced manner by addressing the multiple layers that operate at once—such as modernity, history of contemporary Arab art, and cultural memory. Pushing through the varied literature, I narrowed the topic as much as possible, limiting the multiple layers of the project to specific points in the discourses that applied directly to what I wanted to say, yet certain discourses indirectly linger beneath much of this project.

Once I collected the research, I began assembling information and authors into a structure that was as clear and coherent as possible. It was during this part of the process that the project began forming in my mind as a narrative, beginning with the foundational

framework and steadily moving towards incorporating more artwork towards the end of the project.

The early stages of my research included attempts to identify gaps in academic work that I could fill. It was then that I had uncovered that very little scholarship existed about Arab artists from the Gulf region—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait to name a few nations in the Gulf region. The university library had a collection of around half dozen art books from Saudi Arabia and Qatar that discussed Arab artists from the region, there was very little available electronically beyond these books. The few other books available were focused on art from Iran, Palestine, Egypt and Turkey. In choosing relevant artwork to highlight, I intentionally focused much of my attention on artists that are from the Gulf region as a response to the lack of discussion surrounding the art.

Ayman Yossri Dayban and Raafat Hattab use photography and video to illustrate how narratives breakdown. Dayban pauses film to alter the meaning of a moving narrative and break a memory, meanwhile Hattab uses film to record his aunt recalling memories of Palestine. I felt that these two artists comment on the impact of a medium over memory.

Mona Hatoum is separate from the artists I highlight because she is generally considered to be a modern Palestinian artist. Hatoum's biography represents the difficulty of being a Palestinian forced to live abroad. Through her piece, I introduce a conversation about memories that are subject to erasure and silence.

Nouf Alhimiary is a rising star in the art community, producing a wide range of beautiful prints. In the series, *What She Wore*, there is a subtle presence of a folding in memory and time that I felt represented much of the discussion in chapter. Similarly, Maha Mullah's art work is a great commentary on the experience of being surveilled, carrying only souvenirs in the luggage. Alhimiary, Mullah and Manal Al-Dowayan's commentary is harmonious with the issues taken up in chapter 2.

Ahmed Matar is largely regarded as the artist that contributed the most to the growth of the Saudi art scene. The content and aesthetic print of the art work is very jarring,

commenting on the oil industry and death. In his artwork, Matar addresses the existential difficulties that modernity brings along.

Lastly, chapter 3 was not originally intended to discuss Ahmed Alsoudani, nor was I interested in his work for the most part. My first choice was Abdunasser Gharem, an artist and soldier who strongly believes that art must include social activism. Gharem attended school with some of the men who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks, a situation that influences much of his work. I found that once I started building and writing the project, Gharem did not fit with the spirit of the discussion. Returning to Alsoudani, it became clear that the content and aesthetics of his work completed the project. Alsoudani's biography and art encompass elements of the project's themes.

This project intended to explore the role contemporary Arab art as a diasporic media that encourages collective memory and the reconciliation of traumatic memories. The method I chose to complete this project allowed me to work through relevant material and utilize bibliographies and terms that led to other useful resources. This thesis does not end with a solution, but a proposal for what shape the future of this project might look like.

Emerging Memories

I argue that contemporary Arab art can operate as a form of diasporic media that can promote collective memory, but also address and reconcile traumatic memories that may be fragmented. Moreover, the inability to define contemporary Arab art and artists based on geography or style permits unmediated freedom to explore and has the potential to inspire hybrid identity negotiation among the Arab population. The pages of this project detail an exploration of the conditions of Arab displacement and the difficulties the diaspora faces as it facilitates a community despite a scattered population across the globe and impact the lives of Arabs that continue to reside in the homeland. While flipping through the pages you will encounter terms and concepts such as place, cultural memory, repressive erasure, reflective nostalgia, linear time along with concise historical discussions regarding time-space compression, Hackney, England, Naples, Italy, globalized capitalism and contemporary Arab art. The diversity of terms and histories are

a testament to the impossibility of exploring diasporic conditions in a simple and straightforward way.

Thesis Structure

The first chapter will focus on providing a theoretical framework regarding the terms diaspora, home and the influence of diasporic media on hybrid identity construction. I begin by unpacking the discourse surrounding the term diaspora but I do not rush to align with any definition. Rather, I use the discourse on diaspora to provide context to critique regarding the constant ambiguous use of 'home' and 'homeland.' The following section is wholly devoted to unpacking the nuances of defining 'home' and 'homeland' which directly relate to the politics of 'place' and the construction of a 'sense of place.' The two sections will be resolved at the start of the third section to create a semi-complete theoretical framework to demonstrate the functionality of diasporic media in negotiating hybrid identity construction among diasporic populations.

The second chapter seeks to utilize the previous chapter's theoretical framework to introduce contemporary Arab art and the concepts of cultural memory, reflective nostalgia and the subversion of linear time. Engaging with these terms will conceptualize the particularities of varying themes in contemporary Arab artwork, the terms are beneficial as analytic tools to peel away at the layers of readings and interpretation. In this chapter, I directly examine Arab artworks and corresponding artist biography when judged as relevant.

The third chapter takes up two paintings by artist Ahmed Alsoudani. Beginning with Alsoudani's biography and his reaction to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I explore how his life embodies the uncertainty of diasporic existence which regularly blur the definitiveness of bordered place. In this chapter, I take the opportunity to combine the theoretical framework with the analytic tools introduced in the second chapter to reiterate the complex interweaving of diasporic hybrid identity and sense of place with pervasive cultural memory with hints of reflective nostalgia as Alsoudani rejects time.

I conclude my thesis by bridging arguments from different chapters to highlight complimentary themes. I take the opportunity to discuss the limitations of this project and recommend a topic for future research that can take advantage of the foundation provided by this project.

Definitions

For the purposes of this thesis, home refers to a space that plays host to intimate memories, inspires emotional responses, and is a reference for identity. This term largely exists within this body of work as a substitute for ‘place’ but is also used to underscore the emotional bond between individuals and their memory of a location that is deeply tied to their identity. Similarly, my use of the term ‘homeland’ is referring to a point of origin that exists not only as a country or nation, but as such a crucial part of a person that it can impact how they orient themselves in the world.

Family in this project is largely referring to the nuclear family unit, often considered a western arrangement—a couple and their two children. It must be noted that the nuclear family is a problematic understanding of the family unit. In many different cultures, family extends to grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in some cases, even fellow villagers. However, working within the definition of a nuclear family is sufficient because I do not engage with the role of the family unit directly, nor is it the intended focal point of my project.

Doreen Massey defines ‘place’ as a marked geographical area that utilizes specific readings of historical narratives to construct an ideal understanding of identity within the bordered location. Massey explains that traditional constructions of ‘place’ are often reactionary, proposing an idealized ‘place’ that comprises of a homogenous group that have a historical attachment to the location. However, she argues that it is better to operate with a definition of ‘place’ that prioritizes social relations and a recognition that there are multiple ways to read history to construct the identity of ‘place.’ Section 1.2 engages with a more nuanced discussion surrounding the definition of the term.

Pierre Nora defines memory in opposition to history, which he explains as concerned with representing the past, following strict intellectual standards. Nora states, “history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions,” arguing that history is wrapped up in maintaining a clear relationship between past and present, with the intention of moving into the future.¹ In contrast, Nora argues that memory is dynamic. Memory is not confined within a strict standard, there is an abundance of memory that can be shared among a group or confined to an individual, yet is subject to remembering and forgetting. Temporality is challenged by memory which can lay “dormant” only to be recovered at a later period.² Memory incorporates facts, specificity, and reach— “global or detached”—when suitable and without restriction. Nora’s discussion is the primary definition of memory that I employ throughout this project, specifically regarding the arguments made in section 2.2.

Chapter 1

1. Exploring Diaspora, Home and Popular Culture

This chapter began as a quest to answer the following question: in what way does technology serve (positive or negative) the Arab ‘diaspora’ and ‘non-diaspora’?³ My primary concern with this question was the use of the terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘non-diaspora.’ I had a very basic understanding of the two terms but by no means a sufficient definition that could serve in answering this question. My concern with the definitions is that the two terms exist as a binary; a diaspora is a group of people who had to leave the homeland and non-diaspora are those who remained in the homeland. Within this binary, those who left and those who stayed, the two groups are defined in relation to a constant

¹ Pierre Nora, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” in *Representations no. 26* (University of California Press, 1989) Pg. 9

² *ibid.* Pg. 8

³ My use of the term ‘technology’ in this instance is referring to the use of media tools to reach a diasporic broadcast audience beyond geographic borders.

homeland. The assumption is that those who leave (diaspora) are somehow forced to re-negotiate their experiences with the homeland and that those who stayed (non-diaspora) somehow maintain an authentic relationship to the homeland that does not necessitate a re-negotiation—presumably since the relationship with the homeland was not interrupted through re-location. In other words, my concern with the terms diaspora and non-diaspora is that while they depend on each other to define one another, the definitions are also dependant on the term ‘homeland,’ geographically or otherwise, which is not subjected to an investigation even though it dictates who is a member of a diaspora and who is not. What began as one question branched off into separate investigations: what constitutes a diaspora? What defines ‘homeland’ and how does it relate to diasporas/non-diasporas?

Technology is subject to a wide array of theories concerned with its contributions and effects that are well beyond the scope of this chapter’s concern, therefore technology will be limited to focus on how it mediates and expands the reach of popular culture. Before delving into the role of popular culture I need to understand the nature of the relationship between the Arab diaspora and the Arab non-diaspora and how identities are formed. If we accept the idea that leaving the homeland has a deep impact on people to the extent that it forces them to relate differently to those who are still in the homeland, then we must explore the assumption that identity is bounded to geographic locations that are defined by political borders. Essentially, the two investigations regarding the constitution of a diaspora and defining homeland are concerned with exploring identity formations which will demand that I touch on history, politics, capitalism, modernity and culture. This survey will contribute to a nuanced answer to the original question posed— in what way does technology serve (positive or negative) the Arab ‘diaspora’ and ‘non-diaspora’—but will also encompass the necessary foundation for this overall thesis.

The origins of the word ‘diaspora’ in the western tradition is rooted in the expulsion of the Jewish people from Israel. This limited definition is problematic because many diasporic populations around the world are not necessarily Jewish or have an ancestral long experience of being diasporic. The contemporary use of the word describes the difficult situation of many communities around the world as well as the existential predicament of modernity in the west. Although ‘diaspora’ is utilized in very different

ways, one being a form of physical displacement and the other an existential displacement, I will argue that both contemporary uses contribute to understanding how ‘diaspora’ and ‘non-diaspora’ relate to each other. Further, unpacking the definition of ‘homeland’ will situate the debate surrounding the existential predicament of modernity along with physical displacement within a narrative that will contribute to understanding the Arab diasporic identity.

1.1 Diaspora

Before beginning my research, I understood diaspora to mean the displacement of a cohesive group of people from a location due to war or persecution such as the Vietnamese, Palestinian or Iranian diasporas. While that definition is not incorrect, it is profoundly incomplete and limited since it assumes an essential and inherent identity that is not constructed or re-negotiated. The definition of diaspora operates as more of a framework consisting of markers that aim to position the desired discussion not denote specific experiences.

The primary markers recommend that a diaspora be conceptualized as a group of people who share a similar notion of home coupled with a desire to return home. The notion of home is left unexplored, it is unclear if ‘home’ refers to a geographic location, a site defined by political borders, a specific place within a country (city or neighborhood), or a particular plot of land. Subsequently, the desire to return home may be a desire to return to a home from a particular time in history, to a life that no longer exists—a desire to return to the past.

It is also widely recommended that a diasporic community assumes a collective memory of ‘home’ and shared culture. The collective memory of a diasporic community may be supported, expressed, or facilitated through culture—particularly forms of entertainment. Collective memory and culture operate together to facilitate a group identity based in collective memories of home—history, landscapes or everyday life—and culture—

traditions, rituals or storytelling.⁴ The interplay between collective memory and culture allows a dispersed population that may no longer share the same geographic location to maintain a sense of identity. John Durham Peters explains, “Diaspora suggests the peculiar spatial organization of broadcast audiences—social aggregates sharing a common symbolic orientation without sharing intimate interaction.”⁵ For Peters, diasporic communities form together as a category of broadcast audience that are linked based on identity rooted in shared culture that operates without immediate interaction to other fellow members. The audience consumes entertainment that is based in collective memory and/or culture and that will facilitate a community relationship that transcends borders and distance⁶.

Besides these markers, there are a few other components that have been added to different definitions of diaspora that work to frame particular arguments about diasporic experiences. With these markers in mind, I want to spotlight a few different definitions from different sources who are all interested in how diasporic communities negotiate group identity. My aim is to highlight the challenges of defining the term ‘diaspora’ and how the definitions that do exist serve to frame differing arguments.

I want to begin with John Durham Peters’ essay, “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon,” in which he defines and contextualizes the

⁴ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 39-40

⁵ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 24

⁶ This should not be confused with the notion of a “global culture” because it remains limited to the collective memory and culture of a particular community that is dispersed globally, not a creation of a global community that enjoys entertainment produced by large capitalist corporations. For example, an Arabic movie may be intended for an Arabic audience around the world, whereas a Disney movie might be made for an American audience but used as to promote a global culture that reaches beyond cultural specificity.

term diaspora as it pertains to theoretical understandings of media and communication. Peters begins his definition of diaspora by contrasting the term with exile. Diaspora necessitates a displacement from a center, dispersing from a point of origin—labelled ‘home’ in other definitions—like that of an exile. However, for Peters the key difference between the two terms is the concept of networks among compatriots that create a collective out of dispersed individuals, which exiles are not motivated to accomplish because they only yearn for the opportunity to return home.⁷ Peters’ primary definition states:

Diaspora suggests real or imagined relationships among scattered fellows, whose sense of community is sustained by forms of communication and contacts such as kinship, pilgrimage, trade, travel, and shared culture (language, ritual, scripture, or print and electronic media).⁸

Peters’ definition is broad and based on his discussion of the history of the term diaspora and encompasses key insights. The author shifts importance towards communication and away from geographic origins which he already reduced to simply being a center. Stating that communication sustains a community suggests that a shared country of origin does not automatically motivate a community to form—such as exiles— rather members rely on networks that encourage communication.

This point is additionally supported by Peters’ insistence that an idealized relationship amongst community members does not need to be ‘real,’ that it can be an ‘imagined’ relationship that binds the community together. The explicit mention of media under shared culture insinuates that the definition is mindful of attempts by diasporic communities to narrativize collective memory that can contribute to the formation of an

⁷ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 20

⁸ *ibid.*

imagined relationship within a diasporic community that exists independently of geographic origins.

Peters' definition of diaspora values communication and relationships within diasporic communities but it does not incorporate the experiences of diasporic communities in 'host' countries. Ramaswami Haridranath's essay, "Refugee Community and Politics of Cultural Identity," is primarily concerned with exploring the power dynamics that have an impact on diasporic communities living in the west. Haridranath is working within Post-Colonial studies and is particularly interested in addressing Gayatri C. Spivak's question; "Can the subaltern speak?" For the purposes of his argument, Haridranath utilizes James Clifford's definition of diaspora which explains:

common ancestral homeland...that the community's ancestors were dispersed from, the myth and folklores that form a collective, idealized memory of 'home,' and a commitment to homeland as an imagined space encouraged by cultural alienation from the host cultures.⁹

Stating that diasporic communities share an "ancestral homeland" connotes a deep attachment to a location and its influence on identity. The definition also specifies a community that "ancestors were dispersed from" suggesting a historical event must have occurred forcibly dispersing the community's predecessors. These two claims are residuals from the roots of the word diaspora that is particular to the experiences of the Jewish community who were expelled from Israel—displacement rooted in distant past spanning generations. However, within the contemporary context, situating diaspora as an 'ancestral' dispersion does not incorporate the current displacement of large populations from particular areas of the world.

⁹ Ramaswami Haridranath. "Refugee communities and the politics of cultural identity" *Transnational lives and the media: re-imagining diasporas*. eds. Bailey, Olga, Myriad Georgiou, and Ramaswami Haridranath. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) Pg. 134- Clifford quoted

The key aspect of this definition is the recognition of a “cultural alienation from the host cultures” and that this alienation promotes diasporic communities to commit to the ‘homeland’ even if it is just an ‘imagined space’—home in this instance may be imagined because of a lack of physical attachment or profound impact on personal memories, a common situation for the children of diasporic parents. This part of the definition recognizes that a diasporic community must negotiate a relationship with the host country because it can turn out to be alienating to negotiate cultural differences. Haridranath’s essay is concerned with the negotiation of this relationship particularly since the host country commonly wields power over diasporas. Tension between the host country and diasporic community contributes to the idealization of ‘home.’ At once, ‘home’ is a cherished memory of ‘what was’ and a hopeful future of ‘what will be.’

Contrary to Peters’ definition which de-emphasized the importance of ‘home,’ Haridranath’s chosen definition is immersed in the concept of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ but does not define what those terms characterize within the discussion of diaspora. Regardless, he does go on to suggest that ‘home’ can reference multiple places for a diaspora.¹⁰

Haridranath’s definition of diaspora is rooted in his involvement with Post-Colonial discourse; the definition will go on to serve his argument that experiences of victimhood in everyday life informs the identity of diasporic communities operating within host countries. Cultural alienation is pivotal for Haridranath, whereas Peters is predominately concerned with investigating inter-community relations. Bridging Haridranath and Peters, Jennifer Brinkerhoff avoids a strict definition of diaspora opting for a collection of features borrowed from Robin Cohen’s book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* as a foundation to a broader understanding of diaspora.

¹⁰ Ramaswami Haridranath. “Refugee communities and the politics of cultural identity” *Transnational lives and the media: re-imagining diasporas*. eds. Bailey, Olga, Myriad Georgiou, and Ramaswami Haridranath. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) Pg. 134

Brinkerhoff's book *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* investigates how diasporic identities come together to create a community and mobilize within host countries to achieve particular objectives. Diasporic communities may mobilize to improve everyday life and ease identity negotiations within the host country but they are also likely to organize support for non-diasporic folks that are still in the 'homeland'¹¹. Brinkerhoff begins her research on diasporas as communities that feature¹²:

- collective memory and myth about the 'homeland'
- commitment to maintaining and protecting this notion of 'home'
- movements form that are concerned with returning 'home'
- ethnic consciousness based on a sense of distinct history and a shared fate
- empathy and solidarity with compatriots living globally
- active attempts at institutionalizing communication networks¹³

The six foundational features of diaspora that serve Brinkerhoff's research purpose reconcile Haridranath's focus on the importance of 'home' and Peters' emphasis on inter-community communication. While preserving the status of 'home' as central to the founding of a diasporic community, Brinkerhoff folds in community agency and relations with one another. Effectively, these features acknowledge that while a 'home' connects a community to a shared past and inspires a collective memory—a 'home' that once existed and they wish to return to—we must also account for the ways in which a

¹¹ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 42

¹² *ibid.* Pg. 29-30

¹³ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 30-Vertovec quoted

diasporic community comes together under a shared identity despite global displacement. Brinkerhoff's list should also include preservation of language, continuation of rituals, and continuation of social norms and ways of being. We can look to the preservation of the Kurdish language, Eid celebrations in western countries, and the common Arab greeting of a cheek to cheek kiss as examples of these three additions to Brinkerhoff's list. Language, ritual and social norms based on the 'homeland' produces a sense of familiarity within diasporic communities that facilitate the solidarity and ethnic consciousness that Brinkerhoff outlines in her list.

There are three features that I would like to spend some time unpacking; the idea of protecting 'home,' a sense of shared fate, and solidarity with other compatriots. These features factor in the presence of an outside force that contributes to defining the identity of a diasporic community. The identity of a diasporic community is not exclusively constituted through continued communication or roots in an ancestral 'homeland' that contributes to cultural alienation in the 'host' country, there exists some form of outside force that consolidates a dispersed population into a defined identity category. This consolidated identity labels individuals influencing lived experience and identity negotiations globally. 'Home' situates the consolidated identity to a particular location—which can be real or imagined through myths—ensuring the safety of 'home' is a matter of protecting the roots of the identity. The belief that the community needs to ensure the safety of 'home' suggests that there are possibilities of a threat from an outside source. A global solidarity across a dispersed population connotes a shared experience that may not be limited to the notion of a shared 'homeland' but rather one extended to the experience of everyday life. A consolidated identity permits individuals within a dispersed population to recognize that the fate of the identity group will echo the fate of their individual existence. Global solidarity, for an identity contending with outside forces, safeguards the entire population regardless of where pockets may reside. A dispersed population that is composed of a sense of shared fate implies that the population shares

an identity that is assigned to them.¹⁴ I use the word assigned to underscore the fact that power is exercised over the diasporic community by outside forces. Of course, diasporic communities do have agency to identify themselves and work to maintain a community based on their constructed identity but there remains an element of power that is exercised over the community by outside forces. Further, it is also true that there are a variety of ways to assess the shapes a diasporic community can take.

Rather than disagree, I want to add another layer that unpacks the power dynamic between host country and diasporic community in respect to identity. To clarify I want to compare the Muslim and Sikh communities. The Muslim community—assessed by Brinkerhoff as a “meta-diaspora,” a diasporic identity that serves as an umbrella for many other diasporic communities—is identified commonly by veiling along with a series of stereotypes—brown skinned, dietary restrictions or names.¹⁵ It is also a community that intersects with global politics and war, frequently portrayed as condoning terrorist acts against the west and being barbaric. The Sikh diaspora—originating in India and a different religion entirely—is sometimes misidentified as Muslim because the men wear turbans and often experience violence to the point that some in the community have removed the turban for safety concerns. In contrasting these two groups there is evidence of groups sharing an identity that is assigned to them, a Sikh comes to experience the violence intended for a Muslim because the turban has shifted to represent Islam. There is power in assigning identity and what that identity will come to mean and have an impact on what kind of violence will be experienced. The Muslim or Sikh identity must contend with negotiating the community’s identity, the assigned identity and the host country. The power the outside forces have in assigning identity and inflicting violence motivates ideas of protecting ‘home’ or the original site of the community and inspires feelings of shared fate and solidarity.

¹⁴ These identities may be rooted in colonial representations, enforced by host country, or an identity self-imposed by the group based on historical lineage.

¹⁵ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 35

To further illustrate how an assigned identity and possibility of violence motivates solidarity and protection of home, I want to draw from Sam Bardaouil's work on the identity limitations faced by Arab artists who exhibit their work in the west. Bardaouil explains that western museums misrepresent Arab art by inscribing orientalist tropes onto their work, often promoting continued negative ideas about the Arab community and possibly sanctioning psychic or physical violence.¹⁶ These museums have little regard for the identity of the individual artist, their articulations of 'home' or unique reading of history; instead western museums contextualize Arab art within a colonialist perspective that corrupts any ability to understand the artwork as the artist intended. The colonialist perspective essentializes the identity of Arab artist and by extension the artwork. For instance a piece that originally intended to explore the impact of violence can be repurposed to represent the violent tendencies of Arab societies. Arab artists fear that constant misrepresentation of their artwork will contribute to negative opinions of Arab people—as an identity group—and will perpetuate “post-colonial violence.”¹⁷ Bardaouil described this fear as “acute post-colonial anxiety.”¹⁸ The west, as an outside force, consolidated the Arab population under a singular identity, one which is still highly contested and has contributed aggressive actions against the populations, particularly post-9/11. As a result of the inscribed identity and its violent history, Arab artists fear exhibiting in the west because they wish to protect 'home,' avoid a doomed fate, and maintain solidarity by not contributing to negative opinions. The identity negotiation within the community is subject to the pressures that are applied to the community from outside. Haridranath's essay attempts to expand on this idea through a post-colonial

¹⁶ Sam Bardouil. “The Transmodern Artist” *Told Untold Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space*. ed. Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath Arab Museum of Modern Art (Dawḥah, Qatar). (Milano, Italy; New York, NY, USA; Skirl, 2010) Pg. 25

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

perspective that focuses on the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, host country and diasporic community.

Brinkerhoff broadens these features and frames diaspora as populations that have crossed a minimum of one political border, may wish to return but are not necessarily committed to the idea, they share a collective memory and myths that maintain idea of the ‘homeland’, and facilitate diasporic consciousness through organizations¹⁹. She also goes on to introduce the term ‘meta-diaspora,’ a diasporic identity that transcends national identities and connect based on religion such as a Muslim diaspora or general geographic region such as African diaspora²⁰. Although the definition of meta-diaspora is suited to account for the specifics of the Arab diaspora—an identity group that encompasses various nationalities and religions. I want to resist the urge to settle for a simple definition because the term remains odd without an exploration of the term ‘home’ and its impacts on understanding diaspora. Further, the definitions outlined do not account for varied diasporic experiences.

Some of the many cases that exist beyond the surveyed definitions are the Kurds, a population that geographically exist at the intersection of multiple borders—Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria—who operate as a diasporic community without having political borders in recent history and are surrounded by war. Kurds also continue to experience violence due to their identity and exist as outsiders in various host countries while also asserting the liminal geographic area as their traditional ‘home’. Moreover, colonies that sought independence and attempted decolonization had to contend with populations of people that were imported by colonial empires such as the Indian populations in Uganda, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana to name a few. Lacking in the frameworks of diaspora are the impacts of colonialism on defining and facilitating group identity, what it means

¹⁹ Sam Bardouil. “The Transmodern Artist” *Told Untold Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space*. ed. Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath Arab Museum of Modern Art (Dawḥah, Qatar). (Milano, Italy; New York, NY, USA; Skirl, 2010) Pg. 31

²⁰ *ibid.* Pg. 35

to have a sense of community and how it can be varied depending on cultural experiences and a perversion of collective memory by dominant interests and desire to reconcile trauma. Another element is the complexity of leaving home to return home. The term diaspora is understood to be rooted in the Jewish expulsion and now there is a push to return to the “Promised Land,” Israel, strongly lobbied for during the 19th century and became possible after WWII. Putting aside the religious and deeply political discussion, Jewish folks are leaving the countries their ancestors have lived in for generations in the spirit of returning to the mythical ‘homeland’. Fragmentation arises such as identifying as a Russian-Jew or American-Jew which recognize that while sharing the faith and rituals there are distinct histories that are separate from each other. Meanwhile, a new identity is formed by labelling Israeli-born populations ‘Sabra’ designating their experiences and memories within the constructed state and separate from their ancestors’ adopted ‘homelands’. There is also a sentiment against the immigration of Ethiopian Jews contrasted by high enthusiasm for immigration from European or North American countries in Israel, often attributed to white supremacy. Some from the original diaspora returned ‘home’ and yet it continues to mimic diasporic characteristics. Intimately tied to the discussion of Israel is the plight of the Palestinian people who have been forced into a diasporic existence. Some Palestinian refugee camps that were once intended to be temporary have now existed for generations, acting as a home while reciting myths and recalling memories from another home. The Palestinian diaspora is required to confront the erasure of their culture, history and geographic presence. The assertion that Palestinian people are not indigenous to the geographic area labelled Israel, nor possess a tradition of art, is an attempt to dismiss any Palestinian claim to the land. Complementing the erasure is an active process of silencing innocently disguised as ‘it’s too complicated,’ ‘I don’t want to understand it,’ or ‘it’s too political, I don’t want to get in trouble.’ The Palestinian case exposes a deep flaw in the term diaspora: it is not equipped to engage with the political conditions that inform the experiences and existence of diasporic communities. The authors this section spotlights flirt briefly with the political contribution regarding diasporas but rarely delve into the struggle of forming a diasporic identity while confronting erasure and silence.

Defining, or framing, the term diaspora continues to rely heavily on the value of ‘home’ as a starting point that orients the debate. Yet, ‘home’ remains undefined. In fact, ‘home’ is elusive rotating between being a real and an imagined place, sometimes it occupies both domains simultaneously. As you may recall, Peters de-emphasizes the value of ‘home’ and geographic origins, prioritizing communication and its ability to bolster diasporic communities. However, Peters still had to establish a point of origin that diasporas are displaced from and relies on the elusive term ‘home’ when contrasting diaspora and exile. Further, insisting that ‘home’ refers to a geographic location impacts the ability to understand how the existential crisis unique to modernity has been labeled diasporic.

I want to place this discussion to the side temporarily and resist the urge to settle on a framework that captures the idea of diaspora prematurely. The following section will embark on a mission to define and unpack the term ‘home.’ I want to challenge the designation of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ as constant and unchanging place by contextualizing the terms and stripping them of their elusive nature. This section will compel an examination concerning the existential predicament of modernity and introduce an alternate approach to characterizing ‘non-diasporic’ communities. This detour, once completed, will compliment and clarify the term ‘diaspora’ and finalize the construction of a theoretical foundation that supports a discussion regarding the ways technology serves the Arab diaspora and non-diaspora.

1.2 Home

Home is one of our earliest lesson in recognizing difference, to say you are home means that you are also stating that you are not outside. Home is bordered and limited to your immediate family—mother, father, siblings—crafting ‘inside’ to imply ‘sameness’ and stands opposite to everything ‘outside’—beyond the bordered home—which implies ‘difference.’ Sameness is allowed in the home and difference is designated to stay outside. For Peters’, “All homes are an accomplishment of sublimated violence, unities

pasts together by the will to power and the fear of difference [sic].”²¹ Home, in this instance, is referring to the idea of a bordered ‘inside’ that is defined by sameness and stands opposite to everything beyond the borders, labeled ‘outside’ and different. Laying down borders that aim to separate those that are similar from those that are different demands the type of power that can construct similarities and is supported by fear etched into difference. Violence emerges through the process of setting borders, violence that is not automatically physical—war, murder, abuse—rather a violence that can be perpetuated through psychic, cultural or social means and may even be considered acceptable. Fundamentally, this understanding of home and borders relates to the commonly known concept of ‘us vs. them’—that we belong to one group that is identified as ‘us’ and we must fight against this another group that is identified as ‘them’ who threaten our safety. However, while ‘us vs. them’ is broad and often used to describe tension between groups, this concept of home is concerned with highlighting how manufactured borders contribute to group tensions.

Home is also credited with giving us a sense of rootedness, a belonging of sort, that informs how we orient ourselves in the world. Situating definitions of ‘diaspora’ as leaving home reinforces our belief that home is deeply tied to who we are; if home orients, leaving home disorients. Consider the traditional connotation of home, as a family’s residence. A home is expected to instill character, values, and morality in a child. The home that facilitates this process will go on to function as the primary reference for how a child should understand themselves and their place in the world. This does not negate or reduce the violence exercised to create the borders of a home, rather it reflects how the home has negotiated what is different and familiar.

In both points, home pivots between referencing a familial residence and, loosely, country of origin. ‘Home’ is a discussion of ‘place,’ a term that encompasses the need to

²¹ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 32

draw borders to protect against ‘outsiderness’ and affirms a sense of rootedness. Doreen Massey explains the implications stating, “A ‘sense of place’, of rootedness, can provide... stability and a source of unproblematical identity.”²² Place facilitates the creation of an identity that embodies the ‘sameness’ that exist within the borders and it is able to do so because it also provides the stability necessary to encourage identity formation. In this discussion, home—understood as ‘place’—refers to both a familial residence and as a country of origin the only distinction is that the former is a microcosm of the larger ideologies that inform countries.²³ Moving forward I will be using the terms ‘home’ and ‘place’ interchangeably, for the purposes of this discussion the specialized differences between these two terms do not influence the ability to unpack the concept. At this time, I want to introduce place as a concept beginning with the traditional grounding of the term before going on to unpack the problematic assumptions made.

‘Place’ is a concept used by many scholars to describe a deep human attachment to a locality that contributes to how we understand ourselves and the world around us, anchoring our identities. Some scholars argue that ‘place’ was real and pure in past times—often going on to cite village life as an example. Massey writes, “...place-conservation...often attempts to freeze...a place at a (selected) moment in time.”²⁴ Looking to the past proposes that place is frozen in time, unchanging, and that we can return to and conserve ‘place’. The belief that an ideal place is frozen in time ignites the exploration of the histories of localities to endorse a specific constructed identity of place that prioritizes homogeneity and unity. There is tension between past and present that is motivating the search for place if we recognize that as the past helped inform the present,

²² Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 4

²³ The idea that ‘place’ is inherently geographic will be discussed.

²⁴ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 184

the present similarly informs how we interpret the past.²⁵ The present is influencing the need to return to a 'place' suggesting that a 'sense of place' no longer exists and whatever is happening in the present that is making people feel 'placeless' is clouding how history is being interpreted. The central claim here is that places and their identities are founded in what Massey explains as:

An (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogenous communities is set against the current fragmentation and disruption...Occasional longing for such coherence is none the less a sign of the geographic fragmentation, the spatial disruption, of our times...And occasionally, too, it has been part of what has given rise to defensive and reactionary responses – [sic] certain forms of nationalism, sentimentalized recovering of sanitized 'heritages'...One of the effects of such responses is that place itself, the seeking after a sense of place, has come to be seen by some as necessarily reactionary.²⁶

Some scholars, such as Massey, contend that place is constructed out of several components to resemble what we want, revealing social anxieties. In seeing place as frozen in time, the search for the history to support a constructed identity of place is often an internalized history that seeks to reestablish what has been lost. For Massey, this is emblematic of the changes occurring in the world. The search for a 'place' that is homogenous can be seen as reactionary, often embracing loud anti-immigrant disdain.

²⁵ Doreen Massey. "Places and their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 187

²⁶ Note: Massey does not expand or explicitly state her working definition of 'reactionary.' The spirit of the discussion in the article suggests that when deployed for personal use the term generally expresses 'a response to change' but when highlighting the arguments against the traditional definition of place the term appears to reflect 'deeply conservative and oppositional sentiments'.

Desire to recreate homogenous communities, a desire that motivates varied readings of history, is a reactionary response. Massey underscores that a bordered place is intended to keep difference outside to protect the sameness (homogeneity) that is inside the borders, this is a traditional belief that is supposedly founded in an era long ago that consisted of homogenous communities. Using history to create the identity of place indicates that the identity of place must be situated in relation to time; delving into a particular reading of the past to anchor a constructed identity suggests that there is discontent with aspects of present manifestations that are challenging or changing the identity of place.

Creating a particular image of an ideal place—the identity of a place—rests on a specific interpretation of history and how it relates to the space that will come to host the constructed ideal place. Massey supports this idea stating, “...any claim to establish the identity of that place depends upon presenting a particular reading of that history”²⁷. Implicit is the need for power to enforce and legitimize the interpreted history and its right over space, Massey goes on to add “The identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant”²⁸. Massey emphasizes that various readings of history compete to claim dominance over a particular place, the dominant history requires power that can ensure its “hegemony”²⁹. The dominant history that will often go on to define the identity of place will go on to also inform the borders that will be built—literally or figuratively.

Effectively, place in this instance can be seen as a reaction to dramatic change that is causing some sense of instability and insecurity. The result is an intensified rejection of difference in favor of sameness that is supported by an interpreted historical account of the past. Massey observes this reactionary place is defined in “...negative counterposition (this place is *not* Islamic, not part of Muslim world), rather than through positive

²⁷ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 188

²⁸ *ibid.* Pg. 186, author’s emphasis

²⁹ *ibid.* Pg. 189

interrelation.”³⁰ Defining place in the negative relies on difference to sustain itself such as identifying place as “not Islamic.” This characterization does not explain what place is opting instead to explain what it is not. Coupling the negative counterposition with the impression that place exists in defined space—a location that can be bordered—results in place becoming fragile and in need of protection, that it is susceptible to penetration by difference.³¹ Defining place in the negative and informed by readings of history that are interested in returning to a homogenous past is problematic because it causes tension among groups and is willfully ignorant about how the world contributes to the local place.

The reactionary construction of place as described above is very Eurocentric and tends to be a western response to immigration and refugee crises but it is not unique to Europe or generally the west. Attempts to return to a past place are informed by objectionable circumstances in the present, treading between a desire to amend particularities regarding the present and wanting to overhaul everything about the present in favor of a past. Constructing ‘place’ can range from endorsing myths and stories that emphasize desired narratives to encouraging ethnic cleansing, genocide and war to reclaim and revert ‘place’ to its authentic identity. Due to limited the scope of this chapter, the aim of this section is immediately concerned with the way western countries respond to difference—the presence of immigrant populations within a defined ‘place’ and the perceived difference that accompanies immigrant communities.

For some time, the west has been experiencing a growing immigrant population that has contributed to shifting neighborhoods and environments that citizens of western countries—who are included in the dominant history that constructs ‘place’—find highly objectionable. As indicated by Massey, seeking a homogeneous place often inspires nationalist groups that loudly protest against liberal immigration policies and scorn any

³⁰ *ibid.* author’s emphasis

³¹ David Morely. “Bounded Realms” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place.* ed. Hamid Naficy. (Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 157

form of accommodations that are not consistent with the identity of the particular place—examples include prayer rooms, translation or non-western clothing attire. The need to protect place against an ‘Other’ that is marked by difference—desiring to return to a place that was once homogenous and ordered—willingly erases the Third World contributions to building the west which is another reading of a past ‘place.’³²

Additionally, when considering the past and constructing identity of place, colonial architecture may be stripped of its attachments to faraway lands to deny the presence of difference in the history of place. Simultaneously, there is strangeness and difference within the bordered place as it insists on homogeneity.³³ Doreen Massey sets this conversations within her community of Hackney in England where a heated debate was taking place between locals and immigrants; she explains some locals were unhappy about the fact the old cinema was turned into a mosque and at the large quantity of foreign markets on High Street.³⁴ Massey makes a few key insights about these two situations that perfectly demonstrate the Eurocentricity wrapped into identity of place and the unequal impact it has on the ‘Other.’

The old cinema that was converted to a mosque in Hackney is embellished with domes. According to Massey’s research, these domes were intentionally built to be “exotic” and are “thrown in for an orientalist effect,” citing inspiration from Turkey and the general

³² The term ‘Third World’ and the academic field it resides in are beyond the scope of my thesis. The authors cited in this section use the term ‘Third World’ frequently in their work. My interest in the term is limited to ensuring consistency and clarity in my writing as I analyze various authors.

³³ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 31

³⁴ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 187

Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991): Pg. 4

Middle East.³⁵ The building is dated to a time when British colonialism was vast, the design is intended as tribute to the greatness of the empire. That history has been reduced, for the locals the building was once a cinema that is now occupied by a series of difference, of otherness—a strange religion, language and people. Massey asks the following:

But what ambiguity do the 'exotic domes' produce in those from that very 'Orient', the Turkish community among others, who now live in this place? Thoughts of a history of somewhere else entirely...Or possibly an understanding that that Hackney local community built its self-assuredness in part precisely in relation to other places, on the basis of stories of other places, and on their interpretation of the identity of those places?³⁶

These questions incite a change in perspective, undermining naturalized assumptions about the identity of Hackney as opposing Turkish presence. The old cinema that the Hackney locals remember is also a symbol of colonialism and all the cultural imports colonial policies enabled—it can inspire memories for the Turkish community. While fearing the 'Other,' Massey argues that Hackney was not a place that was coherent, homogeneous and isolated from the world, rather Hackney is a by-product of how it related to and interpreted other places. The distant lands that inspired the architecture of the old cinema were not considered oppositional to the identity of Hackney then but are now being disavowed.

Persisting, Massey interrogates the position that is taken up by Hackney locals—and scholars broadly—who find the abundance of foreign markets and shops disconcerting. Massey problematizes attempts to paint western populations as subjects of unique, jarring

³⁵ Doreen Massey. "Places and their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 187

³⁶ Doreen Massey. "Places and their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 187

experiences perpetuated by the presence of difference in areas that have a history of being a place of sameness. Massey stresses:

The sense of dislocation which some feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports - the pizzeria, the kebab house, the branch of the middle-eastern bank - must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonization, maybe British...later US, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca- Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.³⁷

Similar to the case of the old cinema, the ‘Other’—in this case the Turkish community—understands that communities like Hackney were built in relation to distant lands and informed by colonialism because they witnessed their own lands—perhaps identity of place—change as a result. Colonized people looked on as their culture, societies, histories, and languages were re-structured, altered, or erased for the service of the empire. The feeling of a “sense of dislocation” by western folks rooted in the widespread presence of otherness—difference—is shared by the ‘Other’ who have experienced a severe uprooting based in the conditions of colonialization which injected large quantities of difference in those homelands.³⁸

Some scholars side with Doreen Massey going so far as to assert that the fear of encroachment that is part of the traditional conceptualization of ‘place’ and ‘identity of place’ is a symptom of western dominance being challenged.³⁹ The west fears that the

³⁷ Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 1

³⁸ I am not arguing that the ‘sense of dislocation’ is invalid or that colonized people’s oppression is more worthy, rather I am working within Massey’s analysis and drawing comparisons for the sake of a larger argument.

³⁹ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 184

violence, cultural clashes and greed once directed at the Third World are threatening to invade their borders.⁴⁰ There is an attempt to erase and forget the markings of colonial history to construct an identity of place that is free of any otherness as demonstrated in the Hackney case. Supporting Massey, Iain Chambers recognizes that a reactionary constructed place does not account for a globalized world and that histories cannot be ignored. He writes, “The living evidence of repressed histories and dead empires are not so easily consigned to oblivion: the ‘natives’ have come home to ‘haunt’ their origins.”⁴¹ For example, England is regularly involved in discussions regarding the presence of Indian, Turkish and Nigerian communities sometimes realizing that these populations were once colonized subjects of the empire and are now living in England for varied reasons, one of which may be to access resources that were drained from their own countries by the empire. For Chambers, simply ignoring other histories—or chalking it up as bygones—does not negate the fact that uprooted populations are immigrating in large droves and often from the Third World and they are keen on reveling in the luxuries of the west.

What we are really talking about here is a sense of ‘placelessness’ or ‘uprootedness’—by both the west and migrants from the Third World. Earlier, I explained that place is often the source of our identities and rootedness, it is charged with the role of orienting us in the world.⁴² Indeed, sense of placelessness tends to inspire feelings of discontentment with civilization—perhaps a result of broken promises.⁴³ The “geographic fragmentation” and “spatial disruption” that inspires placelessness is not only a result of invading migrants and refugees; place should not be thought of solely in terms of spatial

⁴⁰ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 4

⁴¹ *ibid*, Pg. 109

⁴² Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 1

⁴³ Khalid Hajji. “Image Culture, Media, Power” *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception*. Ed. Mahjoob Zweiri and Emma Murphy. (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2011) Pg. 69

arrangements but as a construct that defines a group's identity as it confronts the surrounding world.⁴⁴

Modernity has deeply contributed to feelings of placelessness as a result of significant changes ranging from geographic to economic. Chambers wonders whether modernity is about discontinuity, a rupture. In his discussion on subalternity, Joe Maggio writes, "...the West is defined by its differentiation between the 'present,' 'past,' and 'future,' as well as a sense of the other."⁴⁵ Maggio's statement, supported by Massey's work, underlines the importance of history in constructing identity of places and illustrating the deep displeasure of having the other live among the locals of Hackney, connecting the displeasure to a larger history of colonialism. Massey explains that there is "an assumption of continuity between past and present" in the west which Maggio relates to how the west has defined itself emphasizing time as three distinct categories⁴⁶. However, with modernity endorsing discontinuity as per Chambers, placelessness has an impact on time and memory as well as geography.

Chambers illustrates modernity's contributions to placelessness by analyzing Naples, Italy. For Chambers, cities are destabilized, often alternating between being situated and

⁴⁴ Ramaswami Haridranath. "Refugee communities and the politics of cultural identity" *Transnational lives and the media: re-imagining diasporas*. eds. Bailey, Olga, Myriad Georgiou, and Ramaswami Haridranath. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) Pg. 135,

Doreen Massey. "Places and their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 187

Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 4

⁴⁵ Joe Maggio. "'Can the Subaltern Be Heard?': Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Alternatives* 32, no. 4 (2007) Pg.424

⁴⁶ Doreen Massey. "Places and their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 190

disembodied—framing cities as ‘diasporic.’⁴⁷ Naples is a city suffering from placelessness caused by unfulfilled promises. Described as floating between past and present, the city has yet to become a capital or center of a powerful empire; its forgotten potential is shadowed by a volcano, reminding the city of its mortality.⁴⁸ Naples, as Chambers explains, lives in its full glory when it is allowed to live in “other accounts,” when its history, culture and art are spoken of and celebrated⁴⁹. Moreover, the city’s historic architecture shares the landscape with contemporary skyscrapers and design of the business district. Chambers describes the city as “continually displaced,” living elsewhere and in a different time—never truly existing. The continuity between past and present for Naples, Italy—arguably Hackney, UK as well—has been disrupted, contributing to a sense of placelessness. He interprets Naples as a city without “moorings”—labeling it as a “site in transit”—breathing life when its history, art and culture is explored.⁵⁰ Even the city’s landscape is narrated by external forces, a global economy that builds and plans with little attention to the city’s historic architecture or culture⁵¹.

Central to modernity is a globalized economy that demands capital and labor move freely. David Harvey’s time-space compression concept contends that a globalized economy coupled with increased technological capabilities reaches beyond spatial boundaries.⁵² The capitalist globalized economy underlies the discussion of placelessness. For example, immigrants arrive in the west seeking financial stability and

⁴⁷ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 93

⁴⁸ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, culture, identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 105-6

⁴⁹ Pg. 107

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Note: For my purposes when it comes to Harvey’s complete work on time-space compression Doreen Massey’s explanation of the concept is sufficient.

Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 2

often send money to their families who may still be weathering difficult economic conditions in the Third World—as was the case with Somali immigrants in Naples⁵³. These immigrants—marked by otherness and difference—are forced to move based on economic conditions and are encouraged to move since they provide cheap labor, yet their presence is blamed for tarnishing the identity of place. On the other hand, a globalized economy supported by technological advancement means that there are fewer opportunities to find full-time employment at factories, contributing to many cities and townships dying. Detroit was once a center of manufacturing, grand and powerful—attributes folded into its identity as a place— it now exists as a ghost town occupied by memories of a time long lost. There is a push for cheaper labor—provided by immigrants and Third World laborers—and faster production—provided by technological advancement.

Complementing the impacts of a globalized economy are advanced communication technologies that connect populations and cultures across space and despite time, increasing internationalization⁵⁴. Being online allows greater communication capabilities but it also contributes to a lack of down time, people consume content from all around the world or are forced to work around the clock—processing work emails or emergencies—without ever having the opportunity to connect to each other or their immediate surrounding. The overall speed-up in everyday life, constantly being on communication devices coupled with a fast-paced economy, has instilled a deep sense of placelessness.

The general consensus among pundits, academics and politicians is that the world is changing dramatically. Increased interaction with global populations through communication technology and globalized capitalism has instilled a real sense of placelessness—due to a lost identity of place, modernity or physical displacement. Massey contends that being obsessed with conserving the local is a “form of

⁵³ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 108

⁵⁴ Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 2

romanticized escapism from the real business of the world.”⁵⁵ The desire to locate place in a past that is pure, coherent and homogeneous is construed as a refusal to acknowledge a changing world—fearing tragic loss.⁵⁶ Other scholars—Massey and Chambers to name a couple—argue that we need to re-conceptualize ‘place’ so it can adequately relate to contemporary times.

Factoring in the history of colonialism, Massey and Chambers argue that local communities already have a “history of interconnectedness with elsewhere.”⁵⁷ The contemporary globalized world may operate differently—be faster and more efficient—but it is not completely new, the global has always contributed the local identity. Chambers recommends that we recognize home as mobile, be able to move with and through time and space.⁵⁸ He goes on to add that authenticity can form in unpredictable ways based on “re-membering” history and memories within language to channel a “mobile home of identity.”⁵⁹ Chambers theorizes home to be perpetually in flux and borderless—fundamentally different and oppositional to the reactionary understanding of place as defined by a constructed history and bordered. His deliberate spelling of “re-membering” is intended to refer to an active process of renewing attachment and affiliations within a language underscoring home as mobile. Lack of fixity is supposed to encourage interaction with otherness, recognizing that nothing is “universal.”⁶⁰

Adding to Chambers, Massey argues that place should not be defined in the negative based on an internalized history, bordered, and in opposition to outsideness, difference

⁵⁵ *ibid.* Pg. 5

⁵⁶ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg.190

⁵⁷ Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg.1

⁵⁸ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 4

⁵⁹ *ibid.* Pg. 102-3

⁶⁰ *ibid.* Pg.101

and otherness. Instead, she pushes for an extroverted place that prioritizes social relations over spatial terms. Massey explains:

...imagine [place] as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as place itself, whether that be a street, or a region, or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.⁶¹

Massey theorizes that social relations amongst populations occur irrespective of spatial arrangement or geographic location. Her focus on social relations is informed by people's connection to each other beyond physical presence, including memories and imagination, insisting that they connect the local with the global.⁶² Similar to Chambers, Massey argues that an extroverted definition of place based in social relations is not "motionless" or "frozen in time" rather it is process, changing according to interactions.⁶³

Although place and placelessness were discussed initially in relation to western experiences, I purposely engaged with colonialism to demonstrate that the Third World has been struggling with retrieving identities of places and feelings of placelessness. Chambers' assertion that colonized folks cannot be kept away from the center any longer suggests that colonized folks—left without place—are determined to retrieve elements of their ideas of 'place' has been lost due to war, colonization, or instability by relocating to the west. Combined, Massey and Chambers assert that social relations, memories and

⁶¹ Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 7

⁶² Doreen Massey. "A global sense of place." *Marxism Today*. no. 38 (1991) Pg. 6

⁶³ *ibid.* Pg. 7

consistent negotiations contribute and form sense of place—deemphasizing the importance of a static location.

As intended, ending the discussion on home/place/placelessness brings the conversation back to ideas of diaspora. Briefly, John Durham Peters’ definition of diaspora was unique in prioritizing communication within the community over geographic origins—parallel to Massey and Chambers. He goes on to also reject any claims of an organic relationship between people and land. Interestingly, he explains that for diasporas “home is always already there, without any hope or dream of homeland.”⁶⁴ Diasporic communities, for Peters, harness home—a sense of place—out of community but also from negotiations with their immediate surroundings—echoing Massey and Chambers. Peters continues:

Diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from ‘mixing’ but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing.⁶⁵

Diasporic communities are not only able to facilitate a ‘sense of place’ that is mobile and independent of location but they are equally able to maintain an identity despite frequently existing as minorities. Whereas the reactionary definition of place is resistant to the inclusion of differences fearing tragic loss of cultural identity, Peters stresses that these two characteristics indicate that cultural identities require “mixing” in order to endure.

Intersecting with the idea of “mixing” is time. Traditionally, mixing among cultures can occur over several generations by having a culture physically immersed in a different culture—such as diasporas living in a host country—or through marriage. Referring back

⁶⁴ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 21

⁶⁵ John Durham Peters. “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (New York: Routledge, 2013.) Pg.38- Boyarin quoted

to the concept of time-space compression, mixing can be facilitated irrespective of location or marital status. Arguably, this mixing may be happening in contemporary times at an accelerated speed due to communication technologies, access to various cultures and a willingness by younger folks to engage outside their community. These two simple probes do not stand in opposition; I would be more tempted to argue that both sides operate concurrently—the mixing by living and marrying into a different culture and mixing facilitated by greater access to distant places and choosing to participate in a different culture and community.

Embedded in Peters' conversation around mixing is a sense of movement—a slow generational mixing compared to a fast-paced mixing. It is notable that movement and mixing seem to only be concerned with the future—a desire to “continue to exist”—conceptualizing time as linear and moving toward a future. In contrast, Massey and Chambers engage with the topic time in respect to the interaction between the past and present—particularly Europe's colonial past. Additionally, the present is described by the authors as in motion and changing, but discussion of the future is generally absent. This contrast is striking and produces a third way of understanding mixing as it intersects with time. Positioning the conversation ‘mixing’ within a future frame prioritizes time span and subsequently speed—how long and how fast. However, understanding the process of ‘mixing’ within Massey and Chambers' notion of the present can subvert the importance of span and speed recognizing that it is a process that is always already taking place. I want to flag the concept of time because I will be returning to it in the upcoming chapter.

Now that the terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘home’ have been investigated, the final section of this chapter will reflect on the original question posed: in what way does technology serve the Arab “diaspora” and “non-diaspora.” I will begin by challenging the binary between “diaspora” and “non-diaspora” as it relates to the Arab community arguing that the distinction cannot be made. After, I will argue that technology enables diasporas and non-diasporas to participate in a shared community despite geographic dispersion.

1.3 The Arab Diaspora/Non-Diaspora

At the beginning of this chapter I highlighted a few definitions of ‘diaspora’ and found that the term is vague. The authors—Peters, Haridranath, and Brinkerhoff—fundamentally agreed that diasporas sustain communities beyond geographic borders. Peters’ emphasized communication, Haridranath focused on cultural alienation within the ‘host’ country, and Brinkerhoff explored identity that is shaped by outside forces. Brinkerhoff’s framework also factors in the relationship between diasporas and the non-diasporas that remain in the homeland and introduces the term meta-diaspora. The difficulty underlying all the frameworks was a lack of explicit definition of “home,” which leads to an investigation in the second section.

The investigation into ‘home’ demanded that I engage with the discourse on “place.” Essentially, place is constructed out of narrowed readings of history and based in negative definitions—a reactionary response to a changing world. Modernity has contributed to the change, facilitating a globalized world that has transgressed traditional separations between local and global, time, and otherness (immigration). The inability to construct a successful identity of place results in a disorienting sense of placelessness seeping into people’s daily life. Concluding this section, Massey and Chambers argue that place should be conceptualized as mobile and based mostly in social relations instead of spatially. Peters is convinced that diasporic communities are able to teach us how to draw out a sense of home while mobile.

Combining Peters, Haridranath, and Brinkerhoff, I frame the Arab diaspora as a sense of community that lives globally, sustains communication, shares collective memories, culture, fates, and experiences alienation in the host country. They are placeless, but they can create an extroverted sense of place based in social relations not geographic locations. The Arab diaspora also falls under Brinkerhoff’s meta-diaspora, recognizing that while many diasporas exist within—Coptic, North African, Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian are some examples—and are valid and important but unite under a larger meta-diaspora—the Arab diaspora— to achieve certain objectives.

As a meta-diaspora, the Arab diaspora comes together to reconcile with alienation and surveillance, often intensifying following terrorist acts around the world. The Middle East has been at the centre of conflict and war in contemporary times—wars in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen to name a few— and some argue that the region is positioned to appear as a direct threat to western dominance.⁶⁶ The global political scene informs many of the misrepresentations that members of the Arab diaspora, particularly youth, are forced to deal with while negotiating their identities in the ‘host’ country. Nancy Demerdash explains that there is an “existential in-betweenness of being culturally, metaphorically...spatially métissage.”⁶⁷ Youth in the Arab diaspora must negotiate a hybrid identity while confronting violence motivated by global politics. Attempting to negotiate two or more identities creates a feeling of being liminal—neither here nor there. Beyond identities, Demerdash considers the Arab diaspora as spatially mixed and liminal in reference to continually crossing borders. Chambers discussion of the “beur”—described as “French born to Arab parents”—illustrates diasporic hybrid identity through their use of language:

[mélange/slang]it proposes instances of mixing, remixing, translating, and transforming a shared tonality into particular voices and situations. It helps to articulate the dissonance of the experiences of a particular time and place; to be Arab *and* French, to be black *and* Parisian.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Till Fellrath. “Contemporary Arab Art: A case of Stolen Identity” *Told Untold Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space*. ed. Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath Arab Museum of Modern Art (Dawḥah, Qatar). (Milano, Italy; New York, NY, USA; Skirl, 2010.) Pg. 56

⁶⁷ Nancy Demerdash. "Bordering nowhere: migration and the politics of placelessness in contemporary art of the Maghrebi diaspora." *The Journal of North African Studies* 21, no. 2 (2016) Pg. 260, Note: métissage refers to a mixing between two different components

⁶⁸ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2008.) Pg. 94

Classifying second-generation diaspora as “beur” fragments the youth from the parents, the former being French and latter Arab, an attempt to assert a French identity and dismiss the other as belonging to another generation. Identity, in this case, is intimately tied to location—French are born in France—simultaneously the distinct label suggests a refusal to accept second-generation Arab diaspora as wholly French. Language is a place of struggle for the diasporic youth.⁶⁹ Through language, ‘beur’ insist on hybridity creating a language that mixes both identities: basically language was de-centered and made to reside in a liminal space, an in-betweenness. Language is forcibly restructured so that it can articulate what it previously could not.

This in-betweenness, the hybrid identity, is always in flux. Brinkerhoff suggests that sharing collective memory through storytelling and crafts inspire and inform hybrid identities and assists in helping diasporic youth make sense of their circumstances.⁷⁰ Consistent with Massey, Chambers and Peters, youth in diasporic communities often pick and choose, review and alter aspects of the host country and homeland to include in their identities, temporarily.⁷¹ The Arab diaspora, in this case the youth, are creating mobile homes that do not require fixity, as well as identities that are always being negotiated—active “remembering.” This process incorporates language, collective memory, and a sense of shared fate motivated by global politics.

The Arab diaspora, at its core, is placeless because of physical displacement often caused by war and conflict. The Arab non-diaspora, on the other hand, experiences a disorienting sense of placelessness that is not equal to the experiences of the Arab diaspora, but is

⁶⁹ bell hooks. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015) Pg. 145

⁷⁰ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg.39

⁷¹ *ibid.* Pg. 36

closely related to it. Despite continued residence in the homeland, the Arab non-diaspora is required to re-negotiate their identity with changing politics, traumas of war, economic factors, and often share a collective memory with the diaspora. Even in referring to the “Middle East” as a label is deeply ambiguous, since geographically the defined area is often contested or changed. The label itself is a form of in-betweenness insisting on being in the middle—neither here nor there but between.⁷² It is critical to note that consistent images of war contrasted to glitzy cities influenced by global markets—Dubai and Doha for example— indicates that the homeland has been lost in time. Neither diaspora or non-diaspora expect to return to the homeland and find it; spatially it may exist, but temporally it does not.

While the west struggles with its cultural and ideological leadership being challenged—which have impact on diasporic experiences due to flares of psychic and physical violence such as increased surveillance that may be motivated by situations in which the west is challenged— Arab nations are struggling with western modernity.⁷³ I want to draw from Faisal Darraj and Nada Shabout in order to talk about these stereotypes. According to Darraj, there was an active Arab modernity project in the 20th century inspired by European superiority. The Arab elite sponsored different projects set to educate the poor, initiate democracy and bring about a new era. The project failed, Darraj argues, because religious fundamentalists vigorously protested, accused and demonized the modernity project as blasphemous. Due to their large influence over Arab society— citing Egypt particularly— the fundamentalists stopped the project. However, he goes on to dismiss the claim that Arab modernity failed because it wanted to emulate the west,

⁷² Sam Bardouil. “The Transmodern Artist” *Told Untold Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space*. ed. Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath Arab Museum of Modern Art (Dawḥah, Qatar). (Milano, Italy; New York, NY, USA; Skirl, 2010) Pg. 27

⁷³ Till Fellrath. “Contemporary Arab Art: A case of Stolen Identity” *Told Untold Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys through Time and Space*. ed. Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath Arab Museum of Modern Art (Dawḥah, Qatar). (Milano, Italy; New York, NY, USA; Skirl, 2010.) Pg. 55

damning the project from the start.⁷⁴ Darraj concludes that modernity demands a willingness to march into the future and only fails because Arab nations remain in the past clinging to religious scripture. In the same spirit, Nada Shabout states, “Arab peoples have been living somewhere between the past and the future but not the present.”⁷⁵ Both Darraj and Shabout identify the Arab world as stuck in the past and suspicious of embracing modernity. Earlier, referencing Massey, Maggio and Chambers, I explained that reactionary definitions of place assumes that there is “continuity between past and present,” and the west has defined itself by distinguishing past, present and future and moving forward temporally.^{76 77} However, Chambers suggests one of the deeply felt effects of modernity—contributing to placelessness—is the demand for discontinuity.⁷⁸ Yet, while the west is uprooted temporally due to modernity, Darraj and Shabout proceed with a colonialist analysis that positions the Arab world—a colonial world—as fixed and incapable of progress.⁷⁹

Modernity in the Arab world brings to the surface evidence of a colonialism that never left, that continues to re-constitute and haunt the colonized.⁸⁰ Even though the Arab non-

⁷⁴ Faisal Darraj, “The Peculiarities of Arab Modernity.” *Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection*. eds. Sarah A. Rogers and Eline van der Vlist (Amman, Jordan) 2013. Pg. 81-91

⁷⁵ Nada M. Shabout. *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.) Pg. 42-3

⁷⁶ Doreen Massey. “Places and their Pasts.” *History Workshop Journal* no.39 (1995) Pg. 190

⁷⁷ Joe Maggio. ““Can the Subaltern Be Heard?”: Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.” *Alternatives* 32, no. 4 (2007) Pg. 424

⁷⁸ Iain Chambers. *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*. Pg. 2

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Couze Vann. “Identity, diasporas and subjective change: The role of affect, the relation to the other, and the aesthetic.” *Subjectivity* 26, no. 1 (2009) Pg. 14

diaspora lives in the homeland and have not physically left, they experience an existential placelessness that we have reserved for the Arab diaspora. After claiming that Arab people are not living in the present, Shabout argues that Arab youth are experiencing “restlessness” and “disturbance” because they are witnessing “modern civilizations”—implying the west—prosper in the present but the prosperity is not within the youth’s grasp because they are stuck in the past due to being Arab.⁸¹ She is describing youth that anxiously want to leave the homeland so they can live elsewhere, which is understandable as the west does hold opportunities. However, I want to stress the fact that even those who live in the homeland do not feel at home, indicating a sense of placelessness. Massey infers that the sense of dislocation that Europeans feel from being confronted by otherness must have been felt by colonized folks: it is in that spirit that we must recognize that Arabs who remain in the homeland are experiencing the strangeness of modernity and remnants of colonialism.

This chapter sought to answer the following question: in what way does technology serve (positive or negative) the Arab “diaspora” and “non-diaspora.” It is often claimed that technology has brought people from all around the world together at a click of a button. David Morely generally agrees with that sentiment explaining that technology is able to transgress borders, linking dispersed populations.⁸² He goes on to explain that television—arguably all technology—exists in a liminal space subverting insideness and outsideness folding in concepts of “place.”⁸³ Adding to Morely, Brinkerhoff’s research reveals that refugees use online spaces to process trauma, enforce identity and process reality.⁸⁴ Technology has made information and communities accessible, but I want to

⁸¹ Nada M. Shabout. *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.) Pg. 43

⁸² David Morely. “Bounded Realms” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 153-4

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 49

push beyond technology. Separate from the mainstream western media, popular culture specific to Arab peoples is able to bridge the Arab diaspora and non-diaspora.

Popular culture, Stuart Cunningham argues, performs as a public sphere for diasporic communities.⁸⁵ Cunningham believes that “public sphericules” are able restore diasporic communities to a place where they can enjoy a shared culture. He states:

they are the ‘civil societies’ of nations without borders, without state institutions and without citizens... with do-it-yourself citizenship based on culture, identity and voluntary belonging rather than based on rights derived from, and obligations to, a state.⁸⁶

Cunningham, less interested in defining diaspora, is conceptualizing the broad scope of diasporic public sphericules, prioritizing cooperation within and between the diasporic community globally that is not influenced by a state although it might intersect with the state.⁸⁷ The “do-it-yourself citizenship” and “voluntary belonging” encourage members to participate on their own accord allowing for distinct expression of hybrid identities and public communication among the diasporic community globally.⁸⁸ Further, Cunningham stresses that the community is “constituted *through* media” because it is often the reason the community gathers together.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Stuart Cunningham. "Popular media as public ‘sphericules’ for diasporic communities." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001) Pg. 133

⁸⁶ *ibid.* Pg.134

⁸⁷ *ibid.* Pg.136

⁸⁸ *ibid.* Pg.135-9

⁸⁹ Stuart Cunningham. "Popular media as public ‘sphericules’ for diasporic communities." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001) Pg. 137. Author’s emphasis.

Reinforcing Cunningham, authors Sonja De Leew and Ingegerd Rydin reported that diasporic children feel closer to their parents when they consume media from the homeland. During these interactions, media symbolically extends ideas of home allowing parents to feel nostalgic, fondly recalling memories from a different time and place. On the other hand, media allows diasporic children to feel a sense of belonging, prompting them to experience desire, a yearning to connect to the homeland.⁹⁰ These children draw inspiration from media—from the homeland and host country—when negotiating their identity and engage with a global youth culture.⁹¹

However, some host countries reject negotiating ideas of the homeland into their identity or maintaining a “long-distance nationalism” while being hosted.⁹² For example, France limited access to satellites so as to prevent the North African diasporic community in France from consuming North African popular culture.⁹³ Morely explains that France was concerned that consuming popular culture from elsewhere will lead to having a population that does not identify as French. Yet, there does not seem to be concern with French and western popular culture permeating television channels in North Africa and the Middle East. The diasporic community utilizes technology and reaches to the homeland for inspiration, negotiating hybrid identities, but the non-diaspora is assumed to be unable to participate in diasporic popular culture designed to be global. Through popular culture, Arab diaspora and non-diaspora are able to negotiate their identities, express their hybridity, and connect.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ Sonja de Leew and Ingegerd Rydin, “Diasporic Mediated Spaces” *Transnational lives and the media: re-imagining diasporas*. eds. Bailey, Olga, Myriad Georgiou, and Ramaswami Haridranath. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.) Pg. 191

⁹² Stuart Cunningham. "Popular media as public ‘sphericules’ for diasporic communities." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001) Pg. 137

⁹³ David Morely. “Bounded Realms” *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. ed. Hamid Naficy. (Routledge, 2013.) Pg. 156

Chapter 2

2. Art, Memory and Nostalgia

Woven throughout the previous chapter is the concept of time; a desire to return to a time, compress time, or be stuck in time. The discourse surrounding ‘diaspora’ consistently describes ‘home’ as lost in history, something that lives on through myths and collective memory as something that once existed and may never exist again. ‘Home’ is demarcated by past tense, enabling diasporic discourse to concentrate on the prospects of diasporic communities living in host countries. I explained that the traditional idea of ‘home’—or ‘place’—is based on a desire to return to a constructed past often in response to the conditions of a globalized world and advanced technology. Scholars contrasted this traditional definition and encouraged that we think of ‘home’ as mobile, unfixed, and situated in the present. Time is explicitly and consistently tied to placelessness as illustrated by Chambers when he takes up Naples, Italy as a case study; the city is described as unanchored and floating in time.⁹⁴ Engaging with these key insights, I explored the case of the Arab diaspora/non-diaspora. The dialogue that emerged was largely problematic, marking Arabs as lost in time, refusing to march into the future. In this instance, time is used to enforce colonial tropes, confining Arabs to the past while the west is idolized for marching into the future. Time permeated every investigation causally marking topics linearly as situated in past, present or future.

Briefly, I want to review the foundation laid by the previous chapter. I stressed that the separation between Arab diaspora/non-diaspora is at best blurred if it exists at all; both groups experience the loss of ‘home’ through leaving in the case of the diaspora or feelings of ‘placelessness’ instigated by conflict and modernity in the non-diaspora. Further, popular culture acts as a platform for Arab diaspora and non-diaspora to come together and negotiate their identities and express their hybridity: popular culture is so

⁹⁴ Iain Chambers, *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*, Pg. 107

effective at assisting the negotiation that France banned North African channels and limited satellites to ensure minimum contact.

In this chapter, I want to build on these foundational assertions by exploring the ways in which cultural memory, nostalgia and—minimally—temporality are used to express Arab based hybrid identities. My analytical tool are contemporary Arab artworks that will be treated as media texts. This chapter will begin by contextualizing the difficulty in defining Arab art, which will launch a discussion into cultural memory, which will lead to a conversation on the productivity of nostalgia with temporality threaded into both topics. Throughout this chapter I will engage with various contemporary Arab artworks with the aim of providing demonstrable evidence of the complex interactions between form and content of Arab art as inspired by various perspectives on memory at large.

2.2 Contemporary Arab Art

Defining contemporary Arab art can be a difficult task. For the purposes of my thesis, I am working with a definition of contemporary Arab art that addresses themes consistent with diasporic experiences such as: placelessness, not belonging, modernity, collective memory, or trauma. Further, I am limiting contemporary Arab art to works that have been produced since 2000, but do not have a single artistic style.⁹⁵ With this definition in mind, the next part of this section will focus on a concise review of the history of Arab art to contextualize some of the conflicts and tensions that arise.

The beginning of modern Arab art is a contentious issue among scholars and artists. The following few points are generally agreed upon. Prior to colonialism, Arabs lived with and experienced art daily.⁹⁶ Islamic art—characterized by geometric shapes and Arabic calligraphic script—adorned mosques, furniture, prayer mats and books such as the

⁹⁵ This definition does not include Mona Hatoum, who is a known Modern Arab artist

⁹⁶ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*. Pg. 60

Qur'an (fig. 2.1).⁹⁷ Further, Europeans did not recognize—perhaps appreciate—that art was a lived experience. Arabs were largely described as uncultured; one of the reasons they were described as such was the absence of galleries and museums where fine art could be viewed and admired.⁹⁸ By establishing designated spaces for art—galleries and museums—Europeans created a separation between craft—lowbrow and lived—and fine art—highbrow and admired. Subsequently, Islamic art was identified as lowbrow craft consumed by the masses and modern art as highbrow fine art intended for the elite.⁹⁹ This separation largely informs the tension clouding the origins of modern Arab art—some wonder if modern Arab art is extension of Islamic art whether or not is it rooted in western modernity or separate from it.

Nada Shabout adamantly states that modern Arab art is not an “extension, continuation or revival of Islamic forms” going on to assert that it is in fact a rejection of Islamic art in favour of modern western art.¹⁰⁰ For Shabout, tradition is necessarily oppositional to the progressive essence of modern art which values aesthetics. Illustrating her point she unpacks the Arab idea of ‘asl’—the Arabic word can be loosely translated to mean the ‘root’ of something or ‘authenticity’—which encourages a constant reproduction of and perpetual return to the past to reaffirm authenticity which she argues is oppositional to modernity.¹⁰¹ She understands Arab tradition as being stifling to the creative spirit and that modern Arab art came to be when Arab artists compensated for their shortcomings and transcended ethnicity through mimicking western art and aesthetics.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, Pg. 39

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ This is a very concise account; the larger history does not contribute to this discussion and is beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, Pg. 35

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* Pg. 41

¹⁰² *ibid.* Pg. 35-36



Figure 2.1: Prayer niche (Mihrab) from Maidan mosque, Kashan, Iran. Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany.

The other side of the debate maintains that borrowing a medium, technique or form of expression—such as easel painting —does not mean that the west created or inspired modern Arab art.¹⁰³ Beyond aesthetics we must account for content and vision that is derived from the artists’ unique cultural perspectives. This pivot in the debate challenges the value of form and aesthetic over content and message.

I want to come at this debate from another angle. In the previous chapter, I reviewed Faisal Darraj’s assessment of the Arab modernity project arguing that it primarily failed because religious fundamentalists declared it blasphemous. Purposefully omitted from that discussion and profoundly relevant to this one is the fact that it was the art the Arab modernity project produced that was deemed blasphemous. Aesthetic aside, the content of the art mirrored western culture, which is not necessarily oppositional to Arab culture but is certainly distinct from it. The fundamentalist charge that the project was doomed to fail because it sought to emulate the west—described by Shabout as a transcendence—is a commentary on the inauthenticity of the art’s content. As Shabout pointed out, the Arab quest for and return to authenticity— ‘asl’—does not permit mimicry of western modern art.

¹⁰³ *ibid.* Pg. 39-43

Whereas modern Arab art sought to elevate Arab society to reflect western ideologies, contemporary Arab art is centered on reflecting and articulating Arab experiences. The contemporary Arab artist is not separated from everyday realities. Contemporary Arab art engages with the political realities facing Arabs within and beyond the Middle East and North Africa. The raw honesty the artists infuse into the art ensures authenticity and can be described as exercising existence.¹⁰⁴ I argued that the strangeness of modernity and remnants of colonialism change the homeland to such an extent that non-diaspora Arabs experience ‘placelessness.’ Expanding on this argument there is real pain and distress caused by the following: the Iraq War and the continued conflict, the Syrian Civil War, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and bursts of war, the Arab Spring, the war in Lebanon (2006), Yemeni Civil War (ongoing), and terrorist action—previously Al Qaeda and currently Islamic State of Iraq Levant. This list covers just the last seventeen years and does not include the constant diplomatic squabbles, internal dissatisfaction with the ruling parties or the day-to-day hardships faced by Muslim Arabs. Violence pervades the Arab reality. I must stress that ‘placelessness’ experienced by Arabs is a consequence of violence, pain and trauma and is exacerbated by the existential postmodern condition.

Drawing from earlier perspectives on place, migration—in this case, possibly due to war—increased communication and a globalized marketplace does not allow easy maintenance of strictly defined geographic regions that correlate with place. This break with geography is pertinent to Arab artists: for one, the break de-emphasizes the value of European aesthetic contributions and thus its claim over the origins of Arab art. Second, in the same spirit, it is becoming difficult—some argue impossible—to confine or group art or artists based on geographic location.¹⁰⁵ The break allows Arab diaspora to

¹⁰⁴ Couze Vann, “Identity, Diasporas, And Subjective Change,” Pg. 13, Mbembe quoted

¹⁰⁵ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 62

Sam Bardaouil, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 16

participate in the same art community as their fellow non-diasporic artists without the restrictions of a “unified school.”¹⁰⁶

Contemporary Arab artists resist the limitations of some of the most basic stereotypes that tend to designate the group as living in the Middle East, perhaps Muslim—somewhere between the image of Sharif Ali from *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Col. Faris Al Ghazi from *The Kingdom* (2007). Individually, Arabs may be able to tell you what it means to be Arab, which may oppose the stereotypes mentioned and include different descriptions. Pertaining to the art community, curator Till Fellrath argues that the dominant stereotypes are the oil sheikh, barbarian, sex maniac and terrorist; I would argue that misidentification of women’s oppression by certain sects of activism and politics, among other groups, is thematic in negative representations of Arabs.¹⁰⁷ There has been a large concerted effort to educate and construct a more nuanced representation of Arab folks. Concerning Arab artists Fellrath adds by countering:

An Arab artist can at the same time be a woman, a Christian or agnostic, a traditionalist, a human rights activist, an actor, a painter, and be born and raised in Europe, and so on.¹⁰⁸

Fellrath rejects the elitist simplicity that expects artists to only be artists instead choosing to highlight the multiplicity and range of those who are Arab artists. This definition is wide, rejecting the limitations of a boxed identity and remaining true to the composition of the Arab art community. There is an element of Stuart Cunningham’s notion of “do-it-yourself citizenship” with contemporary Arab artists.¹⁰⁹ Some Arab artists may shy away from suggesting that their artwork is tied to their national identity to avoid being

¹⁰⁶ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 67

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* Pg. 58

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* Pg. 57 note: for more information consider the works of Evelyn Alsultany, Karim Karim, Saba Mahmood, Leila Ahmed, Leila Abu-Laghdou

¹⁰⁹ Sturt Cunningham, “Popular Media as Public,” Pg. 134

“reduced to a cliché” and may find comfort in only identifying themselves as Arab.¹¹⁰ For example, Hala Ali refuses to identify by her family name or nationality arguing that those identities overshadow and “become the paradigm for interpreting my [Ali’s] work...”¹¹¹ Ali goes on to add that she feels that she can identify only as an Arab because she moved so often she cannot relate to a national identity.

In contrast, some artists may identify as Arab but will assert the importance of their national identity—for example, Palestinian artists. Contemporary Arab artists have a certain level of agency over their position, residence and meaning within the group. The group is not identified by subject, style, region or religion, artists voluntarily identify as under the contemporary Arab artist umbrella.

The challenge that faces Arab artists is that they must craft their work wary of the different interpretative possibilities and they must reconcile with the need to remain authentic and truthful to their compatriots. There is a need for art that can connect the experiences of a dispersed Arab population and express the range of emotions the community is feeling—rebuilding a culture from rubble. I want to contrast statements made by two contemporary Arab artists regarding their art as a small sample of the different ways the artists approach their work. Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal :

My art is most influenced by the pain and suffering of growing up as part of an Iraqi generation defined by war...I experienced violence on a daily basis, and images of death and terror along with the daily anguish of the Iraqi people are irrevocably etched in my memory. Since coming to the

¹¹⁰ Sam Bardouil, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 24

¹¹¹ Kate Busby, “Hala Ali,” in *Edge of Arabia*. ed. Stapleton, Stephen A., et al. (London,

UK: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012), Pg. 53

United States I have also seen great injustice and suffering in terms of poverty, racism, and many other forms of discrimination and hatred.¹¹²

Evident in Bilal's statement is the fact that history continues to influence his work. Born in 1966, Bilal's generation is lived through the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) the Gulf War (1990-91), the current Iraq War (2003-) and consistent political turmoil in between all these wars. Bilal then implies that his experiences, the violence he had seen, will forever remain in his memories and have contributed to welding a bond with compatriots.

Bilal's statement can almost be imagined as a conversation between the Arab non-diaspora and diaspora. In the first part, the non-diaspora reminds the diaspora of the violence that had taken place over a long period in the homeland. In response, the diaspora expresses the challenges of living in western countries that may be perpetuating violence towards the homeland and negotiating their identity. Yet these two conversations—these two sides—exist harmoniously in a singular statement, he does not stress one over the other.

It is notable that Bilal refused to praise the host country, it is hard to imagine that he does not feel resentment taking up residence in a country that had engaged in a bitter battle with Iraq. My previous analysis of Bardaoui's term, "acute post-colonial anxiety" explained that Arab artists fear that their artwork will perpetuate "post-colonial violence" if museums, curators, and viewers insist on assessing the artwork within a colonialist perspective corrupting the artists' intentions.^{113 114} How can Bilal express these sorrows through art without accidentally endorsing further violence against Iraq?

¹¹² Fellrath, pg. 64

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

Bilal folds in his identity as an Iraqi national and the history that comes with that identity intricately into his work. In contrast, artist Buthayna Ali asks to be considered beyond identity categories, writing:

I am not myself, not Buthayna Ali, not a body, not a woman, not a Muslim, not a Syrian, Not an Arab...many prisons force themselves upon me...My work is I. It's my existence, identity, memory, contradictions, screams, my words and my questions.¹¹⁵

Ali's desire is to strip free of the various identities that are constricting her work's meaning, echoing Hala Ali's rejection of identifying her nationality. In a sense, her work is being denied the ability to speak for itself because the art is being viewed through lenses tainted by preconceived notions and prejudices based on Ali's identity. When Ali defiantly states "My work is I. It's my existence," she is stressing her individuality and insists the viewer recognize her work as exercising existence. By breaking away from those identities, Ali is rejecting the narratives attached to the identities and affirming her own existence and personhood. She is demanding that her work reflect her life and not represent various identities. Consistent with Bardaouil's argument that artists experience acute post-colonial anxiety when they feel that their work may perpetuate post-colonial violence, Ali is explicitly stating to the viewer to not commit further violence by confining her work to the stereotypes assigned to her identity.

Previously, modern Arab art adored Europeans and only sought to appeal to European ideologies and artistic form through imitation and rejection of Islamic art. It is the contemporary Arab artist who turned away from the false binary between the high regard for modern European art and the fundamentalist dedication to Islamic art, opting to carve a path of their own. The tension between modern aesthetics—European styles—and authenticity—supposedly Islamic in nature—contributes to uprooting contemporary Arab art from a defined foundational history. Similarly, Demerdash states contemporary Arab

¹¹⁵ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 69

artists are “dealing with those uncertain and interstitial zones between statelessness, placelessness, exile, belonging, alienation, and displacement.”¹¹⁶ Contemporary Arab art is not restricted to topics of war and conflict; on the contrary, the artists are inspired by the emotional complexity of living at the intersections of existential and physical placelessness; the intensity of these experiences influence the aesthetic of the art.¹¹⁷ Neither contemporary Arab art nor artists have an assured place and so both combine to allow vital flexibility that fosters many different spaces and expressions.

Contemporary Arab artists and their varied experiences with placelessness inspire their work and cultivate aesthetic rebelliousness. The emotional intensity of placelessness contributes to the unreserved use of any medium, technique or form. Moreover, the displacement of Arab artists around the world, coupled with the instantaneity of online communities, allows access to a larger pool of inspiration and connection.¹¹⁸ Artists may produce digital art, performative art, sculptures, easel painting, storytelling or mix traditional Islamic and modern styles in one piece or across their careers. The only desire the contemporary Arab artist seems to have is to provide “form to feeling,” or produce a visual or physical representation to the internal emotions that are taking place.¹¹⁹

For example, in regards to Maghrebi art Demerdash asserts that “aesthetics of placelessness disrupts any essentializing reading of what Maghrebi art is or does.”¹²⁰ She observes that Maghrebi art escapes static interpretations that may result in post-colonial violence by utilizing aesthetics. The “aesthetics of placelessness” deny a sense of place, center, or fixity for the viewer, the space in which the artwork resides, and a singular interpretation forcing the viewer to engage with the politics of place by confronting

¹¹⁶ Nancy Demerdash, "Bordering nowhere," Pg. 260

¹¹⁷ *ibid.* Pg. 260

¹¹⁸ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg 67

¹¹⁹ Couze Vann, pg6

¹²⁰ Nancy Demerdash, "Bordering nowhere," Pg. 261

placelessness.¹²¹ Through aesthetic, artists can convey the feelings of placelessness and subvert or deny interpretations of the artwork by utilizing sound, color, spatial arrangements or visual cues. Further, aesthetics choices may relay the *métissage* and *mélange* experienced by Arab folks negotiating hybrid identities in the artwork by doing just that, mixing.¹²²

Artists may also use aesthetics to subvert institutional powers found in museums or galleries. There are attempts to limit Arab artists and their work within problematic narratives, causing artists like Hala Ali and Buthayna Ali to react by refusing identity classifications. There are also artists who refuse to have their work misconstrued as an extension of a “cultural imaginary of the homeland” or a desire to return, a problem commonly associated with diasporic artists.¹²³ Motivating misrepresentation are global art markets that are interested in buying contemporary Arab art based on the advice of art critiques.¹²⁴ In contrast, Svetlana Boym argues that the “institutional alienation” of the museum can be re-oriented to be “intimately inhabited” by diasporic artists, providing a space to recreate different pasts.¹²⁵

Contemporary Arab artists are in a unique position due to the great amount of changes happening around the world in relation to the Arab/Muslim community. The contemporary Arab artist largely share a lived experience with many of the dispersed Arab community, they do not look down from above but draw from within themselves.

¹²¹ *ibid.* Pg. 260

¹²² *ibid.* Pg. 260,

Iain Chambers, *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity*, Pg. 94

¹²³ Nancy Demerdash, "Bordering nowhere," Pg. 260

¹²⁴ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 60

Nancy Demerdash, "Bordering nowhere," Pg. 260

¹²⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Pg. 508

Most Arab artists have the unique ability to narrate the precariousness of living placeless and Arab—a community that has seen great violence—when they take up the topic. The Middle East and North African regions are confronting war, political tension, international condemnation, rampant misinformation regarding religion and the continued presence of colonization in multiple forms. These regions are undergoing a dramatic shift and some find it appropriate to ask Arab artists to use their skill and insight to re-define the region. Bardaouil states:

the artists of the Middle East were called upon to come up with a new notion, a future notion by which some utopian Middle East can be defined. But why should Arab contemporary artists be expected to map out the cartography of a new Pan-Arabism?... In a world plagued by the politics of difference, artists have learned—way before others have—the importance of shedding territorial baggage, and claiming the entire world as their backyard.¹²⁶

Bardaouil is wary and somewhat resentful of tasking Arab artists with painting a utopian Pan-Arabian/ Middle East because it places unwarranted pressures on Arab artists to carry the region and chart an identity, a difficult undertaking and eternally exhausting to assign to a single group.¹²⁷ The way Bardaouil addresses geography as “territorial baggage” and romanticization of travel and “claiming the entire world” is problematic because it does not account for the violent conditions the experiences of diasporic populations and cause many geographic borders to fall. For instance, Palestinian artists did not have agency in “shedding territorial baggage” and their art often reflects the pain of leaving and desire to return. Further, as reflected in Wafaa Bilal’s statement, Arab diasporas experience violence in the world and rarely find a world that is willing to be claimed. There must be an active attempt to resist romanticizing the conditions of the

¹²⁶ Sam Bardaouil, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 28

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

Arab artist. Bardaouil's analysis does not acknowledge the histories that complicate the region, its people and, ultimately, artists.

In contrast Demerdash observes, "there is evidence of a need to publically grapple with not just complicated pasts, but to envision and actualize future promises as well."¹²⁸ She argues that art should continue to depict various pasts which can help the public come together and heal; art should attempt to sort out visions for the future and give them form. Demerdash is alluding to colonialism, political and economic injustices—particularly in regards to Maghrebi art—but also the underlying implications of border crossing.¹²⁹ She does not task artists with maintaining an imaginary homeland or re-defining bordered areas; rather Demerdash draws from Homi Bhabha, proposing that artists perform "the borderline work of culture," demonstrating the interplay of hybrid identities through artworks. She sees potential for a conducive space in contemporary Arab art for people to revisit their histories to productively shape a better future; Demerdash does not suggest that this space is unmoving or defined, only that "identities must be reconceived and reclaimed" in alternative spaces to embrace placelessness.¹³⁰ She is certainly not alone in her argument; Couze Vann agrees that art is able to verbalize experiences and encourage audience participation with the realities of displacement and may successfully allow viewers to feel a sense of "dislocation" and "subjective dissonance."¹³¹ Complementarily, artist Abdelkader Benchamma states that art can be experienced as "a journey through the physical space that is realized by the means of the body confronting the works."¹³² Benchamma, as Vann and Demerdash concur, explains that art instigates a response or a

¹²⁸ Nancy Demerdash, "Bordering nowhere," Pg. 261

¹²⁹ Note: Maghrebi refers to the Northwestern region of Africa which were also colonies of France.

¹³⁰ *ibid.* Pg. 263

¹³¹ Couze Vann, "Identity, diasporas and subjective change." Pg. 6

¹³² Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 68

feeling in the viewer, an interaction that elevates both art and viewer beyond the physical space.

This section intended on building on the foundation set in the previous chapter by introducing a working understanding of contemporary Arab art. Some of the debates addressed were concerned with the relationships between Islamic, modern, and contemporary Arab art. It is important to remember that contemporary Arab artists are a group based on voluntary participation primarily because it is beyond traditional categorization—such as style, geographic location, or ideology. Equally relevant is the utilization of aesthetic flexibility to express a range of emotions pertaining to the lived experiences of Arab artists and populations.

Lastly, this section ended with perspectives on the role contemporary Arab artists can play in assisting the Arab diaspora/non-diaspora to confront their histories and negotiate their hybridity. With those perspectives in mind, I want to use the following section to delve into a nuanced conversation in relation to the concept of memory, and will assert that engaging with nostalgia can be productive for diasporic communities. The discourse surrounding memory is suited to inform the complex relationship between the Arab artist and history which will be demonstrated by engaging with the contemporary Arab artwork.

2.2 Cultural Memory and Reflective Nostalgia

In the previous chapter, Doreen Massey posited that traditional creations of ‘place’ depended on an interpreted reading of history that is legitimated through hegemonic power. History is a sanctioned narrative; sometimes different narratives contest each other, but the debate occurs within set boundaries and ultimately there is usually single narrative that is actively embraced by institutions.¹³³ I have learned not to underestimate

¹³³ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Los Angeles: University of California Press,

1997) Pg. 4

the power entrenched in dominant history. During a graduate course, I was assigned an article by Edward Said that argued directly against a historical narrative and defied the boundaries of a debate. I confessed to the class that while I know that Edward Said is a celebrated and renowned academic, I found it difficult to process the article because it had radically confronted a sanctioned reading of a historical account. Unpacking this situation allowed me to recognize that history operates with power and will cause me to distrust competing narratives even when they are presented within an educational institution by academics—both of which operate with authority. Similarly, Massey explained that, in Hackney, a structure that was modelled after “orientalist” architecture was a movie theatre before it was repurposed into a mosque, upsetting some of the locals. In Massey’s example, the locals resent the strangeness of Muslims repurposing the building, but not the strangeness of the architecture itself, contrasted to British architectural styles. This is all to say that when confronted, the historical narrative that comes to dominate can marginalize and overshadow evidence of alternate accounts.

Similar to the idea that history is a narrative, memory, too, is a narrative that can be revisited, not a “replica of an experience.”¹³⁴ There are a few perspectives on the relationship between personal memory and society, Marita Sturken sums up the two within the memory discourse by explaining that while Maurice Halbwachs identifies personal memory as “socially produced,” Sigmund Freud argues that personal memory remains untapped in the unconscious and manifests itself in various ways.¹³⁵ In mainstream society, memory is often accused of being inaccurate or corruptible based on intent and so it is dismissed at times or is challenged to produce support for its legitimacy. Accusation of inaccuracy gives way to understanding forgetting as “necessarily a failing,” and discussions around memory demands the inclusion of the role

¹³⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 7

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, Pg. 4

of forgetting.¹³⁶ I want to start the debate surrounding memory with Pierre Nora, explaining that there has been a change in the way memory operates, stating:

Modern memory is archival. It relies entirely on...the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs—hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past.¹³⁷

Image and memory combined is creating an intensity around conserving events and experiences. Nora's description of memory as "archival" suggests that there is a desire to collect all memories to avoid forgetting as opposed to the maintenance of a select few memories of significant events. He sees a situation in which there is a greater desire to reach for the camera to document and preserve memories than settle with a memory as personal experience. The desire to reach for the camera is understood as simultaneously recording the present and past for "conservation" and "preservation."

Nora is particularly disturbed by conservation and preservation efforts because it indicates that there is a belief that the past is always available to be called upon, driving this desire is a refusal to forget.¹³⁸ Constantly recalling the past leads to a position where the present is a "recycled" form of the past, becoming cyclical without working towards a different version of the present and future that moves beyond the limitations of recreating the past.¹³⁹ Nora stresses that the past and future are no longer clearly defined and imagined: they are broken, filled with doubts causing upheaval. He adamantly states that

¹³⁶ Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," Pg. 59

¹³⁷ Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire," in *Representations no. 26* (University of California Press, 1989) Pg. 13

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, Pg. 16

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

“We no longer speak of ‘origins’ but of ‘births.’” Society is not interested in memory and history insofar as the beginning of the society’s greatness; rather people are preoccupied with discovering the original creation, irrespective of whether it can contribute to greatness.¹⁴⁰

Approaching this topic from another perspective, Elizabeth Jelin explains that archiving memory is a response “to a life without anchors or roots.”¹⁴¹ Mnemonic aids allows people to feel that they can draw meaning from revisiting the past, creating a feeling of rootedness. On a broader perspective, Jelin claims that “The past is an object of cult in the West,” constantly reproduced and relived through the consumption of “retro” fashion and “mass media.”¹⁴² Interacting with Nora, Jelin identifies the tensions between those who archive fearing oblivion and those who reject and dismiss the “presence of the past” as unproductive and stifling.¹⁴³ However, she does not isolate cameras and the proliferation of image culture as key motivators of incessant archiving of memories, instead Jelin links memory archiving to trauma—political or personal.

Cultural memory challenges history by highlighting experiences that contradict or verbalize omitted aspects of the dominant narrative. Sturken states, “survivors of recent political events often disrupt the closure of a particular history.”¹⁴⁴ She argues that people’s memories and experiences prevent political events from being fixed into a sanctioned historical account that can go unchallenged, that survivors disrupt dominant historical narratives. Sturken goes on to add, “indeed, history operates more efficiently when its agents are dead,” suggesting that when those who carry the memory of events

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, Pg. 17

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) Pg. 1

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, Pg 2

¹⁴⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 5

die, history can produce an account that cannot be challenged, a final closure.¹⁴⁵ For Sturken, individual memory is pertinent when it relates to a public event because it becomes a memory that is shared with a population, it carries a different meaning and gives way to ‘cultural memory.’¹⁴⁶ For example, earlier Wafaa Bilal explained that his personal memories of violence in Iraq over his lifetime influence the content of his art. These personal memories overlap with larger public events—Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, Iraq War, and oppression under Saddam Hussein’s regime—and provide a different perspective that may complement or reject the historical narratives of those events. Bilal’s individual memories and how they are represented in his art informs the cultural memory surrounding these events, moving from the personal to the cultural domain.

Sturken does not stand alone, Pierre Nora supports her claim, stating “History is perpetually suspicious of memory and its [history] true mission is to suppress and destroy it [memory].”¹⁴⁷ Nora’s claim differs slightly since he is not referring to the death of “agents” as Sturken does but rather a larger opposition between the ideology of history and memory; motivating the idea that history requires the death or destruction of memory to operate is the ability of memory to undermine power—often thought of as state power. Sturken summarizes cultural memory as:

memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meanings.¹⁴⁸

It is key to recognize that Sturken is working with an understanding that cultural memory as “entangled” with history, not entirely antagonistic to it. The definition outlined explains that memory may be marginalized by dominant history but continues to exist

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, Pg. 3

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*—Nora quoted in Sturken

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

within culture by ascribing meaning onto cultural products. While a historical narrative remains dominant, marginalized memory continues to disrupt the narrative and exists through cultural work. To illustrate, both Sturken and Nora agree that the United States of America defines its nationhood through differing cultural memories that operate as part of American culture.¹⁴⁹ In contrast, Nora claims that France cannot sustain a nationhood that incorporates cultural memory because it would create doubt in the traditions and myths that France is founded upon.¹⁵⁰ In both nations cultural memory exists to some degree, yet there are suggestions that some cultural memories are highlighted while others are silenced in order to facilitate a national identity.

Sturken goes on to assert that “cultural memory is produced through representation,” evident in popular media—photography, film, television and art—labelling them “mnemonic aids,” that help retrieve memories.¹⁵¹ The claim that images can be mnemonic aids expands the traditional discourse surrounding memory highlighting Roland Barthes’ claim “that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument.”¹⁵² Barthes is reflecting on mnemonic aids as great physical structures that withstood time, made to be “immortal,” as they echo a retelling of a memory, one that extends beyond “Death.” The prevalence of images and capabilities of representation alter the role of memory and displaces the authoritative power of history—which takes the form of monuments. Supporting Sturken’s position, Nora agrees that current forms of memory are “retinal and powerfully televisual,” going on to state that there is an “omnipotence of imagery and cinema in contemporary culture.”¹⁵³ He

¹⁴⁹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 2

Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” Pg. 10

¹⁵⁰ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” Pg. 10

¹⁵¹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 8

¹⁵² *ibid.*, Pg. 11

¹⁵³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” Pg. 17

suggests that images carry cultural memory and that they are used to vividly portray the past by splicing varied accounts into a single narrative with a “formal closure.”

Mnemonic aids cross between image culture and cultural memory. The shift from articulating cultural memory through monuments to images is partly motivated by moving populations that have so little space to carry belongings which prompt the use of images as mnemonic aids to carry cultural memory.

It is arguable that films influence cultural memory differently than photography. Photographs may embody a captured memory, but film can narrativize, giving form and motion to a memory. Sturken argues that photographs are sometimes seen as embodying memories, therefore, some people may handle and relate to photos as actual memories frozen in time.¹⁵⁴ Amplifying Sturken’s claim, Saudi artist Manal Al Dowayan states “Each photo I take is like a part of my soul, and I’d like that to outlive me.”¹⁵⁵ Al Dowayan may or may not be speaking in literal terms, however the point that she is making is that through photography she can give form to her feelings and abstract ideas giving her the ability to express herself.

I want to draw from Palestinian artist, Ayman Yossri Daydban and his photo series titled *The Opening (El Fatiha)* to clarify Sturken’s position (fig. 2.2). These eight photos are from a scene in the movie *Malcom X* (1998) starring Denzel Washington as Malcom X. In this scene, Washington is portraying Malcom X reciting the opening to prayer which is an essential part of the ritual in Islam—al fatiha/الفتاحة. Transforming this scene from film to photography—made imperfect by the lines consistent with older camera technologies—changes how it should be received and the intended meaning it holds. Henry Hemming writes that Daydban purposely uses “solitary frames from a fluid

¹⁵⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 11

¹⁵⁵ Stephen A. Stapleton, “Manal Al Dowayan,” in *Edge of Arabia*. ed. Stapleton, Stephen A., et el. (London, UK: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012), Pg. 95

continuum” to magnify the impact of the moment, as seen with Malcom X in prayer.¹⁵⁶ Daydban’s interruption of the “fluid continuum” strikes a blow at the movie by pulling away from the entire narrative, the frames exist outside of their intended meaning and produces a commentary on language and cyclical repetition of memory through photography.

Daydban is also keenly interested in taking up the issue of communication which is why he includes subtitles in this photo series. In previous photo series, Daydban would include Arabic subtitles on Hollywood movie frames, in this instance he includes English subtitles.¹⁵⁷ I find it strange that he would choose to translate English movies into Arabic subtitles, yet when Washington recites the opening in Arabic, Daydban opts to include English subtitles. It is also telling that the English subtitles were used for words that belong to a prayer, failure is inevitable between languages when translating the prayer, which is written in poetic form, into English without the rhythm.



Figure 2.2: *The Opening (Al Fatiha)*, Ayman Yossri Daydban (2010)

I read this photo series slightly differently. In regards to his art Daydban states, “My

¹⁵⁶ Henry Hemming, “Ayman Yossri Daydban,” in *Edge of Arabia*. ed. Stapleton, Stephen A., et al. (London, UK: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012), Pg. 67

¹⁵⁷ Henry Hemming, “Ayman Yossri Daydban,” Pg. 67

objects must not die. Instead I want to keep them permanently in a state between birth and death.”¹⁵⁸ He is neither interested in a beginning nor an end, wanting his work to find immortality as an image. In the spirit of immortality, the use of Washington’s image as Malcolm X molds the two individuals—Malcolm X and Denzel Washington—into the same person, sometimes overlapping. There is a fragility to memory, it will always change based on the circumstances, in popular culture memory it is augmented, Malcolm X’s life will be consumed through movies or documentaries, maybe even old interviews.

In contrast to photography, film creates a “visual narrative” that promotes certain cultural memories or a continuum. Addressing films, Nora proposes that the prevalence of films based on past ordinary lives of ordinary characters indicate that there is a desire to relish the simplicity and “slow rhythms of past times.” Interestingly, he expands on the idea of films centering around ordinary characters, referred to as “anonymous biographies of ordinary people,” as a refusal of the “masses” to be “measured as a mass.”¹⁵⁹ Nora’s use of the word “mass” suggests that he is referring to the concept stemming from political science which argues that people are unable to organize themselves, privileging the elite. His question regarding film suggests that by centering the narrative around ordinary lives within the narrative people are radically refusing to be limited to the category of mass. Secondly, Nora posits that memories of past times are constantly reproduced through films and images for “the ephemeral spectacle” to recover a lost identity.¹⁶⁰ He maintains that there is a lack of will to recognize that the history that is being reproduced of past times is equal to the history made in current life, rather there is only a desire to relive past memories through reproduced images.

Nora’s reading—that films promote ordinary lives as a rejection of the category of ‘mass’—is founded in the importance of representation of memory. Sturken explains that

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” Pg. 17

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

representation of memory in images contributes to how the viewer understands the memory, which is to say that representation in film can become entangled with cultural memory.¹⁶¹ Nora adds to Sturken's explanation by stating, "Representation proceeds by strategic highlighting, selecting samples and multiplying examples."¹⁶² Representing memory in images can be done in a variety of ways some of which are emphasizing specific aspects of the image to relay an emotion and identifying samples to include or exclude according to the intended narrative. Nora also proposes that utilizing examples can contribute to limited representation of memory, however he does not explain whether this is done over time, as a genre, or within a single cinematic feature. Representing memory in images should not only be considered as a tool to ensure negative responses, rather there exists a tension between the experience of an event and the memory of the same event. After all, memories are recalled narratives, not replicas of the experience. Andreas Huyssen explains that "The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory," to articulate the past, a negotiation occurs between experience and memory which is when representation necessarily seeps in.¹⁶³ Huyssen and Sturken both agree that the tension between experience and memory can encourage artistic engagement with the past.¹⁶⁴

Khalid Hajji asserts that "image culture" allows sight to prevail over all other senses in contemporary culture.¹⁶⁵ Positioning his claims within a colonial context, Hajji states that once there was interest in circulating photographic still images of colonized folks. These photos were used to illustrate the strangeness of the 'other' and lengths of colonial rule. Further, with the advent of film there came a possibility of showcasing the colonized in

¹⁶¹ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 11

¹⁶² Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," Pg. 17

¹⁶³ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 9 (Huyssen Quoted)

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Khalid Hajji, "Image Culture, Media, Power," Pg. 71

motion and “in progress.”¹⁶⁶ Hajji argues that film began a rush to reclaim visual narratives that is now heightened by advanced technologies, stating “after the war of images, came a war of visual narratives.”¹⁶⁷ It is insufficient to reclaim an image, rather it is crucial to reclaim the entire “visual narrative,” which either possesses memories and pasts that can contribute to group identity or can provide a platform to recreate and reimagine group identity. Moreover, while Barthes mourns the decreasing significance of monument as mnemonic aids, images liberate memory from space, allowing it to travel beyond borders.

Hajji’s overall thesis generally disapproves of image culture and the “power of sight,” arguing that images are easily commodified and allows for globalization. Complicating Hajji’s position, Sturken maintains that the way an image is delivered contributes to how the memory is “shared, produced, and given meaning.”¹⁶⁸ Technologies that deliver images are not docile “vessels” that carry memories, rather technologies—such as cameras images— can influence cultural memory.¹⁶⁹ She contends that just as memory creates images, the images can create memory: the medium used to articulate memory contributes to the overall reception as it delivers the images.

Sturken’s emphasis on the influence of the medium on memory is imperative to understanding the experiences of Arab people. The current geopolitical climate and the conditions of living in non-democratic societies has either placed large populations under ubiquitous surveillance or contributed to the feeling of being watched. Nora’s

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, Pg. 72- note: Hajji’s suggestion that film was popular because it depicted the colonized “in motion” and “in progress” is largely unsupported within academic scholarship concerned with colonial representations in film. In fact, the argument tends to be directly oppositional to Hajji’s position, claiming that colonized folk are often represented in film as static and unable to move towards progress.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, Pg. 73

¹⁶⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, Pg. 9

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, Pg. 11

commentary on modern memory as archival extends to bureaucratic states that enthusiastically track, record, and archive large quantities of information, creating a different memory. Doreen Massey asks “what is it that determines our degrees of mobility, that influences the sense we have of space and place?”¹⁷⁰ Massey goes on to argue that as a woman, she often is made to feel out of place by men, not capital. In line with Massey’s question, movement for Arabs is an unpleasant experience and functions as a shared memory. In opposition to Hajji’s claim that film allowed the colonized to appear in motion and in progress, movement is an extraordinary feat and, as demonstrated previously, Arabs are often described as motionless refusing to progress beyond their past. Demerdash argues that moving through spaces contributes to transgressing “geopolitical hegemonies.”¹⁷¹ Moreover, describing artistic inspiration, Demerdash states:

Under constant military and police surveillance, in its security apparatus, the site [borders] transforms into a place for tremendous creativity, with strategies constantly being reinforced so as to subvert the various infrastructures of the borders...¹⁷²

Security devices influence Arabs’ sense of place as they move through borders; these technologies capture and assign meaning to memories. There is an abundance of surveillance archives on Arabs in any given western country complemented by a wealth of cultural memory, yet little is mentioned in dominant history: of course, this observation intimately intersects with Muslims in general. Arab populations are surveilled thoroughly in airports and there are plenty of archival memories of terrorist attacks and the stark contrasts of Muslim Arabs living in western society. Leaving Arabs out of mainstream dominant history in western societies emphasizes the representation of

¹⁷⁰ Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place,” Pg. 2

¹⁷¹ Nancy Demerdash, “Bordering nowhere,” Pg. 259

¹⁷² Nancy Demerdash, “Bordering nowhere,” Pg. 267

negative memories and supports the interpretation of sameness that defines place. Demerdash, recognizing the power dynamics of representing memory, believes that despite the limitations of borders and the overbearing presence of power, artists can subvert the space and carve out an alternative meaning to captured memories.

Saudi Arabian artist, Maha Malluh, takes up the issue of surveillance in a digital print titled *Screened*. This piece appears to replicate the airport baggage x-rays which look into carry-on luggage as shoes are untied and sweaters are removed and bodies are examined using body x-ray machines or metal detectors. Malluh's print is concerned with providing a different perspective, where those who are surveilled can look at what is seen during the surveillance. The bag appears empty and lacking in anything substantial as it heavily carries 'otherness' with its distinct products and outdated technologies. The x-ray, as a medium, is used as a form of efficient surveillance and so the image it produces is assigned meaning based on suspicion. The surveilled seeing the product of surveillance subverts the power exerted by state at a creative level.

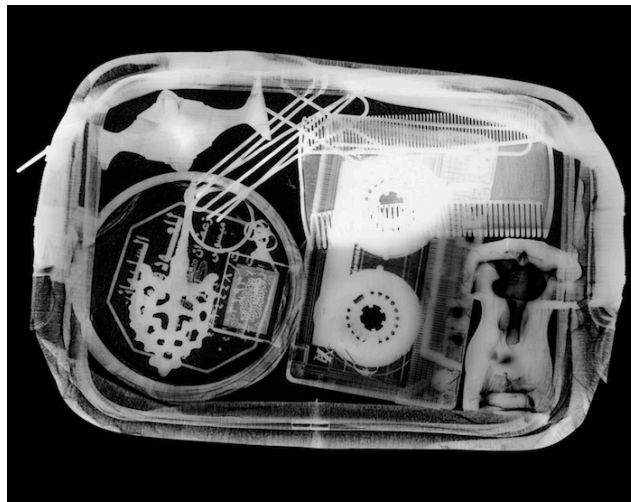


Figure 2.3: *Screened*, Maha Malluh (2008)

A few objects stand out in this bag that are consistent with the theme of the series *tradition and modernity*. There is an Arabic kohl, the bottle is in the top left hand corner and the wand has loosened and is right below the bottle in the shape of a tree of sorts. There are simple kohl bottles that can be purchased and discarded easily, but there are also very decorative metal kohl bottles that are traditional and deeply adored. Personally,

growing up in an Arab household, my mother would put kohl on our eyes because she believed it could ward off evil and protect our eyes from the climate, the bottle we used was in the same shape as the one in Malluh's print. The bag also includes a cassette, Malluh explains that these "passé cassettes" demand that people gather to listen, drawing out a sense of belonging. It appears that joining the kohl and the cassette is a hair comb, a canister and some sort of body, perhaps a figure that alludes to a body when passed under an x-ray machine.

Cultural memory creates an opportunity to determine and preserve relevant memories that may reside outside dominant history. In support, Michel Foucault states that "if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism" suggesting that shared memory is directly connected to how people relate.¹⁷³ There are battles over recovering memory and attempts to silence or reclaim, deny or assert. These battles are part of an attempt to control the overall narrative which will inform how people understand and relate to their past, future and each other. Personal memories play an important role in maintaining group identity because they are political when formed under traumatic experiences of oppression, war and discrimination.¹⁷⁴ Among placeless populations, personal memories of travels and tribulations are often shared among group members, as is the case with Arab folks. Moving between borders or attempting to make a life in a different place produces a set of lived experiences for Arab folks that may center on struggle and may be amplified or altered in accordance with the repercussion of a larger political event—for example, the National Council of Canadian Muslims reported that there had been a large spike in hate crimes against Muslims in 2016 motivated by the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida and divisive rhetoric against Muslims in politics during the year.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Pg. 6 (op. cit.)

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, Pg. 2

¹⁷⁵ National Council of Canadian Muslims, Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Hate Crimes Report*. (2016) Note: The attack was carried out by a man identified as Muslim and connected to a terrorist organization. This information was used by islamophobic people pushing violent rhetoric and led to physical attacks against the Muslim community for being associated.

These highly individual memories transform into cultural memory because they are impacted by larger political events and contribute to group identity.

Paul Connerton's article "Seven Types of Forgetting," identifies the ways different strategies of forgetting work alongside memory to achieve certain ends; his third type of forgetting is titled "Forgetting That is Constitutive in The Formation of a New Identity."¹⁷⁶ He argues that forgetfulness is often associated with a sense of loss for Europe and North America, consistent with Jelin's claim that there is a cult surrounding the past in the west, which Nora refers to as a "preservation of the past." Connerton posits, one, that there are small and consistent processes of forgetfulness that occur gradually to change society and reshape group identity—such as moving away from feudal systems and changes in vocabulary.¹⁷⁷ Second, he proposes that which is "allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects," suggesting that discarding unproductive memories permit people to come together under a common identity.¹⁷⁸ Stuart Cunningham observed that diasporic media has a tendency towards "compulsive memorialization," reinforcing their pasts as it confronts dominant cultures globally.¹⁷⁹ Combining Connerton and Cunningham, Jelin suggests that memory contributes to group identity specifically those who are "oppressed, silenced or discriminated" against.¹⁸⁰ She goes on to explain that shared memory contributes to support and confidence among those within the identity group: Arab individuals are more likely to identify with each other if they feel that they all share experiences of oppression at some level. Further, shared memories of past events suggest that there is a need to achieve a standard set of memories that can be captured and recalled through mnemonic aid with little variation in the assigned meaning. Standardizing memories leads to silencing survivors and creates a

¹⁷⁶ Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting." *Memory Studies 1*. (2008) Pg. 62

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, Pg. 64

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, Pg. 63

¹⁷⁹ Stuart Cunningham, "Popular Media as Public," Pg. 138

¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Pg. 2

narrative beneficial to the dominant power. Using shared memory to encourage cohesion implicitly recommends that there also be a process of “forgetting” other memories, as Connerton suggests, to promote commonality. This exchange is eerily reminiscent of Brinkerhoff’s discussion regarding ‘meta-diasporas,’ multiple group identities form under a singular identity often motivated by experiences of oppression and discrimination—such as the Muslim or Arab diaspora.

Yet, prioritizing personal memory leads to a discussion on nostalgia. While searching for a definition of ‘diaspora,’ plenty of authors included a desire to return or maintain the idea of home as a characteristic. The discussing a desire or yearning to return home ignites nostalgia as Sonja de Leew and Ingegerd Rydin discovered in their research into the influence of media on the identity of diasporic children.¹⁸¹ Nostalgia should not be taken up dismissively or in shame; instead it is a supplement permitting Arab populations the ability to voice and confront their memories as they contribute to cultural memory. However, to discuss nostalgia and cultural memory, I must briefly weave in the concept of linear time which has haunted the representation of Arab identity.

Haunted by placelessness, the relationship between time and nostalgia has been adjusted to cover a different sort of loss. Peters explains, “The history of nostalgia also evinces a shift from a lost home in space (the patria) to a lost home in time (the past).”¹⁸² Peters describes nostalgia as a condition that has been uprooted from space and repositioned within time, nostalgia is not concerned with returning home as much as it is concerned with returning to a desirable time in the past. Svetlana Boym complements Peters’ statement and adds that “a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once.”¹⁸³ Boym is reinforcing the point that home does not play the same role in nostalgia, arguably that the concept of placelessness is having an impression on the

¹⁸¹ Sonya de Leew and Ingegerd Rydin, “Diasporic Mediated Spaces,” Pg. 191

¹⁸² John D. Peters, “Exile, Nomadism, Diaspora,” Pg. 30

¹⁸³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) Pg. 50

emotions spurred by nostalgia. She expands on Peters' explanation by stating:

In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.¹⁸⁴

Interestingly, Boym contextualizes nostalgia to be against dominant history, leaning towards the setup of cultural memory where multiple individual accounts are threaded together producing varied narratives. It is apparent that while progress is celebrated in western societies and desired by others, there is a strong aversion, or “rebellion,” to idealizing the future and forward movement, Boym argues that nostalgia is a byproduct of modernity.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, she handles time in a way that suggests an attempt to make time placeless. Barthes' claim that mnemonic aids that “speak Death” should transcend time sadly reflecting on the declining popularity of monuments. Although monuments can transcend time, they are attached to a defined space, immovable in contrast to the displaced existence of so many. Memory—or mnemonic aid—must be travel-sized so it can cross borders and carry meaning without demanding a pilgrimage to a site—illustrated in *Screened* (fig. 2.3). Nostalgia's fight with time means that it does not move between looking at the past and looking at the future, Boym suggests that nostalgia is often “sideways,” refusing to be limited within time along with space.¹⁸⁶ Nostalgia should not be thought of as an attempt to return to a past or something that should be rejected in order to move towards a future, rather it is an attempt to step off linear temporality—which can be visualized as a moving treadmill—and reflect on memories; taking on a similar liminal space as moving through borders.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, Pg. xv

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, Pg. xvi

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, Pg. xiv

Further expanding on nostalgia, Boym proposes the concept of “reflective nostalgia,” defined as valuing memories in multiple spaces and time zones.¹⁸⁷ Boym lovingly unpacks reflective nostalgia as “ironic and humorous,” arguing that reflective nostalgic does not idealize home nor live with a false hope of returning, rather it dances with fragmented memories with no end. She goes on to say:

Nostalgics of the second type [reflective nostalgics] are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; home is in ruins or, in the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition.¹⁸⁸

Here the Palestinian diaspora must be taken up separately from the general discussion regarding Arabs. There are Palestinians from villages that no longer exist on a map and a homeland that is occupied and constantly at the brink of being completely overtaken. Further, Palestinians are facing “repressive erasure,” defined by Connerton as an attempt by the state to encourage the population to forget about certain historical narratives to consolidate power of some sort; quoting Milan Kundera, Connerton asserts “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”¹⁸⁹ In the Palestinian case, reflective nostalgia contributes to the production of a larger cultural memory that can transcend the borders that separate a diasporic community without drowning in melancholy. The nostalgia is productive and transformative.

To illustrate concisely, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut, Lebanon and lived in London, England for some time, she is part of the diaspora. Hatoum’s *Misbah* is an installation in which a ceiling lamp, when turned on, reflects the images of what appears to be soldiers holding guns and stars. The ceiling lamp is a play on decorative lamps made for children designed in ‘oriental’ fashion—arguably close to Islamic art—but the images that appear are mirroring of violence. In this piece, there is a dialogue

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, Pg. xviii

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, Pg. 50

¹⁸⁹ Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” Pg. 60

between the playfulness of childhood, designs reminiscent of a past era, and violent military powers—it should be noted that this piece was produced in the same year conflict between the Gaza strip and Israel was intensifying.



Figure 2.4: *Misbah*, Mona Hatoum (2006-07)

In contrast, queer Palestinian artist Raafat Hattab grew up in Jaffa and currently lives in Tel Aviv. His video installation *Houria* consists of Hattab’s aunt speaking to the camera about *al nakba* and how it impacted the family (fig. 2.5).¹⁹⁰ While his aunt narrates the story, the camera cuts to Hattab at a beach between Jaffa and Tel Aviv dressed as a mermaid and at one point wearing what looks like a fishing net. Other scenes include Hattab at a tattoo parlor getting the phrase “bride of Palestine” tattooed on his chest in traditional Arabic calligraphy.

¹⁹⁰ Note: *al nakba*, briefly, refers to a period in which Palestinians were expelled from their homes.

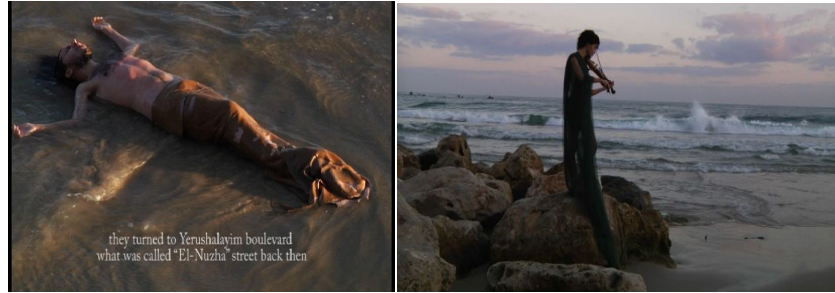


Figure 2.5: *Houria*, Raafat Hattab (2011)

Hattab’s video highlights the aesthetic and material diversity that defines contemporary Arab art. Colleen Jankovic and Nadia Awad argue that Hattab’s attire suggest that he is changing the approach to a “masculinist narrative of Palestinian national loss and struggle for return,” rejecting gender identity and human form by incorporating the mermaid bottom.¹⁹¹ Memories are recalled with the subtle intrusion of his violin and the vulgar buzzing of the tattoo needle, as he performs a kind of diasporic dance with the sea. In her description of reflective nostalgia, Boym states that “it loves details.”¹⁹² in the picture on the left there is a subtitle in which the aunt refers to a street— “Yerushalayim boulevard”— and immediately includes what the street was named before *al nakba* and occupation of Palestine. In that instant, the detail is intent on existing in a narrative that is much larger and impactful beyond the street name, yet the magnitude of the nostalgia is such that is the inclusion of the original street name is necessary.

While honoring the pain of the past, Hattab demands queer Palestinians create their own language to describe their lives, rejecting the desire to use English to describe gender and sexual identities. As Hattab performs, he is at once experiencing the past in his aunt’s narration, the present as he lays on the shore, and the future by presenting his queerness

¹⁹¹ Colleen Jankovic, Nadia Awad, “Queer/Palestinian Cinema: A Critical Conversation on Palestinian Queer and Women’s Filmmaking,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 27 (Duke University Press, 2012) Pg. 140

¹⁹² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) Pg. xviii

in a way distinct to Palestine. In the same sense, in Hatoum's installation as with Hattab's, there is a break in the barrier between personal and public, home and outside, memory and history. Her installation indicates a homely existence of violence—particularly war—emphasized by the inclusion of stars, a soft light, and beautiful traditional lamp designs that project images of soldiers with guns. The inclusion of traditional designs and references to childhood appeals to memories of the past and Hatoum produces a cultural product that embodies memory and the present.

Further, these two artists are engaging with memories and topics that are being repressed by the state. This more clearly demonstrable in Hattab's *Houria* where his aunt is confronting erasure by passing on the family memories of a lost Palestine. In Hatoum's installation, she inspires a feeling of disorientation since the soldiers look as though they can be children playing and the room looks ready to be overtaken by joyful children or a sleeping baby. The sense of disorientation functions as confronting erasure in the sense that it brings to 'light' the violence occurring, the representing the memories in an installation is a refusal to be forgotten.

In a comparable circumstance, Boym takes up the unique situation of Soviet artist Ilya Kabakov who moved from a Ukrainian village to Moscow for art school, living in poverty with his mother and insisted on being identified as a Soviet artist after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Kabakov's case, time changed quickly, as it does often. Boym writes that his art installations showcased contradictory impulses "one to transcend the everyday in some kind of collective fairy tale, and the other to inhabit the most uninhabitable ruins, to survive and preserve memories."¹⁹³ Kabakov highlights the despair evident in the frenzied archiving of memories Nora detests, a desire to move beyond the present, presumably towards the future, and an equal desire to live with the shadows of memories and archive them. In line with Jelin, Kabakov's art engages with the precariousness of existing in multiple temporalities in conjunction with intolerable spaces—such as the

¹⁹³ Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes," *Critical Inquiry* (1998): Pg. 515

communal toilet.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, he also personally had to deal with the drama of the fall of the Soviet Union, overnight becoming stuck between being Russian or Ukrainian and opting to continue to identify as a “Soviet artist.”¹⁹⁵ He exists in different temporalities and narratives, both historical and through cultural memory.

Time, Jelin explains, is not neatly divided between past, present and future, rather these different periods intersect and fold into each other. She states:

It is at that point of complex intersection and convergence, in that present where the past is the space of experience and the future is the horizon of expectations, where human action is produced.¹⁹⁶

Jelin is explaining that in the present experiences and expectations exist at once and motivates different actions. She is identifying the intricate negotiation that occurs between past— “present past”—and future within the present— “future made present”— meanwhile each individual or society must “orient” themselves between the different narratives and times.¹⁹⁷ That is not to say that one narrative and one time must be selected, rather it is to suggest that there are multiple narratives and temporalities that exist at once and are subject to change. Warning of the horizon of expectation, Demerdash argues that while the horizon may embody “hope” or “yearning,” it also represents the “ominous, wide-reaching magnitude and governmentality of the state.”¹⁹⁸ The horizon, representing the future and the literal horizon, should not only cause positive feelings regarding the future, the hope and yearning for a better existence.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, Pg. 508

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, Pg. 504

¹⁹⁶ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Pg. 4

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Nancy Demerdash, “Bordering nowhere,” Pg. 266

Rather, she is recommending that the horizon also be understood as symbolizing state power, especially when displaced folks reach the horizon and encounter armed borders.

Further, Jelin states that “memories of the past intrudes” on the present and can leave traces while disrupting.¹⁹⁹ She asserts that while the past may occupy the present, it still requires people to transform these intrusive memories of the past to be productive with assigned meanings, people like artists who assign meaning to the past through creative expression. Syrian artist Khaled Takreti concurs, poetically stating, “Time goes by and the traces that it leaves on us become clearer and clearer,” referring to the cost of conflict and the weight of memories that are made in or intrude on the present.²⁰⁰ On the other hand, Hattab, for instance, occupies three different temporalities, accepting a single narrative of the past based on his aunt’s memory while working on transforming the future based on his own “horizon of expectation,” all of which are occurring in the present.

2.3 Subverting Time:

The Arab artist is constantly negotiating their own identity, memories and their work while living in a state of placelessness. Based on the discussion in this chapter, it is appropriate to conclude that the contemporary Arab artist exists in several temporalities and regularly moves among them. This section intends on concluding the discussions on cultural memory and nostalgia by examining three artworks by three artists to highlight the manifestation of the different analysis explored in this chapter.

I want to begin with Nouf Al Himiary, a young artist who is quickly becoming a rising star in the Arab art scene as her photo series titled, *The Desire to Not Exist* (2015), is well-known. To start the process of unpacking art work, I want to begin with Al Himiary’s smart photo series titled, *What She Wore*. This series was interested in

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Pg. 5

²⁰⁰ Till Fellrath, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 66

documenting girls' fashion in multiple setting, Al Himiary “spinoff the popular concept Outfit of The Day” took place in Saudi Arabia, where she currently lives.²⁰¹



Figure 2.6: *What She Wore*, Nouf Alhimiary (2013)

The photo (fig. 2.6) is effectively what every girl depicted was wearing—an abaya—with subtle hints of individuality through the color of their scarves or accessories. Al Himiary concludes the photo series by stating that the abaya can be classified as the “unchangeable outfit of the day.”²⁰² This unchangeable outfit settles uncomfortably in the present as it hints at a past that has been washed away by the desert sands. Further, all the women depicted are outside their houses participating in society—library, school, parking lot, fast food place, or arcade—the outdoors aspect of the series suggests that the future and the past can be traced within the present. Temporalities are conflating and

²⁰¹ Nouf Al Himiary, “What She Wore,” *Nouf ling*, <http://art.noufling.com/what-she-wore.html>

²⁰² *ibid.*

confronting the divide between tradition and modernity within Saudi society as well as the deepening the sense of placelessness.

Attempting to express the feeling of disconnect among Saudi citizens, artist Manal Al Dowayan produced a series titled *And We Had No Shared Dreams*. Al Dowayan conceptualizes this series to reflect the impersonal nature of cities and their inhabitants generating an existence that cannot satisfy those who live among the buildings and busy streets. Effectively, Al Dowayan is discussing the placelessness she believes city folk experience. She states that she created this series as “an imagined conversation between urban inhabitants and their cityscape,” in which the relationship is plagued by uncertainty.²⁰³



Figure 2.7: *Nostalgia Carries Us But Desire Keeps Us Away*. Manal Al Dowayan (2010)

Within the context of this chapter, Al Dowayan’s work speaks to another form of peculiarity: the title of this photo from the series is *Nostalgia Carries Us But Desire*

²⁰³ Manal Al Dowayan, “And We Had No Shared Dreams,” *Manal Al Dowayan*, <http://www.manaldowayan.com/and-we-had-no-shared-dreams.html>

Keeps Us Away. Firstly, the photo appears to be two separate photos joined together, connoting movement and distance. The title of the work is overlaying the photo; the words are traced making them bright mimicking a neon light sign.

The pervasive horizon in this work is a reminder of the contrasting opinions of Jelin and Demerdash. Jelin explained that the “horizon of expectation” is the future as it manifests in the present and has an impact the way people orient themselves in the world in many ways. In contrast, Demerdash suggested that the horizon remains forever elusive, ominous and riddled with the “governmentality of the state.” She was concerned with the harm borders have on displaced folks and the impacts of chasing the horizon. In Al Dowayan’s work, the horizon appears serene and inspires a longing in the viewer.

Further, the title of the series, *And We Had No Shared Dreams* appears to comment on a lack of collectivity in the group. Shared dreams suggest that there needs to be a memory of the past and connectivity in the present to inspire a dream for the future within the group. To state that there was a lack of “shared dreams” indicates an absence of past memories and a disconnect in the present. This analysis aligns with Al Dowayan’s concept for the series, folks in the city may very well forget past memories and can be so removed that group cohesion falters and dreams fade.

The other line that is of particular interest, which speaks directly to Boym’s discussion on nostalgia, is the title of the work itself (fig. 2.7), is *Nostalgia Carries Us But Desire Keeps Us Away*. Boym has argued that reflective nostalgia does not always desire returning home and sometimes it does not look to the past or future with longing. It is the “impossibility of homecoming” that rotates from being “homesick to sick of being home.”²⁰⁴ However, Boym asserts that nostalgia can also be productive in transforming the present, it does not have to be melancholic. Al Dowayan’s title is supported by Boym’s position, stating that “nostalgia carries us” echoes the productive capabilities of nostalgia with easing the pain of placelessness and displacement. Following with “but

²⁰⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Pg. xvii, 50

desire keeps us away” suggests that there is a yearning to not return to or arrive at home, preferring not to be disappointed or made “sick of home.”

Concluding this chapter is Ahmed Matar’s work titled *Evolution of Man*. In an interview with Catherine David, Matar explains that his work is influenced by the gap between rural and city life, the lack of human relations and consumerism.²⁰⁵ In this piece Matar is directly engaging with the impacts of the oil industry, perhaps more broadly the modernity oil production encouraged. In this piece, a pump evolves into what appears to be a man holding a gun to his head using an x-ray type aesthetic



Figure 2.8: *Evolution of Man*, Ahmed Matar (2010)

By naming this piece *Evolution of Man*, Matar is challenging the demand for progress set up by modernity and implying it will result in men evolving into committing suicide. The evolution from an oil pump into a person holding a gun to their head suggests that the oil industry is causing a profound displeasure with life. There is a rejection of the future as it is manifesting in the present, it is a rejection of the “horizon of expectations.”

²⁰⁵ Catherine David et al. “Ahmed Matar,” in *Edge of Arabia*. ed. Stapleton, Stephen A., et al. (London, UK: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012), Pg. 171

This chapter sought to lay down the last of the theoretical discussion, namely, a brief history on contemporary Arab art and the difficulties of defining Arab artists, the discourse surrounding collective memory, reflective nostalgia, and some references to temporality. I utilized some works by contemporary Arab artists throughout the chapter to demonstrate interplay between theories. Ending the chapter, I draw from works by Al Himiary, Al Dawayan, and Matar which suggest that there is a collusion between modernizing forces and life in Saudi Arabia. I do not want to be tied in the narrative of Saudi society as oppressive because it would not be fair to the art produced or the intended meaning. Rather, the art is subtly and distantly negotiating and detailing the trauma and collective memory of the Saudi population through the expressed banality of everyday girls' wear, the serene horizon of expectations that will never be met, and the use of the oil pump that has come to represent the wealth of Saudi Arabia—the use of x-ray could be a commentary the desire to see what is within.

Up to this point, I have had limited discussions bridging theories to contemporary Arab art. The next section, chapter 3, is solely devoted to unpacking the life of Arab artist Ahmed Alsoudani and analyze two of his artworks within the framework set up by the previous chapters. Bridging the framework with Alsoudani's artworks will allow chapter 3 to wrap up the project by bringing all the various pieces and putting them together.

Chapter 3

3. Alsoudani: Painting Memory and Trauma

Ending the first chapter I argued that the Arab diasporas are not separate from the Arab non-diaspora, rather both groups communicate, contemplate and face similar issues and circumstances. The conditions that displaced large populations of Arabs occurred in recent history and continue into contemporary times, influencing the content of popular media and negotiation of hybrid identities. I have referenced the many conflicts that have gripped the Middle East several times to contextualize the overwhelming feeling of placelessness by many Arabs. Drawing from Jennifer Brinkerhoff and other authors I argued that these conflicts have contributed to facilitating a sense of shared identity among the Arab population around the world. The mass displacement of the Arab population demands that definitions of diaspora be expanded to include the unique Arab situation. Towards the end of the first chapter, I combined several authors to provide an alternative definition of the Arab diaspora. I recognized the Arab diaspora as a ‘meta-diaspora,’ a community that lives globally, sustains communication through culture, shares collective memories, culture, fate, and experiences alienation in the host country—I also argued that the Arab non-diaspora should be included in under the umbrella of this definition. Largely guiding this definition is the overwhelming presence of constant war and political turmoil in the region and experiences of violence and aggression for those living around the globe.

The parameters defined in the first chapter contributed to the approach of the second chapter as it introduced contemporary Arab art—which freely utilizes multiple styles, mediums and popular culture references—and its relation to cultural memory and nostalgia, folding in aspects of the concept of time. There are attempts within the population to reconcile and collectively support each other through trauma stemming from war and increasing instability. The second chapter detailed the role of images and popular culture in recalling memories that may reside outside the borders of dominant history—labelled mnemonic aids. The underlying theme bridging these chapters is that popular culture and images have the capacity to relay memories that counter dominant

narratives to facilitate communication between the diasporic and non-diasporic population.

In this chapter, my aim is to apply the framework from the first chapter to the discussion from the second chapter by unpacking the life and work of Ahmed Alsoudani. His biography has been marked by various conflicts despite his physical absence from the homeland. Alsoudani's life exemplifies the experience of being diasporic and the intensity of the shared fate and memories with those who remain in the homeland. Alsoudani's experience conveys the intimacy between diaspora and non-diaspora while his work engages with themes that attempt to grapple with the conditions of displacement. Utilizing Alsoudani's work as an example allows this chapter to concentrate on demonstrating the interplay of: the hauntings of memory and witnessing, elements of nostalgic reflections, historical disputes regarding Islamic art as it relates to contemporary Arab art, and place. This chapter features two artworks—*We Die Out of Hand* (fig. 3.1) and *You No Longer Have Hands* (fig. 3.2)—these paintings will work in concert to represent different perspectives on expression and diasporic existence.

3.1 Biography of Ahmed Alsoudani

Born in 1975 in Baghdad, Iraq, growing up as both the Iran-Iraq War (1980-'88) and the Gulf War (1990-'91) took place. Ahmed Alsoudani found himself in trouble at the age of twenty in 1995 when he graffitied over a picture of then-President Saddam Hussein.²⁰⁶ His family feared that he might be arrested and harmed by the state and they encouraged Alsoudani to escape to Damascus, Syria.²⁰⁷ Living as an exile in Syria without the possibility of obtaining Syrian citizenship translated into being categorized as “stateless,” he explains “It's almost as though you don't exist,” filling his life with uncertainty and

²⁰⁶ Mark Bessire, “Neither/Nor: American Dream, Exiled Hero,” in *Ahmed Alsoudani*

Redacted (Phoenix Art Museum, 2013) Pg. 21

²⁰⁷ Shamim Momin, “Shamim Momin on Ahmed Alsoudani,” in *Ahmed Alsoudani* (Phoenix Art Museum, 2013) Pg. 7

placeless.²⁰⁸ The categorization of his place in Syria is quite informative; he moved from a state under severe surveillance to being non-existent in another. During his time in Syria, Alsoudani worked on improving his artistic skill and displayed his first show. Although he was labelled “stateless” and feels as though he does not have a place within Syrian society, Alsoudani found inspiration and drive leading to a successful debut of his art. It was this very debut that contributed to Alsoudani receiving permanent residency status and moving to the United States of America.

Alsoudani moved to America in 1998 and continued to practice and hone his artistic skills, later graduating from Maine College of Art and Yale University and gained popularity among the art community at large. While Alsoudani’s artwork became recognized and his life more ordered, the events of 9/11 shook and transformed the world bringing about the Afghanistan war as well as the Iraq War. Living in America, he feels that the war is pitting his Muslim, Iraqi identity against the position of the ‘host’ country—his identities were and are in conflict. Alsoudani safely took up residence in America as it committed harm by invading Iraq, where his family continued to live—he witnessed the war from afar.

Alsoudani’s diasporic existence—the root of his placelessness—is heavily related to situations of war and persecution that contribute to his trauma. It is important to stress that the conditions of diaspora experienced by the Arab diaspora—exemplified in Alsoudani’s biography—intimately relate to the emotional and physical exercise of violence by powerful actors. Consistent with Elizabeth Jelin’s argument in the second chapter, memory assists in buttressing group identity when that group suffers from oppression, and archiving the memory is a response to the emotional and physical violence experienced under oppression. The conditions of Alsoudani’s experience led to

²⁰⁸ Christian Viveros-Faune, “Shock and Awe: Ahmed Alsoudani’s History Painting for

the Digital Age,” in *Ahmed Alsoudani Redacted* (Phoenix Art Museum, 2013) Pg.

his art often commenting on war often through memory. However, he expertly pivots away from the trappings of documentation and archiving of memory.²⁰⁹ His art reflects on war by way of “the depth and universality of emotion,” emphasizing the value of expressing the internal dilemma that war and violence inspire to work through the trauma.²¹⁰ Alsoudani’s artistic work is a part of the large array of cultural products that aim to archive Arab memories of war and express the trauma it left behind, Alsoudani’s expression converts into a cultural memory of sorts that informs the future narrative of these events among the Arab population. Alsoudani embodies the complexity of diasporic existence and the difficulties of navigating and archiving memory and emotions as they occur—in real time.

Relaying memories and emotions through art is not without anxieties. Recalling Sam Bardaouil’s argument, Arab artists often experience “acute post-colonial anxiety,” fearing that their work may be misinterpreted and used to validate further violence.²¹¹ The topic of war, particularly as it relates to the Middle East taken up by an artist living in America, makes artists fearful of the possibility that their work could be misinterpreted in a way that invites personal harm—scandal or financial penalties—or encourages more violence.²¹² For Alsoudani, the risk of being misinterpreted has been described as “internalized in the work,” which performs as being “an archive of terror that allows all to bear witness.”²¹³ He pulls from his lived experience, which is implicitly dominated by fear and ties it to his art in such a way that it translates to the viewer.

²⁰⁹ Shamim Momin, “...on Ahmed Alsoudani,” Pg. 9

²¹⁰ *ibid.*

²¹¹ Sam Bardaouil, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 25

²¹² Mark Bessire, “Neither/Nor: American Dream, Exiled Hero,” Pg. 23

²¹³ *ibid.*, Pg. 23

3.2 Time, Space and Memory:

Building on Alsoudani's theme of war is the intersection of time and space. Bardaouil observes that there is a growing interest in abstract time and the demand to deconstruct its linearity through aesthetic.²¹⁴ Complementing Bardaouil, Boym suggested that mnemonic aids should be able to travel with displaced populations, crossing borders and resettling elsewhere. Between both artists is a desire to re-imagine time—subverting the bordered and, sometimes, spatial divide implicit in linear time—and displace memory—the past—from space. It is the desire to confront the “*impossibility of sitedness*” that the time-space axis ideally demands.²¹⁵ Time and mnemonic aids cannot remain bordered and definitive when under the condition of placelessness. I want to contextualize the influence of time and space on Alsoudani to better understand his motivations to subvert both.

In 2003, the American-led invasion of Iraq deeply affected Alsoudani, he reflected:

I'm away physically, but I talk to my family very often, so I feel caught in between. The state of being “in between” two places and two worlds allows me to see and hear things from a different point of view.²¹⁶

The images of the Iraq war are prevalent in news coverage and accessible online, playing out on multiple forms of media. Alsoudani experienced a combination of “the familiar and the unknown” and “immediacy, and yet simultaneous distance.”²¹⁷ Images of Baghdad on the television screen are familiar to Alsoudani as his home, the destruction and rubble hangs heavily over him and casts him into the “unknown.” Alsoudani sees

²¹⁴ Sam Bardaouil, *Untold, Told, Retold*, Pg. 17,18

²¹⁵ Nancy Demerdash, “Bording nowhere,” Pg. 259

²¹⁶ *ibid.*, Pg. 16

Christian Viveros-Faune, “Shock and Awe,” Pg. 17

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, Pg. 16

Shamim Momin, “...on Ahmed Alsoudani,” Pg. 7

images of violence while living in America, he is forced into the “unknown” feeling of being liminal, caught between two very different locations that are at war with each other. Further, access to information and his ability to reach his family through the telephone temporarily compresses the distance between the two locations but also highlights the spatial separation. He explains “Emotionally I was there, but physically I was helpless.”²¹⁸ Alsoudani is attached to two places—emotionally in Iraq and physically in America—effectively making him neither here nor there, rather “in between.”

Liminality, suffering from “in-between,” breaks down the bordered order of both time and space. Alsoudani is experiencing multiple temporalities that are spatially separate—emotionally ‘there’ but physically ‘here’. His experience of liminality is complicated by the fact that he only experienced home as a place of oppression, in which he had to flee. As he states “emotionally I was there,” Alsoudani dances with a sense of nostalgia as theorized by Boym—what he wants is tied to a sense of home and yet he is sick of home. He feels for a country he fled but wanted to become better. Alsoudani may not be emotionally tied to Iraq as the home it once was, but he is tied to it as the home it could have become and as the home that his family presently inhabits. Here Alsoudani and Kabakov find commonality, both exist in multiple temporalities hosted by painful spaces.

Experiencing liminality enabled Alsoudani to “see and hear things” from a different perspective and that wholly inspires his desire to undo temporality within his art. His experience of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has been carved by the impossible feeling of being in multiple spaces and time. This experience feeds into his ability to approach war and trauma in his art from a state of placelessness that is deeply diasporic: communicating this perspective necessitates that the viewer be temporally displaced. Underscoring Alsoudani’s intentions regarding the dismantling of temporality in his art, Shamim Momin states “even temporal directness in the face of true trauma is impossible.”²¹⁹ Momin’s statement reflects on the topic of war as tackled by Alsoudani,

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ *ibid.*, Pg. 9

arguing that trauma—and subsequently memory—distorts the ability to identify time. As Jelin explained, time is not neatly organized within ascribed borders, rather time often will fold into itself fiercely bringing the past into the present.²²⁰ Putting form to “true trauma,” for Alsoudani, translates to distortion of meaning and direct visual representation.

Alsoudani’s biography is often weighted more than his work which demands that I remain clear.²²¹ His life necessarily influences the content of his art such as living under conditions of war and oppression, leaving Iraq, becoming stateless in Syria, moving to America, and watching the invasion of Iraq while still in touch with family, all of which inspires a feeling of liminality. These influences do not override the art, but function alongside the art to provide context and indicate a starting point for the analysis. With his biography in mind, I want to move on to discuss the theme of war and unpack Alsoudani’s aesthetic choices.

As stated previously, Alsoudani’s art is often preoccupied with the theme of war. Alsoudani’s life is dominated by the presence of war and is exuberated by the continuous political instability and uncertainty regarding the potential of another war. Moreover, images of war are plentiful, whether on abstractly discussed in American news channels or glorified in Hollywood films. Alsoudani’s art provides a different perspective, taking on the theme of war beyond the images of torn bodies. He is not interested in glorifying or clarifying war and its reasons, instead Alsoudani tries to communicate the difficulty of coping with war, the memories and traumas that come out of it. Alsoudani adamantly states:

²²⁰ *ibid.*

²²¹ Sara Cochran, “Collateral Damage: Looking and Seeing the Painting of Ahmed Alsoudani,” in *Ahmed Alsoudani Redacted* (Pheonix Art Museum, 2013) Pg. 25

I'm not trying to make 'war paintings', but paintings about war. I'm most interested in depicting the effects of war on people who live under these circumstances.²²²

Alsoudani does not allow war to distract and rule over his art by forcibly defining his art as solely "about war," allowing his art to be interpreted in regards to the many threads that pull out of the theme. War—in the form of battle scenes—is removed from starting point for analysis for interpreting his art.²²³ Alsoudani is firmly interested in expressing the emotional turmoil and devastation that war imprints. In Alsoudani's art, as he strictly defines the theme of war, there is also a desire to "bear witness" to the trauma and horrors perpetuated during times of war, to encourage the viewer to confront the cost of war without turning away.²²⁴ He is dedicated to producing art that demands the viewer to engage and reflect with the difficulties of war. Alsoudani's paintings are not obsessed with war as much as they are obsessed with the trauma and memories war leaves behind.

Alsoudani's strong statement defining his work as "paintings about war," is reinforced in his sensitivity towards imagery and aesthetic. Pierre Nora argued that the availability of the camera has led to constant archival of memories, a need to take a picture of every mundane experience as a memory. Supporting Nora, Khalid Hajji disapproved of the "power of sight" over all other senses and the rise of image culture, arguing that it made it easier to commodify images. Cameras and images make memorializing and transporting information convenient and vividly visual.

Alsoudani recognizes the role of images and purposefully remains distant, his paintings are often highly abstract refusing to be immediately understood. Alsoudani's insistence on ambiguous abstract form is described as respect, granting the viewer the ability to

²²² Christian Viveros-Faune, "Shock and Awe," Pg. 16

²²³ Shamim Momin, "...on Ahmed Alsoudani," Pg. 9

²²⁴ Sara Cochran, "Collateral Damage," Pg. 25

interpret the painting in multiple ways without being fed information.²²⁵ Alsoudani worries that if he incorporates images, his work will become “indistinguishable from the media,” which suggests that he is cautiously opposed to creating work that superficially reflects on war, that feeds the viewer repetitive statements and information.²²⁶

Images of war can reduce the torn body into a commodity to be consumed through television or newspapers. Sometimes, these same images are recreated in films for more consumption for the purposes of entertainment. Images are often distant and unrelatable, dead bodies are unable to convey cries for humanity or emotion because they are interpreted as far too removed from daily life—these bodies do not reflect immediate surroundings nor resemble familiar faces. Alsoudani’s refusal to use images and photographs is also a refusal to provide comfort to the viewer. Quoting Gerhard Richter, Momin states, “I’d say the photograph provokes horror and the painting...something more like grief.”²²⁷ Richter recognizes that photographs can remind us that “we are the survivors” while also depicting our doom. Photographs may incite horror by providing a clear visual of a situation and depicting our end. However, a photograph allows the viewer to find comfort in being a survivor, removed from the actual presence of horror. In contrast, Richter proposes that paintings can provoke the viewer to feel grief, which demands intimacy. Paintings do not permit the viewer take comfort in being a survivor or shudder in horror, rather they embraces the viewer and allows grief to spill.

Trauma, for Alsoudani, denies “temporal directness” and “embraces the impossibility of direct view.”²²⁸ Traumatic memories cannot be illustrated in clear form because the memories are broken—the mind is broken—having witnessed the violence of war. Incorporating abstract form in painting requires the viewer to use their imagination to

²²⁵ Christian Viveros-Faune, “Shock and Awe,” Pg. 15

²²⁶ Christian Viveros-Faune, “Shock and Awe,” Pg. 15

²²⁷ Shamim Momin, “...on Ahmed Alsoudani,” Pg. 11 (Richter Quoted)

²²⁸ *ibid.*, Pg. 9

understand what is seen, imagine the trauma of being broken after war. Alsoudani's paintings push the viewer into what is described as an "existential sense of horror and anguish."²²⁹ Sara Cochran expands:

they [viewer] cannot escape the dread of imagining what might be happening or what has just happened. This creates a space onto which viewers can project their fears and demons, because the unknown invites the irrational.²³⁰

Through abstraction, Alsoudani confronts the viewer demanding they reach into their "psyche's darkness" to ascribe meaning to the painting.²³¹ This process, Cochran explains, pits the viewer against their own fears while navigating waves of irrationality. The painting reflects to the viewer, spotlighting their ability imagine the unspeakable violence of war. Alsoudani's engagement with the viewer and insistence that they look inward flips the topic of the painting away from a spatially and temporally defined event—often stemming from the Iraq War because of his personal life—to a broader understanding that encourages emotional reactions to traumas of war irrespective of space and time.

3.3 Unpacking Alsoudani's Paintings

In chapter two, I briefly reviewed the contentious history of modern Arab art which evolved into contemporary Arab art. Shabout asserted that modern Arab art came to be when Arab artists decided to imitate modern western art and aesthetics. I went on to emphasize that contemporary Arab artists utilize a wide range of mediums to express themselves fully, often moving beyond traditional art mediums. Alsoudani's medium,

²²⁹ Sara Cochran, "Collateral Damage," Pg. 26

²³⁰ *ibid.*, Pg. 26

²³¹ Shamim Momin, "...on Ahmed Alsoudani," Pg. 9

aesthetic, and content disagree with the authors from chapter two and illustrates the inability to define Arab artists.

Alsoudani's paintings are often charcoal, pastel and acrylic directly on either paper or canvas which is described as an "age-old medium" and the artist as "stubbornly analog."²³² Alsoudani's choice of medium permits him create paintings that contain genuine emotions in the brushstrokes, filling the canvas or paper with layers that reveal themselves slowly over time. The medium conforms to his desire to move away from digital techniques that may obscure his intentions to avoid directness by allowing a direct view to the trauma.

Aside from being old and analog, Alsoudani is working with a contentious medium that originates from European art and fuels Shabout's claim that the borrowed medium instigated the modern Arab art scene. Complementing Shabout's assertion, Alsoudani is also heavily influenced by Francisco de Goya and his art portraying war and violence.²³³ There is considerable European presence in Alsoudani's medium and inspiration, but he engages with topics that are immediately relevant to the Arab population and communicates the precariousness of living under uncertainty. Alsoudani, as is the case with most Arab artists, refuses to be defined and limited. It is impossible to claim that he is not a contemporary or Arab artist.

Alsoudani is peculiar in his choice of medium but remains purposeful and conscious. The artist rarely titles his paintings; his first reason is to avoid tainting the viewer's perspective.²³⁴ Secondly, Alsoudani's work changes in meaning over time well after they have been made because they are temporally and spatially ambiguous, they are interpreted differently when they are re-visited over some time.²³⁵ Lastly, Alsoudani

²³² Christian Viveros-Faune, "Shock and Awe," Pg. 17

²³³ Shamim Momin, "...on Ahmed Alsoudani," Pg. 9

²³⁴ Mark Bessire, "Neither/Nor," Pg. 22

²³⁵ *ibid.*

perceives his paintings as fragments of a singular “maimed body,” much like a victim of war, his paintings are torn from the main body.²³⁶ Alsoudani’s reasoning behind refusing to title his paintings provides an interesting insight; the physical form—the canvas—is intended to reflect and honor the content it carries, the painting is intended to be as broken as the memories etched into the canvas.

Alsoudani’s painting titled *We Die Out of Hand* (fig. 3.1), depicts a violent clash taking place indoors. On the left side of the piece there is a figure gripping a bar and appears to be in motion. Below, facing away from the viewer, another figure is holding on to the bar, crunching its body into the bar as though bracing impact with the bar. This figure may have an open harness or cuff around their leg. Occupying the furthestmost bottom left corner is a dark shadowy figure with barely defined facial feature that is portraying an emotion, agony. On the right side of the piece, there are two figures with their faces covered by bags.



Figure 3.1: *We Die Out of Hand*, Ahmed Alsoudani (2007)

²³⁶ Shamim Momin, “...on Ahmed Alsoudani,” Pg. 10

The suggestion of violence in the brushwork and set up of the scene coupled with the cold brown and beige interior has led some to argue that the art piece is most likely referring to Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay Prison.²³⁷ The suggestion that this piece engages with either of these infamous prisons is likely based in Alsoudani's identity, which wrongly traps his painting within the realm of archiving memory and operating as media images that seek to feed information. I do agree that this painting is dealing with torture, but on a broad scale taking on the topic of torture removed from specific incidents.

Considering that Alsoudani refuses to title his paintings, the fact that this painting is titled means that the words were carefully chosen. To say something is "out of hand" suggests that it is beyond control and comments on the lack of power in a situation; to say "we die out of hand" implies that a group of people—"we"—are dying and it is beyond control or control cannot be exercised because there is a lack of power. The words take on a more nuanced meaning when combined with the torture scene in the painting. Torture provides the perpetrator with incredible power over the everyday life of the victim: their life is at the hands and mercy of the perpetrator. The title alludes to a displacement of the power to control one's own fate and the experience of violence. There is an inability to prevent or stop a group of people from dying because the power to do so is elsewhere, beyond our reach.

The second piece is *You No Longer Have Hands*. In this painting, there is a building to the left side that is marked by graffiti. In the center, a circular cluster of violent brushstrokes settles against a clear blue sky and brown sand; the colors in this painting lack vibrancy and are dull and grimy.

²³⁷ Saatchi Gallery



**Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.2: *You No Longer Have Hands*,
Ahmed Alsoudani (2007)**

This painting merges clear imagery and abstract technique to illustrate psychological ramification of war. Demanding attention is the cluster of brushstrokes that takes over most of the canvas; taking on the shape of tumbleweed comments on the convergence of multiple emotions and memories psychologically. In the brushstrokes is evidence of the difficulty and inability to identify and vocalize traumatic memories, they remain chaotic by remaining unnamed.

Indeed, tumbleweeds are depicted in scenes in western Hollywood films as rolling across the screen without origin or end, exaggerating the intensity of the scene. Tumbleweeds come to roll through the landscape once they are uprooted and tossed by the wind.²³⁸

Clair Blundell Jones explains that tumbleweeds connote:

both globalization [sic] and an imaginative, undulating poetic landscape:
to be both feared and admired. Through their journey without destination
and their pestilent associations, they can act as a visual metaphor for

²³⁸ Clair Blundell Jones, “Walking, the Western and the tumbleweed,” in *Visual Arts Studies* 25 (Taylor & Friends, 2010) Pg. 87

internal struggles and conflicts, the feeling of being emotionally or socially uncomfortable and alienated from others.²³⁹

The connotations of tumbleweeds emphasize Alsoudani's intended reading of the painting. The cluster in the painting is the struggle with emotions and memories of violence and its essential intrusiveness on the individual's psyche. Of course, these memories have a beginning, but the way they flare up in the psyche comes at random times—without an origin—and seemingly have no end or purposeful journey. Illustrating psychological trauma as tumbleweed demands that I highlight the word “pestilent.” Describing tumbleweeds as pestilent can suggest that they are annoying and disruptive or as a destructive force. The tumbleweeds of violent memories in the psyche, rejecting outward expression, engage with both definitions of pestilent, as annoying, disruptive and destructive.

Surrounding the cluster is a clearly defined space with a blue sky, brown sand and smooth building riddled with graffiti. The space is made ambiguous and still while it hosts the chaotic episode rolling through the landscape. The ambiguity is intentional, even though landscape is painted in defined terms, Alsoudani strips it of any telling markers so the viewer can project their own spatial understandings that may be based in current or future events.²⁴⁰ Bessire further expands by arguing:

These paintings go beyond the specificity of the artist's time and experience, becoming a timeless plea to the futility and shame of crimes against humanity in the name of politics and war.²⁴¹

The ambiguity of the landscape and absence of time are consistent with Alsoudani's refusal to be direct temporally and spatially with the purpose of engaging with the viewer

²³⁹ *ibid.*, Pg. 88

²⁴⁰ Shamim Momin, “...on Ahmed Alsoudani,” Pg.11

²⁴¹ Mark Bessire, “Neither/Nor,” Pg. 23

and instigate that they use their imagination to complete the painting. In this painting specifically, Alsoudani is highlighting the never-ending cycle of trauma from memories in the psyche of the survivor and the pain of bearing witness to the chaos. This is not a painting that is rooted in Alsoudani's lived experience, it denies that restriction by demanding that the viewer recognize the violence of war without locating it to one circumstance or experience. Leaving the painting bare of defined temporal and spatial specifics allows the viewer to see the essential and unmediated violence of war long after it ends.

The title of figure 3.1 was *We Die Out of Hand*, possibly suggesting a lack of power to control death and violence. By naming the following painting *You No Longer Have Hands*, Alsoudani indicates an inability to measure the absence of power to control the violence taking place in the psyche. The landscape hosts the tumbleweed of traumatic memories rolling through without end, defying any capability to exercise power and control it by taking grasp and demand it make sense.

Concluding the discussion, it is important to heed Cochran's observation that Alsoudani "does not revel in despair. There is room in his compositions for life, no matter how chaotic."²⁴² The paintings I have spotlighted engage with intensity the violence of war, but in Alsoudani's other works—sometimes in the same collections—are paintings that reflect the pleasure of painting and beauty of colors.²⁴³ The graffiti detail in figure 3.2 hints a to a sense of rebelliousness and defiance, exemplified by Alsoudani's early life when he vandalized portraits of Saddam Hussein with graffiti. This detailed graffiti can be interpreted as an homage to the wild styles and dangerous, adrenaline-filled escapades of graffiti artists on the streets.

Including room for life in the form of beauty in artwork or collection is not intended to feed into the viewer's desire to turn away from the realities of violence nor is it specific

²⁴² Sara Cochran, "Collateral Damage," Pg. 28

²⁴³ *ibid.*

to Alsoudani: many contemporary Arab artists include elements of beauty in their artworks or collections. Making room for life allows the artist to work against becoming lost in a violent past, but to recognize the beauty that can only be enjoyed when alive, and to a lesser extent the potential of the future. This is Svetlana Boym's reflective nostalgia at work, the painting exists in multiple time zones and spaces—if at all—refusing to idealize traumatic memories, violence, war or any singular location. As far as violence is taken up, Alsoudani prioritizes illustrating traumatic memories in a way that can encourage productivity opposed to inspiring pity or melancholy.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 began with a single question: in what way does technology serve the Arab ‘diaspora’ and ‘non-diaspora’? Working my way through this question necessitated an exploration into the definition of diaspora which gave way to investigating home and ended with a discussion of popular culture. Taking on this task was the beginning of a journey to find answers to clearly identify one of the Arab dilemmas.

Starting with diaspora, it quickly became apparent that there are multiple definitions that extend beyond the origin of the term as a descriptor of the Jewish circumstance. Out of many authors, I engaged and moved between Peters, Haridranath, and Brinkerhoff to compare distinctive definitions. Peters, informed by communication studies, highlighted the importance of sustained communication among a displaced group to be labelled diasporic. Haridranath rejected Peters’ definition and recommended that diasporas be understood as violently displaced from a mythical, ancestral homeland over generations that have experienced hostility in the host country. Interjecting between both Peters and Haridranath is Brinkerhoff with a more nuanced definition. Instead of a traditional definition, Brinkerhoff introduces guiding principles that diasporas tend to follow: collective myth about the homeland, pledges to protect the notion of home, possible concern with returning home, a distinct sense of shared history and fate, solidarity amongst the group internationally, and finally, institutionalizing communication networks.²⁴⁴ I refused to settle on a definition or framework of diaspora before exploring the constant use of the word “home” without providing a definition.

The second section of the first chapter was wholly devoted to unpacking the definition and meaning of home as it pertains to the discourse surrounding diaspora. Unpacking Peters’ argument that homes are products of violence, I began to understand that home is a part of a discussion on the politics of place which led to the work of Doreen Massey.

²⁴⁴ Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. *Digital diasporas: Identity and transnational engagement*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) Pg. 30

Massey explained that the traditional idea of place—a reactionary definition—is manufactured by intentional readings of history that seek to promote homogeneity and fear of difference. Iain Chambers supported Massey's explanation and added that reactionary definitions of place are motivated by fear of immigration.

It is in this section that the term placelessness is introduced, a sense of not belonging anywhere in a fast-paced, uncertain world dominated by global capitalism and technology. Populations of folks that have never moved or left the homeland experience the same diasporic existences as displaced diasporic communities. This discussion ended with Massey, Chambers, and Peters recommending that place should not be equated with a static, geographic location. Instead, they suggest that place should be mobile and welcoming of difference and opportunities to mix—*mélange*—to ensure the continuity of the group identity.

With the previous two sections in mind, in the last part of the chapter I settled on a definition that framed Arab diaspora as living globally, sustaining communication, sharing collective memories, culture, fate, and experience alienation in the host country. I utilize Brinkerhoff's term meta-diaspora to recognize that Arab is an umbrella term that includes many other diasporas and a multitude of identities. In addition, I argued that the unique circumstance of the Arab non-diaspora is intimately related and tied to the diasporic community and these must be discussed together when appropriate.

Concluding the chapter, I demonstrated the role of popular culture in negotiating hybrid identities within and between the diasporic and non-diasporic Arab community. David Morely argued that technology transgresses borders and connects displaced populations: in one example, France was anxious the immigrant North African populations may be able to sustain a separate identity through television programs streaming in from North Africa through satellites. Similarly, Stuart Cunningham argued global communities can be sustained and forged solely through voluntary participation with media products. Complimenting Morely and Cunningham, Sonja De Leew and Igegerd Rydin researched and concluded that popular media from the homeland may inspire nostalgic emotions

from parents, but it allows diasporic youth conceptualize the idea of home and to negotiate their hybrid identities with other factors.

Using contemporary Arab art as a media text, the second chapter sought to work within the framework outlined by the first chapter and extended to include the concept of memory, nostalgia and time. The chapter started with a discussion with a brief history that contributed to contemporary Arab art, revolving around the value of Islamic art and degree of European influence in the development of modern, and later, contemporary, Arab Art.

Similar to the difficulty with defining diaspora and the history of Arab art, there is great difficulty with defining who is an Arab artist or whether there is a genre-specific medium and style. It is largely understood that artists voluntarily identify with contemporary Arab art, consistent with Cunningham's observation that diasporic communities can be entirely forged through voluntary participation and consumption of media—in this case art.

Consistent with the first chapter, I engage with contemporary Arab art as a form of media that can facilitate a relationship between the Arab diaspora and non-diaspora by assisting the population with confronting their traumas and cultural memories to negotiate their hybridity.

Working through the concept of cultural memory led to an exploration of the desire to memorialize narratives. There was also a dialogue regarding the shift of mnemonic aids from immovable monuments to easily captured and transportable camera images. Marita Sturken argued that the technology that captures the memory contributes to its meaning. On the other hand, Pierre Nora detested the camera image as a mnemonic aid because it inspires a drive to archive every mundane memory.

The constant referral to individual memory led to a discussion on nostalgia, specifically Svetlana Boym's reflective nostalgia. Boym explains contemporary nostalgia is rebelling against history and time, arguing that reflective nostalgia is not interested in idealizing home or the past, rather it engages with bits of memories while existing in multiple temporalities and spatiality. The tendency of reflective nostalgia to look sideways allowed Elizabeth Jelin to highlight that time often folds into itself. The past may exist in

the present alongside the future: in the present, the future is negotiated based on the experiences of the past. Jelin's argument suggests that time is not as neatly linear as it is often understood. Supporting Jelin, in the first chapter Joe Maggio maintains that linear time—described as a distinct separation between past, present and future—is the foundation on which the west defines itself against the difference of the 'other.'

Throughout this chapter, I include a variety of Arab artworks to demonstrate the differing ways Arab artists visualize cultural memory, reflective nostalgia, and the inconsistency of time. Further, implicit in all these works are themes of placelessness, diasporic existence, and identity from the first chapter. The artists featured include: Ayman Yossri Daydban, Maha Mullah, Mona Hatoum, Rafaat Hattab, Nouf Al Himiary, Manal Al Dawayan, and Ahmed Matar.

The final chapter was devoted to the application of the previous discussions through an in-depth analysis of Ahmed Alsoudani biography and paintings *We Die Out of Hand* and *You No Longer Have Hands*. Alsoudani's life demonstrates the impossibility of classifying one Arab population as diasporic and the other as non-diasporic: although he left Iraq and lives a fulfilling life elsewhere, Alsoudani explains that he is forever emotionally tied to his homeland. It is relevant to point out that he does not miss Iraq as it once existed in the past because he lived under an oppressive regime, rather he appears to be emotionally tied to Iraq because of his social ties—such as family and neighbours. Alsoudani's biography describes an unwavering connection to his homeland that does not hinder his ability to lead a fulfilling life as a diasporic. He also embodies reflective nostalgia in that he remains devoted to recalling memories in a productive way: Alsoudani is not interested in returning home because he understands that home does not exist.

Alsoudani's choice of medium is analog, painting on canvas, reminiscent of European art history and the subject of tension in regards to the history of Arab art. The outdated medium provides Alsoudani with the ability to step outside digitization and technology to deepen the rejection of image culture. His paintings are dedicated to engaging with the viewer's imagination of violence and war, often instigating feeling of anguish in the

viewer. To ensure that the paintings do not come to connote a singular war they are stripped of temporal and spatial specificity, demanding the violence and trauma of all forms of war be experienced.

Alsoudani engages with emotionally packed themes, but he includes space for life to flourish despite the violence and trauma. In these spaces, artists dare to imagine beauty to undermine—or escape—the grip of the past over the present and hopes for the future. It is a way to break away from the crippling sense of hopelessness that repetitive recalling of traumatic memories can instill.

Limitation

The size of this thesis demanded that the scope be narrowed so that it can fit into the expectations and remain possible to accomplish. There were necessary negotiations to reconcile ideas with the narrow scope which had a great impact on my ability to dive into nuanced discussions that could support or expand on my arguments. For example, I was not able to include references that highlight tension between diaspora and non-diaspora identities and the difficulty of negotiating hybrid identity both, of which unravelled on a popular reality show. Moreover, the scope of the project did not permit any leeway to unpack the role of the colonized and colonized within the section on home in the first chapter.

With a broader scope, I would have addressed the theme of death which permeated the entire project because of the constant referral to violence as part of the Arab experience. Throughout my research, several authors spoke of the oppressed confronting death in daily life. This topic would have seamlessly contributed to a better dialogue on bearing witness to violence and surviving. Unpacking death and witnessing contextualizes Ahmed Alsoudani's aesthetic obsession with chaos as representative of violence and war.

However, the most challenging aspect of this project was access to resources. My research found that one of the few fields that appropriately take up the difficulty of existing under constant violence was post-colonial theory. Post-colonial theory is largely problematic because it has a tendency to confine the colonized within a space that

removes agency and capacity to vocalize experiences. If I were to fully fold post-colonial theory into my project I would have to map out the critiques and justify its role in my project. I was not prepared to do that because it would have taken up too much space and forced me to move well beyond my scope. I also did not feel certain that post-colonial theory would fit within my scope and function accordingly.

For example, in chapter one, I engaged with Ramaswami Haridranath's definition of diaspora. However, the discussion surrounding this particular definition relies heavily on Gayatri C. Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1992). The common critique regarding Spivak's essay is that it removes subjectivity from colonized folks, arguing that they are always spoken for and never permitted to speak for themselves. Haridranath centered the discussion on diasporas within this framework which limited my ability to fully engage with the material in chapter one. The critiques against Spivak capture the inconsistencies that would have unfolded had I moved beyond using selected works and embraced post-colonial theory in this project—the entirety of my project operates with the understanding that Arab artists are speaking and expressing themselves. Arab populations are exercising agency by selectively constructing their hybrid identities that may include elements from the colonizer.

I could not afford the space to include post-colonial theory and explain whether it remove agency; such a discussion would allow the project to digress to a debate on colonial subjectivities that is well beyond project's scope. However, there are selected works that use post-colonial theory in ways that would not force my project to directly address the theory such as Couze Vann, Iain Chambers and Joe Maggio. These selected works helped push the project through while maintaining the scope. If this project is taken up as a PhD project, there would be an opportunity to tackle critiques against post-colonial theory and facilitate a more nuanced dialogue regarding the role of the theory within the project.

The resources I had access to through the library databases and catalogues were not extensive by any means. Many of the available books and articles focused on individual Arab countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Jordan. There were also a substantial number of resources on Palestinian and Iranian art, mostly devoted to the struggle of

maintaining existence. In the Palestinian case, the art was part of a tradition motivated by the need to preserve memories and document as a struggle against obliteration. Iranian resources were focused on the plight of the exiled negotiating the loss of home in time and reconciling with the revolution in the late 1970s.

Excluded from the library's databases and catalogues are extensive resources on the far east of the Middle East—such as Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, or Saudi Arabia. The few resources that are accessible tend to describe art as a new phenomenon with little mention of the history of art in that region. I had to rely heavily on scouring the internet for supplementary information. Further complicating resource accessibility is the prevalence of the Arabic language in many sources which would have demanded translation beyond my ability. The language divide leads me to believe that had I done my research in Arabic, I might have accessed a large pool of sources. Again, the translation that would have been required and proofing to ensure the proper meaning is reflected in English extend well beyond scope and my personal qualifications. This limitation is the cause of great personal sorrow since I had hoped to explore contemporary Arab art specific to the further eastern region of the Middle East which continues to live in stereotypes in popular media and remains elusive in the western academic tradition.

Proposed Future Research

Using this current project as a stepping stone, future research should focus on the everyday presence of memory captured by mundane objects. Svetlana Boym's research on the work of Ilya Kabakov included an interesting analysis of souvenirs functions as mnemonic aids for diasporic populations.²⁴⁵ Similarly, Stuart Cunningham adds that the aesthetics of diasporic media can only be understood once put to use by the community.²⁴⁶ Boym and Cunningham are describing a blurring between the public and

²⁴⁵ Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy," Pg. 523

²⁴⁶ Stuart Cunningham, "Popular Media as Public," Pg. 136

private, in which a community share private exchanges through souvenirs and media as they simultaneously exist in the public. Boym's term for this exchange is "diasporic intimacy," it comes about when two individuals share a moment of familiarity in an alienating host country, revealing "a miracle of possibilities."²⁴⁷ This shared intimate moment ducks any attempt to be captured by language, existing as a "love at last sight," in which loss is already experienced and what comes after is able to provide a sense of possibility.²⁴⁸

I envision a future project devoted to exploring the deep sense of intimacy in the face of violence, war and political instability: I am interested in unpacking how contemporary Arab artists ignite a sense of intimacy while taking on undesirable themes. How is diasporic intimacy performed along transgressed borders and heavy surveillance? In what way, if at all, do Arab artists facilitate or relay intimacy between the Arab diaspora and non-diaspora?

Consistent with intimacy is the role of language. Many Arab artists featured in this project included written language in their works, some commenting on translation and others focusing on the impossibility of language. For the project to properly unpack diasporic intimacy and the blurring between public and private, language and translation must be equally considered. Language contains power which may be intentionally subverted to ensure safety under surveillance. Language is a site of struggle that can pave a way to self-expression and recovery from memories to escape the repetitiveness of the past.²⁴⁹ For example, Iain Chambers describes the "dissonance" of black, Arab, Parisians which takes form in the way they remix language and tone to express themselves.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy," Pg. 499, 501

²⁴⁸ *ibid.* Pg. 499, 502

²⁴⁹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics.* (London: Turnaround, 1991) Pg. 145, 147

²⁵⁰ Iain Chambers, *Vibrancy, Culture, Identity,* Pg. 94

Folded into the theme of language is the role of Arabic calligraphic script and the separation between colloquial and formal Arabic.

This project has immense potential to contribute to western academic tradition in regards to contemporary Arab art and Arab diaspora, if handled delicately in a PhD. Directly addressing the limitations of the Master's thesis, a PhD can relax the restrictiveness of the project's scope so that it can include a discussion of post-colonial theory and take on the theme of death and witnessing as an aspects of violence and cultural memory. These themes would fold in other scholarly work and provide valuable context and perspective when interpreting artwork and analyzing the intimacy between diaspora and non-diaspora and the role of language regarding expression.

Conducting this topic as a PhD project allows a lengthy timeline for completion and room for nuanced investigation. A lengthy timeline allows for exhaustive research that can include resources in different languages, dependent on access to translation services or ability to demonstrate individual translating capabilities. There is the bonus of being able to afford the time-consuming process of applying for ethics approval which can grant access to interviewing artists, curators and art consumers. In that same stroke, the timeline can incorporate travelling to the exhibits: there is profound significance in experiencing art as intended and moving through a space with other viewers.

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