Negotiating Contested Identities:

Palestinian American Identity in Poems by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Susan Abulhawa

By

Klara G. van Lessen

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Department of Foreign Languages

University of Bergen

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Abstract in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg poetiske fremstillinger av sammensatte identiteter i verkene til tre Palestinsk Amerikanske samtidsdiktere som, direkte eller indirekte, har det komplekse forholdet mellom USA og Palestina som et bakteppe. Til tross for at både diplomatiske og geopolitiske perspektiver står sentralt i diskusjonen av en slik omstridt og kompleks identitet, vil oppgaven ikke gå i dybden på den aktuelle politiske situasjonen; her vil derimot den litterære fremstillingen stå i sentrum. De fire utvalgte diktene som danner grunnlaget for analysen er hentet fra Lisa Suhair Majajs *Geographies of Light* (2009), Naomi Shihab Nyes 19 *Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) og Susan Abulhawas *My Voice Sought the Wind* (2013). Et mangfold av perspektiver trer fram når oppgaven tar for seg hvordan de tre kvinnene bruker diktning til å illustrere utfordringen i det å skulle balansere en iboende dobbelthet i sin egen eksistens. Av den grunn blir denne masteroppgaven et sentralt bidrag til et voksende litterært felt av Arabisk Amerikansk litteratur som, så vidt meg bekjent, har en overvekt av oversiktsverk snarere enn studier basert på nærlesning.

Selv om Majaj, Nye og Abulhawa gir uttrykk for ulike agendaer, har verkene deres en del fellestrekk. Sammen formidler de hva det vil si å måtte navigere og balansere komplekse og sammensatte identiteter i en kontekst som karakteriseres av en grunnleggende skepsis ovenfor mennesker med Arabisk opphav. Videre illustrerer diktene også hvordan slike identiteter formes og utvikler seg over tid. Nærlesningen av diktene synliggjør den komplekse sammenhengen mellom arabisk etnisitet, palestinske røtter og et amerikansk statsborgerskap. Jeg argumenterer for at gjennom ulike representasjoner av denne følte dobbeltheten – navngivning, stereotyper, interkulturell dialog og transetnisk solidaritet – oppstår det muligheter for at individer kan bryte med denne dualiteten og overskride den på et personlig og et mellommenneskelig plan.

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Table of Contents

Introduction **1**

Hyphenated Identities 2

Theory and Concepts 9

Chapter 1. Negotiating Identities in Lisa Suheir Majaj's "Recognized Futures" (2009) and "Cadence" (2009) **17**

1.1 Negotiating Doubleness 20

1.2 Claiming both Sides of the Hyphen 35

Chapter 2. Bridging the Divide Between the I and the Other in Naomi Shihab Nye's "Two Countries" (2002) **43**

2.1 Frame of Reference 45

2.2 The Personification of Skin 47

2.3 Identity, Body, and Place 51

2.4 Breathing in Two Countries 54

Chapter 3. Claiming Blackness in Susan Abulhawa's "Black" (2013) **62**

3.1 The Concept of Blackness in Abulhawa's "Black" 64

3.2 Claiming Blackness 69

3.3 Lend me your Voice – Intertextuality and Identity Construction 80

Conclusion **85**

Works Cited **90**

Appendices: The Poems **104**

Appendix 1: Recognized Futures (2009) 104

Appendix 2: Cadence (2009) 105

Appendix 3: Two Countries (2002) 107

Appendix 4: Black (2013) 108

Introduction

The whole world watched in disbelief as the Twin Towers collapsed after the terrorist attacks on the morning of September 11th, 2001, leaving a scar on the Manhattan skyline. In the following surge of U.S. national pride and patriotism, Arab and Muslim Americans promptly became subject to great scepticism and scrutiny (Notaker).[1] Since then, research in ethnic, religious and legal studies has demonstrated how Muslims, and Americans of Middle Eastern decent, have had to put up with a noticeable amount of finger pointing from all strands of U.S. society (Clay 72; Sirin and Fine 1-2; Lichtblau; Audi; Wingfield and Karaman). Nearly twenty years later, this does not seem to have changed. Instead, the political discourse only seems to deteriorate, becoming increasingly racialised, markedly anti-migrant, and openly islamophobic (Brocket 2). This shift in the political discourse has been spurred on by the rhetoric of current U.S. President, Donald J. Trump whose decision to formally recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (*Proclamation 9683*) drew global attention to a group of Arabs whose relationship with the U.S. was already strained, namely the Palestinians (Usher). Knowing that an estimated six percent of all Arabs who live in the U.S. are of Palestinian decent ("Demographics"), one has to wonder what impact the aforementioned events have had on those Palestinian Americans who have to negotiate cultures that, when seen from a political perspective, are at odds. [2]

When considering the complex situation that Palestinian Americans are facing today, this raises the question of how these individuals mediate the various tensions and

[1] Here I use both the terms "Arab American" and "Muslim American", it is however, important to point out that the two cannot be used interchangeably. There is a clear difference between a hyphenated identity that is based on an Arab ethnicity, and a hyphenation that is derived from a religious affiliation.
[2] According to the Arab American Institute Foundation the estimated Arab American population of the U.S. is set somewhere between two to three and a half million, depending on how far back you go in terms of ancestry («Demographics»).

contradictions inherent to their own biography. These tensions are addressed by the three contemporary American poets studied in this thesis, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye and Susan Abulhawa, who use their poetry to offer their versions of what it means to negotiate outwardly opposing ethnic and cultural identities. At the heart of these particular works of poetry lies the search for an identity that is rooted on multiple levels, and a wish to display how these contested hyphenated identities occasionally destabilise an individual's sense of self. Together their poems reflect the internal tug-of-war that takes place when individuals try to navigate the hyphen, try to look beyond the dichotomy and initiate in dialogues that promote increased cross-cultural understanding in an environment that comes across as fundamentally biased.

Hyphenated Identities

Notwithstanding the stylistic choice that has led me to abandon the use of a hyphen when referring to particular national or ethnic groups such as Arab Americans and Palestinian Americans, the identities that I wish to explore in this thesis are "hyphenated". [3] These "hyphenated identities" refer to the multiple identities that these individuals will have to negotiate, including their Arab ethnicity, their ties to a Palestinian homeland, and their American citizenship. Complicating this process are the elements of geography, politics and history that both unite and divide these different aspects of a Palestinian American identity. Thus, the process of negotiating these hyphenated identities can result in a wide range of individual experiences. This means that where some individuals perceive their cultures as fully merged, these cultures may just as well evoke feelings of parallel worlds, or become conflicting elements that leave the individual both psychologically and socially divided (Fine and Sirin 136). This point is also emphasised by one of the poets, Lisa Suhair Majaj, who in

[3] "In MLA style, if each part of the name of an ethnic or national group is an independent term, no hyphen is used, regardless of whether the name appears as a noun or an adjective" ("Punctuation").

her essay "The Hyphenated Author" (1999) states that at present there are two competing views on what constitutes an Arab American identity. On one side there is the idea that an Arab American identity is predominantly "Arab". As a result, the hyphenated identity is a displaced identity, characterised by a collective wish to sustain the culture of origin by upholding active ties to the Arab world, while keeping traditions and the language alive within the displaced community ("The Hyphenated Author"). On the other hand, some emphasise the other side of the hyphen by stating that an Arab American identity is part of the great multicultural American kaleidoscope, and thus predominantly American, as this hyphenated culture develops in an American context ("The Hyphenated Author").

While the competing views described above clearly affect those who identify as Palestinian American, this hyphenated identity is only one of many in the great cultural amalgamation of American society. As a matter of fact, the latest *World Migration Report 2018* points out that today as much as one in thirty of the world's population of seven point six billion, are living in a country different from the one in which they were born (5). These people, ranging from immigrants and expatriates to asylum seekers and refugees, live their lives in a cultural context different to their own, a situation that likely will affect both their sense of self and that of their children and grandchildren. Consequently, a little more than three percent of the world's population will have a first-hand knowledge of the complexity of hyphenation and what it means to negotiate different roles in distinct, and sometimes sharply contrasting worlds. If we are to believe that experiences of this kind have become increasingly common, this will inevitably lead to the question why Palestinian Americans stand out amidst all other hyphenated Americans. I therefore wish to address some of the connotations evoked by this particular hyphenation, in order to shed light on some of its impediments.

Of central concern to the complex character of a Palestinian American identity is its combining of two politically opposing demonyms. In “Identity, Authority, and Freedom” (1991) Palestinian American scholar Edward Said chooses to map out this perceived incompatibility of the terms “Arab”, “Palestinian” and “American” and goes on describing how his intermediate position has bestowed on him an “odd, not to say grotesque, double perspective” (397). By using adjectives such as “odd” and “grotesque”, Said implies that the combination of the terms “Palestinian” and “American” results in a peculiar and slightly strange concept, and it seems almost as if he deems such a hyphenation unnatural and absurd. To account for this felt discrepancy, a definition of the terms will be beneficial. It is, for instance, interesting to know that the *Oxford English Dictionary* presents the term “American” as “a native or citizen of the United States” (“American”). As I see it, this definition places the term within the understanding of civic, or liberal nationalism, which evidently minimises the significance of origin and descent. Were this definition to be taken at face value, one might argue that its lack of focus on ethnicity makes the term well suited for inclusion. However, this also means that the word “American” lends itself to hyphenation as the term gives no information about the individual’s place of origin. In contrast the term “Palestinian” refers to “an Arab born or living in the area of the former mandated territory of Palestine” or “a descendant of such an Arab” (“Palestinian”). Although this definition accounts for both those born in historical Palestine, and those born in the diaspora, the use of the word “Arab” applies to an individual’s ethnicity rather than their citizenship or national identity. In other words, the two demonym’s contradictory tales further complicate the matter.

This being said, the descriptions above still do not fully capture the controversy associated with the term “Palestinian”. The decisive element that marks the term as a matter of discussion is the fact that the U.S. does not acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian state. Beyond that, one may point out that the diplomatic discourse between the two political

bodies has not been helped by the open U.S. support for an Israeli state located in parts of historical Palestine, not to mention the series of wars that have taken place in the region.[4] In short, the best way to describe the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Palestine is as a state of stable instability. Based on the aforementioned aspects, the idea of a Palestinian national identity will inevitably generate debate in an American context. In the narrative poem "Out-of-state" (2006), Lisa Suhair Majaj illustrates this imposed statelessness with the words "'Place of birth – Palestine.' | A land with no borders, too many maps" (14-15). Here Majaj shows how the idea of Palestine, and in extension the term "Palestinian", are insolubly linked to the region's history and the lack of a formally recognised geopolitical point of reference. Without delving too deep into the entanglement of foreign politics, suffice it to say that U.S.-Palestinian relations constitute a complex lacework of diplomatic endeavours which time and again have been compromised. With this in mind, these two distinct and seemingly contrasting cultural identities put the Palestinian American in a position that stands out amongst the many coexisting hyphenated identities in America.

Having considered the lack of formal recognition, it is also reasonable take a more detailed look at the last two decades, which have been defined by a number of pivotal moments for Arab, and Muslim Americans alike. Literary scholar Carol Fadda-Conrey addresses these events in her book *Contemporary Arab-American Literature* (2014) as she identifies "the ensuing US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the interminable War on Terror" (1) as the reasons why Arab Americans are finding themselves in an "increasingly precarious position within the US nation-state" (1). A description of this difficult position is found in the poem "First Writing Since" (2001) where Palestinian American poet Suheir

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[4] It has to be borne in mind that, while on the one hand Americans identify with Israel and sympathy for Israel is widespread, Americans are increasingly divided about the Arab-Israeli conflict. This division increasingly aligns with the major political, ideological, and religious divides in America (Rynhold 1-8).

Hammad captures a tone of suspicion and hostility as she describes a Palestinian American's immediate response to the 9/11-attacks:

> first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed, the
> plane's engine died.
> then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.
> please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone
> who looks like my brothers.
>
> ……………………………………….
>
> thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking back
> tears. she opened her arms before she asked "do you want a hug?" a
> big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the
> warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn't about to say no to any comfort.
> "my brother's in the navy," i said. "and we're arabs". "wow, you
> got double trouble." word.
>
> one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.
> one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.
> one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.one more person
> assume they know me, or that i represent a people.
> or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a
> flag and words on a page. (12-16, 68-79)

In these lines, Hammad offers a poetic reaction that echoes the initial shock, and depicts the dire consequences of cultural bias, misconceptions and prejudice. The same consequences are also visible in the multiple ethnographic that have been carried out since then.[5] One of the more recent studies on the experiences of assimilation and transnationalism amongst second-generation Palestinian American migrants was conducted by geographer Tom Brocket. In his article "From 'in-betweenness' to 'positioned belongings'" (2018), he demonstrates how Arabs and Muslims raised after September 11th, 2001, are increasingly racialised. Further Brocket draws attention to the many examples of anti-Arab sentiment in U.S. politics, and identifies the campaign and election of U.S. president Donald Trump as a driving force

[5] For further research regarding the situation of Arabs in America I recommend the extensive database of the *Arab American Institute.* Here you will find a great number of opinion polls, demographics and census data.

behind the recent shifts in U.S. political discourse (2). During the interviews that were part of the data collection for his article, Brocket notes how the President's decision "to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem caused outrage amongst [the] Palestinian-American interlocutors, who argued that this revealed the Israeli bias of the US state and negated Palestinian ties to the city" (2). According to Brocket's findings, the post-9/11 generation of Palestinian Americans express a lack of belonging as they are recognised as "not being fully American in the eyes of others" (8). This does raise the question whether the crux of the issue for Palestinian Americans today is not hyphenation per se, but the ongoing hostile discourse of xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, sexism and cultural biases that keeps challenging the hyphenated identities of Palestinian-, and by extension Arab- and Muslim- Americans. Thus, the significance of this study is composed of multiple elements and derives in part from an increased interest in Arab American literature sparked by the events of 9/11 and the increasingly strained relations between the U.S. government and Palestine, but also from the fact that the three poets in question are part of a larger community of Arab American writers, activists and scholars, who communicate their shared experiences of navigating a bicultural background and portray both the consolidating and the destabilising effects that such a multicultural identity might entail.

Up to this point I have operated with three terms: Arab-, Muslim-, and Palestinian American. Here I wish to point out that, although the terms Arab American and Muslim American are the ones most widely used in academia, I will stay with the term Palestinian American whenever I refer to the poets in question. Despite the fact that this choice means I will be confining these women to a specific geopolitical context, this does not mean that I will refrain from drawing on aspects of ethnic or religious identity in cases where such notions are addressed. The reason why I have made such a choice is to continue to draw attention to the distinct political and historical implications of the term, and the many tensions and

contradictions that are inherent to a hyphenated identity of this kind. Still, my thesis is not meant to be an in-depth study of U.S.-Palestinian relations, but an inquiry into how these three women navigate across the hyphen as they negotiate their Arab ethnicity, their Palestinian roots and their American identification.

Accordingly, this thesis is an analysis of how these three Palestinian American poets use their different objectives and poetic styles to depict how the dynamics of hyphenation apply to the individual's internal perception of these two competing cultures, but also to how this duality can be transcended on an inner, interpersonal and a transethnic level. Here I will argue that Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye and Susan Abulhawa complement each other since they depict the challenges inherent to their hyphenated identities from different angles. Where Majaj uses her poems to convey a sense of felt doubleness by tackling the struggle of identities on an introspective level, Naomi Shihab Nye operates on a relational level as she searches for the possibility to look beyond the dichotomy suggested by hyphenation. Here I wish to argue that she illustrates how distinct cultures can inform and enrich each other, as they grow in understanding of one another. Where Majaj is centred on the individual, and Nye on the relational dimension, Abulhawa adds to the complexity of the Palestinian American experience by portraying the struggle of identity in a global perspective, contextualising her hyphenated identity within a struggle of recognition that transcends ethnic boundaries. Together the three women contribute to inform readers of the complexity of navigating multiple identities in a political context that often dismisses their right to claim a distinct identity.

Theory and Concepts

Before moving on to discussing the works in question, a brief examination of the conceptual framework, and some key concepts this thesis calls for, will follow. Here I will draw upon a number of ideas and concepts from social philosophy, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory. The significant amount of negative rhetoric, and a rise in stereotypes and derogative statements has complicated the situation of Muslim and Arab Americans (Lichtblau). Two scholars who have written at length about such impacts of xenophobia and racism on the human psyche are sociologist W.E.B. DuBois and Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon. Fanon's attempts to understand the concept of blackness, and the complex processes of identity formation, will be of value when considering how poets such as Susan Abulhawa seek to transcend ethnic boundaries in their poetry. Similarly, DuBois thoughts on negotiating a hyphenated identity in an American context will prove useful, as this thesis is concerned with Americans of Palestinian descent who find themselves in an equally challenging situation. One of DuBois's concepts that will be of relevance as I address my thesis, is that of "double-consciousness" (16). The term was first introduced in DuBois's essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he writes:

> […] the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (16-17)

Here DuBois uses the term "double consciousness" to describe the internal struggle an African American feels when trying to fuse two seemingly incompatible versions of the self. DuBois also specifically locates the concept of double-consciousness "in this American

world" (16), hereby marking the concept as something that is context-dependent. Thus, the passage itself suggest that, although the described struggle of identity between the "two warring ideals" (16) may be internal, it is also a socio-cultural construct. What is more, the arena in which the belligerence of selves takes place, is the "one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (17). Here the cognitive dimension seems to merge with the physical as the body becomes the vessel that contains the struggle. In consequence, the body and the mind become a battle ground as the individual tries to cope with a constant sense of ambiguity. While it is true that this concept has since been followed by other models and theories of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic identities, and DuBois's descriptions of an internal struggle of identities is commonly left out of contemporary studies of identity, I still consider DuBoisian term of double-consciousness valid and helpful; a central idea that may be expanded and used to shed light on struggles of identity formation outside the African American context.

Here I wish to make one final introductory remark as far as DuBois's passage from *Souls of Black Folk* is concerned. As DuBois presents this body as having been "born with a veil" (16) and "gifted with second-sight" (16) he shows some of the ambiguity that defined the position of African Americans in the time after the U.S. civil war. While African Americans were systematically marginalised, excluded and overlooked at the time, he also saw them as "gifted" (16) since they could see the world from multiple perspectives. In light of the specificities of a Palestinian American identity problematic, I wish to argue that the hostile discourse – xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, sexism, and cultural biases – that characterises the American experience of many Palestinian and Arab Americans constitutes a similar DuBoisian "veil", a boundary that complicates and hinders cross-cultural understanding. Based on the ideas presented above, I thus wish to argue that there are relevant parallels between DuBois's struggle of identity as it is presented in *The Souls of Black Folk*,

and the poems of Majaj, Nye and Abulhawa. Where Majaj deals with the meditative and introvert aspects of double-consciousness and celebrates the gift of a bicultural double-perspective, Nye explores the sense of otherness through the metaphor of the human body. And significantly, like DuBois, all three poets depict the struggle of negotiating competing cultures in an "American world" (16).

At the very heart of postcolonial theory lies the wish to view the world from the position of the marginalised minorities. This includes speaking up for those who are the *topic* of conversations, but never the addressed, who live in a world that is defined by others and which seems to offer no space for voices that challenge the grand narrative (Young 1-2). One could argue that, since the Middle East receives the attention of U.S. politicians and the global media, the Palestinian diaspora is by no means a forgotten chapter of world history. However, these stories that we read are told by politicians and journalists, and not necessarily by the Palestinian Americans themselves. One man whose scholarly contributions have been decisive for the development of the field of postcolonial criticism, and on whose works and ideas I will draw in my study of the poems, is Palestinian American Edward W. Said. It was his book *Orientalism* (1978) that provided the foundations for the present field of postcolonial criticism. In *Orientalism,* Said identifies the cultural dimension of imperialism, and analyses how the colonial powers of the West promoted their "occidental" culture as superior, while representing the "oriental" Other as alien and alluring, albeit always inferior (Abrams 245; *Orientalism* 38-41). Said's claims proved to be inspirational, and literary critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Jacques Derrida contributed in developing the field. As a result, today's field of postcolonial research is heterogeneous, and not limited to discussions on colonialism in its classical sense. Thus, the term "postcolonial" has become an important vehicle to talk about things such as slavery, racism, resistance, gender, stereotypes, belonging, immigration, diaspora, exile, recognition and representation (Madsen

1). As I see it, Said himself extends the scope of application of his concepts in his epilogue to *Orientalism*, where he uses Western suspicion of Islam and the Arab world as examples to indicate how a cultural bias continues to uphold imagined geographies and permeate the geopolitical discourse of the day (329-354). Bearing this in mind, I think that a postcolonial framework will be appropriate in my exploration of the poems.

Three concepts of postcolonial theory that will be instrumental in my discussion of the poems are the terms "hybridity", "Third Space" and "mimicry", all commonly associated with Indian English postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Babha. Unlike scholars such as DuBois and Said, Bhabha stresses the need to refrain from using dichotomies when speaking about identity and culture, as "[c]ultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self and Other" (*The Location* 35-36). To Bhabha, culture is a performative act, and so is identity. This is further accentuated in *The Location of Culture* (1994)*,* where he claims that:

> The representation of [cultural] difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (2)

Here Bhabha dismisses the idea that there is such a thing as a fixed culture, or a set ethnic identity. Instead, he suggests that one should think of culture and identity in terms of the concept of "hybridity". Bhabha argues further that the composition of cultural identity, meaning and structure occurs where cultures intersect, in a kind of traversing "in-between" that he refers to as the "Third Space of enunciation" (*The Location* 37). In this flexible space between cultures, something new can emerge, neither fully one, nor fully the other. Instead the plasticity and fluidity of these hybrid identities marks them as ever evolving entities that can change and shape each other as they interact in this ambiguous in-between. These ideas have been summaries in *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2007), where Ashcroft et

al. define Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" as "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (108). An equally significant aspect of Bhabha's thesis is that, although wishing to avoid binaries, he upholds a difference between the coloniser and the colonised as he seeks to explain how, in a globalised world with clear imbalances of power, the colonised will eventually begin to adopt certain elements of the coloniser's culture (Parker 298). Bhabha describes these complex mirroring effects by way of the term "mimicry". More will be said about this particular concept at a later point. Suffice it to say that, as this thesis is concerned with poetic manifestations of a hyphenated identity, and concerned with the works of poets who seek to use their poetry as a means to build a bridge between contesting cultures and conflicting identities, and act as cultural mediators, all three of Bhabha's concepts will prove to be useful lenses.

As a closing remark I wish to mention that I will also be drawing upon the work of other writers whenever their ideas help me to nuance my approach. Some of these ideas are primarily helpful on an overall level. Although this might mean that they are to a lesser degree addressed explicitly, they are of considerable value to my reading of the poems. One such example is the concept of "intersectionality" as it has been put forward by critical race theorist and professor of law, Kimberlé Crenshaw in the article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989). Her concept is built upon the idea that the experiences of women of colour differ fundamentally from the experiences of white women, and those of men of colour, and therefore need to be considered separately (Crenshaw 140). In support of her claim, she demonstrates how women of colour fall outside the standard categories, and thus have a hard time being heard in cases where the answer lies in the intersection between gender and race (Crenshaw 140). Over the course of the last thirty years, many more causes of intersectionality and multiple discrimination have been identified, such as class, nationality, religion, age, disability, political affiliation and sexual orientation, to name some of them. In

view of this, Crenshaw's concept helps me to point out how different aspects of discrimination based on someone's ethnicity, nationality, gender or religion all add to the level of complexity of hyphenated identities. As I will argue that Majaj, Nye and Abulhawa all use their poetry to identify and address this complex web of identities, I consider the concept of intersectionality to be a helpful trajectory.

Before I move on to describe the contents of the chapters, I will give a brief outline of the existing criticism of the three writers' work. To my knowledge, the vast majority of critical work that has been conducted within the field of Arab American literature deals with political and historical issues, aspects of cultural identity and stereotypes.[6] In addition, a growing body of critical works examine Arab American literature through an ecocritical lens. Of the three poets who form the basis of my analysis, Naomi Shihab Nye's writing is most frequently mentioned by critics.[7] As a literary scholar, Lisa Suhair Majaj is often quoted in critical works. Yet, her poetic voice is far less prominent in literary criticism and is often either featured in book reviews (Sazzad; Knopf-Newman) or presented in combination with the works of other Arab American writers (Bujupaj; Noman; Hamad). Susan Abulhawa's first, and for the time being, only collection of poetry *My Voice Sought the Wind* (2013) is fairly new. Thus, the majority of criticism that engages with her work is focused on her novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) (Al Soud; Altomani; Al-Ma'amari et al.; Bellour and Boussouf). Although the works of these three poets are all represented in existing criticism, to my knowledge their poetry has never been read together. The writings of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye and Susan Abulhawa provide ample opportunities to examine Arab

[6] For critical studies on Arab and Palestinian American literature in light of political and historical issues, see: Gómez-Vega ["Extreme Realities"]; Altomani; Bellour and Boussouf; Kayyali; Al Soud. For criticism on aspects of cultural identity in Arab American literature, see: El Hajj and Harb; Gómez-Vega ["An Essay Review"]; Abdulrahim; Al-Ma'amari et al.; Radwan; Hamad. For stereotypes, see: Wingfield and Karaman; Wardi-Zonna and Wardi, and for ecocritical perspectives, see: Bujupaj; Campos; Allani.

[7] For critical studies regarding the works of Naomi Shihab Nye, see: Allani; Bujupaj; Gómez-Vega; Al Soud; Wardi-Zonna and Wardi; Abdulrahim; El Hajj and Harb; Hamad; Safi. For their thematic content the footnote above may be consulted.

American literature from a distinctly Palestinian angle. Here I seek to fill the gap that emerges between the existing criticism that engages with Arab and Palestinian identity and a Palestinian identity of exile, and those texts that deal with Arab American poetic representations of ambiguous identities in a post-9/11 reality.

My study is informed by three collections of poetry, Lisa Suhair Majaj's *Geographies of Light* (2009), Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) and Susan Abulhawa's *My Voice Sought the Wind* (2013). As part of my methodological choice I have selected four poems from the respective collections. These four poems form the basis of my analysis and will be subject to close reading in the subsequent chapters. However, I will draw on a number of other poems in order to further nuance my claims. Close reading is important for my purposes in this thesis because it will allow me to pay attention to the details, language and images, which in turn will inform my analysis and increase my understanding of the poems in question. Only then will I be able to access the specificities and details that make up the complexity of negotiating the hyphen and demonstrate how the dynamics of hyphenation, and the perceptions of competing cultures, are expressed through the poets' different objectives and poetic styles.

For the first chapter, I have chosen the poems "Recognized Futures" (2009) and "Cadence" (2009). These poems, both written by the Cyprus-based, Palestinian American scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj, allow me to provide a basis for my study. In them, I find speakers who, due to a feeling of doubleness, begin to examine and question their roots. While exploring the dynamics of hyphenation and what it means to negotiate an Arab, Palestinian and American identity, the speakers eventually find strength in the ability to feel at home in more than one culture. This teleology of inner harmony is challenged in the second chapter by the speaker of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Two Countries" (2002). At first, this poem works as an extension of Majaj's introvert focus as both poems are self-examining at the outset.

However, Nye's poem crosses the line between the I and the Other as her speaker explores the possibilities of bridging the relational gap on an interpersonal as well as an intercultural level. In this way she seeks to pursue her overall aim of providing the foundations for cross-cultural understanding and empathy. The third chapter then is based on the poem "Black" (2013) written by Susan Abulhawa. Her poem widens the scope of how hyphenated identities can be negotiated as her speaker aspires to a transethnic solidarity that exceeds the traditional constructs of colour and race. Rather than living on both sides of the hyphen, as suggested by Majaj, or enter a dialogue with the Other in order to promote mutual recognition, as proposed by Nye, her speaker in "Black" elevates the distinctness of her Palestinian identity, and aligns it with the black struggle.

Chapter 1. Negotiating Identities in Lisa Suheir Majaj's "Recognized Futures" (2009) and "Cadence" (2009)

> *I look at myself in the mirror, I who am fractured at the core, yet whole inside my skin and in my heart.* ("Origins" 14)

When Palestinian American poet and scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj, opens her poetry collection *Geographies of Light* (2009) with the closing lines of Constantine Cavafy's poem "Ithaka" (1975), she invites her readers to consider her poems in light of an ancient trope. She does this by tapping into one of the great classical metaphors linked to the "Odyssey", an epic poem from antiquity that is regarded as one of the world's greatest classics ("Homer"). Central to the "Odyssey" is the Greek island of Ithaka, the home of the audacious hero Odysseus who, after having fought in the Trojan war, sets out on a journey to return to his island. In time both the name of the island and the poem's title have become common tropes for adventurous and challenging journeys, for wandering and homecoming. These ideas then, resound in *Geographies of Light* where Cavafy's closing words become Majaj's opening as she quotes, "[w]ise as you will have become, so full of experience, | you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean" (Cavafy 36-37; *Geographies of Light*). In these lines, the speaker of "Ithaka" points to the significance of learning to appreciate the process of life's many journeys and not just the point of arrival or the ultimate goal. This intertextual metaphor becomes a roadmap to Majaj's poetry and a signpost that lets her readers know that what they are about to read are some of the crossroads of her life. In doing so, Majaj suggests that it is the sum of all our identities that tells the story of who we are. In her poetry may be seen to extend this idea to the way in which Palestinian Americans search for a sense of rootedness on multiple levels as they negotiate their hyphenated identities. Consequently, I wish to argue that this particular opening enables me to read her poems as both profound personal contemplations, as well as broader comments on the experience of having to negotiate

outwardly opposing ethnic and cultural identities. To be able to understand the connection between the personal dimension of Majaj's poetry and the more general comments made in her poems, a brief look at her background will prove useful.

Born in Iowa in 1960 as daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, Lisa Suhair Majaj spent most of her childhood living in Amman, Jordan. Later she moved to Lebanon to study at the American University of Beirut. However, due to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 she had to evacuate and move back to the United States where she continued her education at the University of Michigan. After twenty years as a U.S. resident, Majaj moved to Nicosia, Cyprus in 2001, where she is currently residing. While Majaj may be seen to draw inspiration from a life that intersects closely with the tragic history of the Levant, much of her poetry is also motivated by her experience of having a mixed identity, Arab and American ("Palestinian-American Profiles"). As an Arab and a Palestinian American, she writes poetry that reflects the internal struggle that takes place whenever she tries to negotiate her cultural identities in an environment that comes across as fundamentally biased. The destabilising effect of this internal disruption permeates Majaj's poetry, which is influenced by her understanding that she is "fractured at the core, yet whole inside [her] skin and in [her] heart" ("Origins" 14). It is in this space between the fragments and the whole, in a contested territory challenged by cultural biases and temporary sensations of inner disunity, that her sense of self arises. In this chapter then, I have decided to take a closer look at how these particular sensations are expressed in two of her poems, "Recognized Futures" (2009) and "Cadence" (2009). Both poems are found in the fourth section of her collection *Geographies of Light,* which is Majaj's first full-fledged collection of poetry. Although "Cadence" is less specific than "Recognized Futures" in terms of presenting a distinctively Palestinian perspective, both poems provide readers with a portrayal of Arab American ethnic identity. As I see it, these poems show Majaj's ability to use language as a vehicle to

manoeuvre and mediate the different worlds to which she belongs. Here the poetic medium enables her to engage with issues of ethnic and cultural identity on a personal level, and express emotions and experiences that cannot be uttered in any other way.

Focusing of the poems “Recognized Futures” and “Cadence”, I will show how – by means of autobiographical elements, imagery and a diction evoking a tone of disconnection and separation – Majaj explores personal experiences of double-consciousness, hybridity and intersectionality, while insisting on the right of being recognised as an Arab, a Palestinian and an American. This is reflected in the poem “Recognized Futures” where Majaj addresses both her American name “Lisa” and her Arabic name, Suhair. It is in this intersection between herself and her names that the sense of doubleness arises. Having dissected her cultural identities, the poetic speaker in “Recognized Futures” struggles to reassemble the pieces. However, in time the inner tug-of-war is overcome by reconciliatory strategies that enable the speaker to let “torn | lives merge” (34-35). On account of this, I will argue that the poem “Recognized Futures” (2009) serves as a good example of how double-consciousness might manifest itself in the poetry of a Palestinian American writer. In “Cadence” Majaj addresses the complex web of identities that are inherent to her role as an “Arab-American woman” (2). Here her mixed ethnic heritage intersects with her roles as a woman, poet and scholar, a complexity that she tries to address from multiple perspectives. As she approaches the same scene from various viewpoints, “Cadence” becomes an example of how both in-group expectations and stereotypical representations may lead to sensations of incompatible identities and roles. In this way Majaj highlights the confusion that arises out of a discrepancy between an individual’s cognitive understanding of the self, and the perception others might have based on popular biases. In the end, the speaker in “Cadence” embraces the instability of identity. As a result, she finds a way to come to terms with her competing cultures.

1.1 Negotiating Doubleness

In a poem such as “Recognized Futures” (2009) (Appendix 1) the poetic voice becomes a vehicle through which Majaj is able to uncover a fraction of the personal dimension and hereby give the reader a glimpse of what it means to navigate multiple identities. In this poem Majaj also shows how this negotiation between different cultural identities can lead the Arab American to temporarily adopt a divided focus that leaves the individual trying to apply two perspectives at once. Rather than encouraging this celebration of separate identities, the speaker in “Recognized Futures” uses her name as a lens that – aided by imagery of light and darkness, as well as sound, song and speech – sheds light on aspects of Palestinian American identity that often remain covert. If names are little more than signs, one might argue that they bear no significance lest in reference to the person to whom they have been assigned. Still, I wish to argue otherwise. As one takes a closer look at Majaj’s poem, it becomes evident that, although names might be arbitrary labels, they manage to trigger a great number of cultural connotations and biases and are of personal significance to the bearer’s development of identity.

At present, the significance of “owning” or “claiming” your name is not necessarily an alien thought to the modern reader. One might consider how human reality is increasingly defined by virtual spaces that open up for everything from self-construction to identity theft. According to writer Ralph W. Ellison, “[i]t is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own” (“Hidden Name and Complex Fate” 192). In stating this, Ellison manages to capture some of the ambiguity that is inherent to receiving a name and repeatedly using it to identify oneself. In this regard it seems plausible that confusion might arise when the name one is given seemingly contradicts a coherent sense of self as it offers two conflicting cultural identities. This again might lead to a sense of doubleness that could elicit a crisis of identity. What Ellison seems to suggest when

stating that our names "must be made our own", is the significance of actively declaring a name one's own rather than accepting it as a pre-given fact. In other words, there will be a point when the individual will feel compelled to explore, question and challenge his or her name in order to claim the name and integrate it into their sense of self. I will therefore take a closer look at how Majaj uses her own names and history to find a way to honour both her American and her Arab identity.

In order to fit into an ethnic category, many multi-ethnic people experience situations where they have to choose between identities or are pressured to do so. Here Majaj's poem shows that Palestinian Americans are no exception, affirming Dinitha Smith who identifies Arab Americans as "feeling torn between their parents' traditions and their new culture" ("Arab-American Writers, Uneasy in Two Worlds"). It is difficult to say whether Arab Americans are in fact "uneasy" in two worlds or simply choose one side of the hyphen over the other. Perhaps it is this patchwork of possible identities which hides behind the hyphen that is, at least, partially to blame for the "competing views on what constitutes an Arab-American identity" ("The Hyphenated Author"). The ramifications of such a choice become visible in the opening strophe of Majaj's poem where the speaker seems to express a desire to recognise a part of herself that evidently has been underrepresented and discarded. In the poem the speaker seems to have realised that she is culturally detached from one side of her identity as she states:

> Turning to you, my name –
> this necklace of gold, these letters
> in script I cannot read
> this part of myself I long
> to recognize—falls forward
> into my mouth. (1-6)

The initial verb "turning" (1) suggests a movement, or more precisely, a change in perspective. Here the speaker directs her focus towards an unidentified "you". This addressee

could be a single person; however, it might as well be a plural "you", suggesting an audience of listeners. Another, more figurative interpretation emerges when taking the title of the poem, "Recognized Futures", into consideration. Rather than addressing a tangible addressee, the speaker might be "turning" towards the future. A personification of this kind serves as a way to turn an abstract and unpredictable concept such as the future, into something tangible and controllable. Such a reading could suggest that the speaker is standing on the brink of a process of self-examination, not knowing how this process of recognition will ultimately affect her. At the same time as the speaker is addressing this unidentified "you", she attends to her name as it suddenly "– falls forward | into [her] mouth" (6). Here the use of the word "fall" suggests a suddenness and sense of bewilderment, almost as if her name was an estranged relation. This mood of abruptness and perplexity is accentuated by the two dashes that turn the two respective lines into a frame for the remaining three lines of this first strophe. The pause created by these dashes enables the speaker to pronounce both the physical and the mental distance between herself and her name by depicting is as a "necklace of gold" (2) comprised out of "letters in script I cannot read" (2-3). Here the speaker negotiates her identity through a language she cannot decipher. Although it is not spelled out in the poem, reading these lines one can easily imagine a Palestinian American who has little knowledge of Arabic, and thus is unable to read her name in anything but the Latin alphabet. Despite the fact that this word for word interpretation might seem of limited value, it still offers an interesting point, as it highlights a loss of language, and thus a loss of culture. Therefore, this to the letter reading opens up yet another aspect of the Palestinian American experience, where acculturation, and suppression of one's heritage has long lasting consequences. At this point one may draw a parallel to Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Arabic" (2002), which opens with the lines:

> The man with laughing eyes stopped smiling
> to say, “Until you speak Arabic–
> –you will not understand pain.” (1-3)

These lines point out how the speaker in “Arabic” is excluded from the Arabic language, a frustration that becomes all too evident a little later in the poem when the speaker notes that “I admit my shame. | To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging | its rich threads without understanding how to weave the rug … I have no gift” (19-23). As she stands on the threshold, the speaker seems painfully aware of her shortcomings, knowing she will never master the language enough to cross that final line. Equally, Arabic seems to pose a linguistic challenge to the speaker in “Recognized Futures” who describes her experience of pronouncing her Arabic name as:

> a taste faintly metallic,
> blunt edges around which my tongue
> moves tentatively. Suhair, (15-17)

In this particular passage the speaker’s poor command of the Arabic language seems to make her question the Arab Palestinian part of her identity. This is shown by way of gustatory and auditory imagery in phrases such as “a taste faintly metallic” (15), and “my tongue | moves tentatively” (16-17), where Majaj’s diction creates a mood of unfamiliarity. Although she already conveys a certain distance regarding the name by referring to it as the “other name” (14) in a previous line, the speaker’s insecurity regarding the name and the language is accentuated by the way Majaj expounds the unfamiliar way in which her organs of speech move while attempting to pronounce that name. The adjectives that she uses to describe this experience, such as “metallic” and “blunt” could be understood in connection to the nature of the sounds of speech that she produces when pronouncing the name. Here the word “metallic” suggests the nature of metal, something lustre, resonant or hard, and the “blunt edges” could be understood as a way to describe, in a tactile fashion, the curves and curls of Arabic script.

At the same time, the reference to the taste of metal turns the name into a foreign body, which implies that the name "Suhair" is something unfamiliar, not yet claimed by the speaker.

Much like way the metallic taste implied both a sense of proximity and physical distance, the aforementioned reference to the image of the necklace serves to expose a paradox. Here the necklace becomes a symbol of both the speaker's mixed origin, and of the detachment and lack of connection to parts of this same ethnic identity. On the one hand a necklace is something that is worn close to the human body where the charm is typically located close to the heart. This would imply both a sense of steadfastness and closeness. Meaning that, albeit the individual might choose to favour one identity over another, the rejected part will only fade, but never truly disappear. On the other hand, one finds a contradiction in the fact that, although a necklace is worn close, it is also detachable as it is fastened around the neck and not an integral part of the one wearing it. On account of the aforementioned paradox, the element of choice and the ability to lose or ignore parts of the self is emphasised by the image of a piece of jewellery that may be taken off at leisure. Let me say in passing that the human ability to claim multiple identities, also suggest that the speaker has a choice in terms of which identities to explore, and which to ignore. According to developmental psychologist Jean S. Phinney, a change from indifference to a position where one acknowledges the existence of an ethnic identity, will help a person to verify the claimed identity and create a heightened awareness of one's ethnicity. When seen in light of the first strophe of "Recognized Futures" one may see how Majaj is able to disclose such a perceptive shift as the speaker states, "this part of myself I long | to recognize" (4-5). Here Majaj describes the speaker's strong desire to identify a neglected part of the self in order to verify this part of her identity. In the same line, Majaj's use of the word "part" may be read as a further reference to a fractioned identity. The word, which by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is defined as "relating to a portion or division of a whole" ("part"), alludes to an identity that

is composed of more than one piece, yet belongs to one individual who seeks to consolidate the fragments. Ultimately, the opening strophe depicts a speaker who seeks a way to recognise a neglected part of herself, a process which is presented as complex and complicated as both images discussed – “a taste faintly metallic” (15) and the “necklace of gold” (2) – point to a sense of inner ambiguity.

In continuation of the idea of the indecipherable name in “Recognized Futures” I wish to turn attention to the way Majaj specifically addresses names as an aspect of identity. When understanding the practice of naming as an act of cultural “inscription”, an alternative reading emerges. Where on one side the description of the two names – “Lisa” (7) and “Suhair” (17) – attests to the speaker’s multi-rootedness, Majaj shows how the speaker herself seems unable to access the entirety of the cultural capital that is embedded in her name. The importance of names in a bicultural context is also given emphasis by the work of Edward Said in his autobiographical narrative *Out of Place: A Memoir* (2000). Here the narrator describes a similar struggle of identities as he portrays the Palestinian American from an explicitly subjective point of view. Not unlike the speaker in “Recognized Futures” the narrative voice of the young Edward Said struggles to come to terms with the cultural and political message embedded in his names (*Out of Place* 3). This is echoed in the opening lines of Said’s narrative where he writes:

> All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language. There was always something wrong with how I was invented and meant to fit in with the world of my parents and four sisters. Whether this was because I constantly misread my part or because of some deep flaw in my being I could not tell for most of my early life. Sometimes I was intransigent, and proud of it. At other times I seemed to myself to be nearly devoid of any character at all, timid, uncertain, without will. Yet the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place. Thus it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel less uncomfortable with, Edward, a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said. (3)

The notion that somehow a name is an act of invention which you will have to "become accustomed to" or "feel less comfortable with", suggests that names are in fact cultural constructs more closely connected to parents and their hopes and dreams, than to the individual bearing the name. Just as the necklace is attached from without, Said suggests the formation of an externally formed narrative identity that is composed by a collective and transferred onto an individual. He describes the sensation of not being able to conform to the role that he had been assigned and uses his name as a vehicle to explain his internal sense of disunity and perpetual sensation "of always being out of place" (3). He acknowledges the fact that on one hand he has been ascribed with the name "Edward", a name that is unmistakably Anglo-Saxon, while on the other hand his surname, "Said" suggests roots in the Middle East. Where one name reflects his citizenship, the other reflects his ethnicity. Thus, Said manages to convey what it feels like to have two contesting labels manifest themselves as part of your name, and your means of identification. In his memoir it becomes clear that this perceived dissonance between the names "Edward" and "Said", and the schism between being both Palestinian, Arab and American leaves him at odds with himself. Here he recollects his inner conflict with his names' cultural and ethnic connotations as he "tried to connect [his] fancy English name with its Arabic partner" (3). He recalls:

> For years, and depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past "Edward" and emphasize "Said"; at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear. The one thing I could not tolerate, but very often would have to endure, was the disbelieving, and hence undermining, reaction: Edward? Said? (3-4)

Here Said attests Ellison's claims that the names we are given "must be made our own" ("Hidden Names and Complex Fate" 192). However, to him the act of "making" is presented more as a state of gradual and reluctant acceptance than as someone who boldly lays claim to his name. In light of this, one can see how, for Said, the act of negotiating these two

seemingly antagonistic identities becomes a time-consuming project. A little later in the same chapter he writes:

> I have retained this unsettled sense of many identities--mostly in conflict with each other--all of my life, together with an acute memory of the despairing feeling that I wish we could have been all-Arab, or all-European and American, or all-Orthodox Christian, or all-Muslim, or all-Egyptian, and so on. (5)

In retrospect he describes a longing for something undivided and singular, something which, if we are to believe scholars such as Bhabha and Crenshaw, is a utopian ideal that is incompatible with the fluctuating nature of identities. This point is sustained by the fact that Said's sense of a compartmentalised self remained largely intact throughout his life. This then is the distressing reality of having to navigate between multiple identities.

In "Recognized Futures" this same ambiguity of hyphenation is conveyed by way of the two names "Lisa" and "Suhair". Here Majaj may be seen to describe an experience similar to the one mentioned above. It is important to note that these two names are Majaj's own names, something which indicates that she draws on personal experiences as she presents the split-vision that arises when a person of mixed heritage tries to negotiate multiple cultural identities. What is more, as a Palestinian American, Majaj has first-hand knowledge of what it means to affiliate with different ethnic or cultural groups. In view of this, I wish to argue that the poem holds enough references to the poet herself that an autobiographical reading is admissible. This allows Majaj to shift her focus from a general description of Palestinian American ethnic identity-development to a more specific and personal narrative. Thus, her two names, each rooted in a different culture, become a scripted manifestation of doubleness as she writes:

> You call my daily name, Lisa,
> the name I've finally declared
> my own, claiming a heritage
> half mine: corn fields silver
> in ripening haze, green music
> of crickets, summer light sloping
> to dusk on the Iowa farm.
>
> This other name fills my mouth,
> a taste faintly metallic,
> blunt edges around which my tongue
> moves tentatively: Suhair,
> an old-fashioned name,
> little star in the night. The second girl,
> small light on a distanced horizon. (7-20)

Majaj visibly divides her identity into two separate parts, where the fraction is found in the juxtaposition of these two strophes each dedicated to a single name. Rather than forcing the two sides of herself together, Majaj contemplates the two sides separately. She begins by using her first name "Lisa" to explore the part of her that is American. Here the words "my daily name" (7) suggest that "Lisa" is the familiar name used by those who are in her immediate vicinity. In addition, the speaker states, "Lisa, | the name I've finally declared | my own, claiming a heritage | half mine" (7-10). Once again one may draw a parallel to Ellison as the speaker in "Recognized Futures" gives the impression of having realised how names must be claimed and made our own. Nevertheless, a latent distance seems to remain as this American heritage of hers, the "… corn fields silver | in ripening haze, green music | of crickets, summer light sloping | to dusk on the Iowa farm" (10-13) are only seen as representing half of her. Due to this a mood of incompleteness prevails.

Having considered how the hyphenated individual may lay claim to an identity by way of her names, the speaker's referral to "a heritage | half mine" (9-10) aligns closely with the concept of hyphenation. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday define such hyphenated identities as labels "applied to those categorized as belonging to more than one sociocultural group, in terms of culture and ethnicity" and in more general terms "any label based on allocating

someone to both a minority group and a disconnected social category". As a linguistic composition, the hyphen is typically used to identify someone's cultural descent. Yet it may also function as a way to describe the situation of having to negotiate a specific ethnic identity, while simultaneously being a part of a diverse and multicultural America. On these grounds, the concept of hyphenation is in itself a reinforcement of a binary way of depicting a mixed ethnic and cultural background. In other words, these hyphenated compounds allow us to verbally simplify complex identities by way of dichotomies. In an article in *The Guardian*, the black writer Toni Morrison calls attention to this dilemma when noting how, "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate" (Morrison). Majaj illustrates this systemic segmentation in "Recognized Futures" as she separates the American identity from the Palestinian identity, hereby visibly dissecting the various layers of a Palestinian American identity.

The tension that arises in the junction between the speaker's Arab name and her American name is further complicated by the historical context that bestows the Palestinian American a diasporic identity. In *Attitudes to Language* (2010) linguist Peter Garrett explains how proper names, just as any other words and expressions, trigger connotations and attitudes. He also mentions how names are typically associated with certain social and cultural stereotypes that will lead people to perceive and judge people based on "cognitive shortcuts" (4). This will evidently complicate the process in coming to terms with one's own name, as the process of claiming it will be affected by the general perception and the cultural and social bias that clings to the name. This sensation of a debated identity is hinted at in the fourth strophe of "Recognized Futures" where Majaj refers to:

> A contested name, a constant
> longing, evening star rising mute
> through the Palestine night. (24-26)

In the essay “Identity, Authority, and Freedom” (1994) Said draws attention to the prevalent discussion about a Palestinian national identity as Palestinians have been and continue to be seen as stateless “Arab inhabitants” (12) by the Israeli authorities and those who support them. With this in mind, I am inclined to believe that the “contested name” (24) Majaj is referring to is a conscious choice of diction that carries a political message. Just as the word “contested” refers to some kind of disputed idea that is repeatedly called into question, Palestinians living in an American context will time and again have to handle the fact that their “name”, the existence of a Palestinian nation and a Palestinian national identity, remains a subject of controversy. As a consequence, Majaj’s choice of diction enables her to identify the strained diplomatic relations between Palestine and the U.S. as an obstruction in her attempts to overcome a sense of doubleness, as well as helping her to shed light on the complexity this particular political situation adds to the individual’s endeavours to negotiate multiple identities. Thus, Majaj links a sensation of internal disunity and double-consciousness to the complicated relationship between the U.S. and Palestine and seeks to identify how the political situation may affect the development of ethnic identity in individuals.

If one takes a look at the entirety of the strophe from which the above-mentioned lines are retrieved, it becomes evident that Majaj emphasises this inner tug-of-war by using a diction that intensifies this mood of disconnection, divergence and separation. Majaj writes:

> Throughout childhood this rending split:
> continents moving slowly apart,
> rift widening beneath taut limbs.
> A contested name, a constant
> longing, evening star rising mute
> through the Palestine night.
> Tongue cleft by impossible languages,
> fragments of narrative fractured
> to loss, homelands splintered
> beyond bridgeless rivers,
> oceans of salt. (21-31)

Rich in descriptive words and imagery, the retrospective outset of the passage cited above depicts a speaker who is looking back, perhaps to her childhood or adolescence, and recalls a feeling of being internally torn as she is pulled in two directions desperately trying to find a suitable coping strategy that allows her to bridge the widening gap. This passage then serves as an example of what might happen to those who set out to examine their ethnic identity, but whose search only leads them to realise the great cultural gap that is between their two loci of belonging. Embedded in the same passage are words and expressions that further accentuate the sensation of a mental dissonance, such as “rending split”, “moving apart”, “rift widening”, “cleft”, “fragments”, “fractured”, “splintered” and “bridgeless” (21-31). Lined up, these words all point to an understanding of an ongoing process of division. Here the phrase “rending split” (21) refers to a forceful, perhaps even violent process of separation. This sense of a loss of proximity is stressed as Majaj uses the image of two geographic locations that are “slowly moving apart” (22). By way of the preceding image of movement, her portrayal of a fractioned self is amplified even further. Into the same image plays the fact that the tectonic plates of North America and Arabia are drifting apart. Here the sense of self is based on two external loci of identity, namely two geographic locations. Therefore, the passage in question could also be read as a reference to plate tectonics and a geographical increase in distance. Here one might argue that the actual movement in the tectonic plates serves as a symbol for an internal movement of the two sides of the speaker’s self.

There is also, however, a further point to be considered in relation to the emerging “rift” (23). Rather than bringing the different cultural identities closer together, the speaker’s upbringing causes her two identities to crystallise into two separate entities. This particular idea is further developed in the line where the speaker describes her two external loci of ethnic identity – America and Palestine – as a “rift widening beneath taut limbs” (23). On the one hand the aforementioned “rift”, which denotes an open space, a fissure or a splitting of a

whole, could symbolise a room of opportunity, a space in which the speaker is bound by neither of the two identities. On the other hand, the rest of the words “beneath taut limbs” (23) conjure up an image of a widening gap that makes it increasingly difficult to maintain the cultural splits, as the speaker is already stretched to the breaking point. In view of this image the body becomes a provisional bridge, where the arms and legs are drawn in opposite directions as the cultures seemingly drift apart. What remains is a speaker consisting of multiple “fragments”, with a “fractured” and “splintered” sense of self. Ultimately, this dynamic state of the two drifting positions may be summed up as follows. From one point of view, the “continents moving slowly apart” (22) serve to illustrate how the speaker’s Palestinian and American identities are anchored in geography, as they are derived from two different continents. Here the gap between the speaker’s ethnic identity which links her to the Arab world, is physically separated from her life in the U.S. and her identity as an American citizen. Hence, the speaker’s sensation of felt two-ness is connected to a distance in space. From another standpoint, one may argue that this widening gap is a consequence of an increased focus on one’s ethnic identity. In other words, the more the speaker seeks to find a coherent self, the more she realises the immense difference between her two cultures of origin. In the end, the political undertone, and the creation of a specific emotional setting evoked by a mood of disconnection, divergence and separation enables the speaker, and in extension the poet herself, to contemplate and mediate the various tensions and contradictions inherent to her own biography.

So far, the poem has been presented as an example of a split-perspective, where the different identities that have been singled out exist as separate entities, that, when intersecting seem to contradict and challenge each other. If one were to leave it at that, a binary understanding of ethnic identity development would persist. Yet here the final strophe of Majaj’s poem “Recognized Futures” offers a volta that opens for a different interpretation.

> From the fragments I feel
> a stirring, almost imperceptible.
> In the morning light these torn
> lives merge: a name on your lips,
> on mine, softly murmured,
> mutely scripted, both real
> and familiar, till I cannot
> distinguish between your voice
> and my silence, my words
> and this wordless knowledge,
> morning star rising
> through lightning sky,
> some music I can't quite
> hear, a distant melody
> flute-like, nai through
> the olives, a cardinal calling,
> some possible language
> all our tongues can sing. (32-45)

In the space between the multiple fragments of identity, the speaker's identities seem to undergo some kind of metamorphosis as her "torn | lives merge" (35) in a dialogue between the speaker and the undefined "you". Although still separated by a division of lines, the enjambment draws the different identities closer together. Central to this shift in mood is the way in which Majaj uses the recurring symbol of a star in connecting with imagery of light and darkness. Where the previous strophes depict the speaker's Palestinian identity as a "little star in the night" (19) and "a small light on a distant horizon" (20), and her disputed identity is compared to "an evening star rising mute | through the Palestine night" (25-26), the final strophe seems to renounce both dimness and distance. Rather this aforementioned darkness gives way to light as "In the morning light these torn | lives merge" (34-35), while a "morning star is rising | through a lightening sky" (42-43). Here I wish to dwell a moment on the symbol of the star, with the intention of showing how this particular symbol assembles the different identities.

Moving in an orbit between the sun and the earth is the brightest planet of our solar system, Venus (Squyres). Only visible during the brief hours of dawn and dusk, the planet has

been referred to as both the “morning star” and “evening star”. Astronomers Kaare Aksnes and Truls Ringes call attention to the fact that ancient civilisations such as the Greeks and the Egyptians believed they were looking at two separate celestial bodies, when in fact they were seeing the same object (Squyres). Although the link between astronomy and ethnic identity might seem a little fanciful, I think that it offers an interesting angle when it comes to the transition between multiple distinct and competing identities, and a more dynamic and inclusive interpretation of identity. Where on the first glance it seems as though Majaj is referring to two different celestial bodies, closer inspection reveals that the two stars are actually one and the same planet. Similarly, the different identities that Palestinian Americans will have to navigate and negotiate between are in fact all aspects of the same person. Like a planet that is visible only at dawn and dusk, multiple identities might seem mutually exclusive or incompatible. Yet, in the invisible in-between, in this Third Space if you will, these different cultural, ethnic, historical, political and relational identities can communicate, in the process of which something new can emerge. This hybrid identity that is “both real | and familiar” (“Recognized Futures” 37-38) uses the discernible and felt differences between the many identities to form something that transcends the original boundaries of the original hyphenated identity of the Palestinian American. Majaj herself verbalises this simultaneity of a cracked yet unbroken self in her prose poem “Origins” (2006) where she writes, “I who am fractured at the core, | yet whole inside my skin and in my heart” (14). This remark seems to echo the same paradox, emphasising how one can be both torn and unified at once. The speaker in “Recognized Futures” concludes in a similar fashion as she states, “all our tongues can sing” (45) in the final line of the poem. Here the speaker seems to have found a way of coping with her internal sense of doubleness as she moves away from a polarised mindset and begins to acknowledge the complexity of hybridity, and the transformative potential that lies embedded in an inquisitive mentality that is open to diversity.

1.2 Claiming both Sides of the Hyphen

Majaj's poem "Cadence" (2009) (Appendix 2) manages to add additional layers to the discussion on the hyphenated identities of Arab and Palestinian Americans. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate the final section of this chapter to this particular poem. Where "Recognized Futures" gives insight into the complexity of negotiating a distinct Palestinian American identity, the Arab American speaker in "Cadence" shows how a hyphenated identity gives Arab Americans a position as intermediates, a stance that generates challenges, but also becomes as a source of cultural insight. Rather than focusing on the dichotomy of hyphenation, Majaj uses "Cadence" to exhibit the web of intersecting identities that all add to the complexity of an Arab American identity. In this poem Majaj uses her poetic voice to highlight the struggle of Arab American women who seek creative freedom while navigating the multiple roles that are constructed by them and for them. In consequence, this poem offers multiple points of view, exposes a crisscross of different roles, and depicts the Arab American woman as both a victim of multiple forms of discrimination, as well as a proud and confident individual who has found ways to negotiate her hyphenated identity. Well aware that this part of the chapter is markedly shorter than the one preceding it, I wish to point out that it is meant to be viewed as a supplementary remark rather than a chronological in-depth study of the respective poem. Thus, my focus will be on how Majaj juxtaposes restrictive in-group expectations with stereotypical representations to highlight the destabilising effects of cross pressure and cultural misconceptions. I also intend to return to Majaj's overall metaphor of a journey, to show how she uses the image to explain how Arab Americans can transcend binary representations and cultural bias and come to terms with their competing cultures by entering a Third Space that enables them to successfully negotiate between the different identities.

There is something about the universality of the narrative voice that makes "Cadence" stand out amidst the many intriguing poems in *Geographies of Light*. In the poem the reader encounters the voice of an omniscient speaker who remains in the background while directing attention to the stylised figure of an Arab American woman. By assuming a secondary position, the narrative voice enables the reader to become a hovering observer. One may ask how a generalisation of this kind might serve to depict complexity, especially since generalisations tend to oversimplify reality rather than provide the nuances necessary to get a grasp of its diversity. However, I wish to argue that by approaching the abstraction from multiple angles, Majaj identifies multi-layered and intertwined identities, hereby adding to the sense of complexness rather than diminishing it. In this fashion she is able to explore the in-between that transpires in the places where these identities converge.

The first two strophes are of particular significance when exploring how Majaj highlights the destabilising effects of cross pressure and cultural misconceptions:

> The audience watches curiously
> as the Arab-American woman steps up
> to the podium. Light hair and skin,
> unaccented English … they thought
> she'd be more – you know – exotic.
>
> Or: the audience waits attentively
> as the Arab-American woman steps up
> to the podium. She is cousin, compatriot,
> fellow-traveler, Arab resonance
> in a place far from home. (1-10)

As the narrative voice recounts how "the Arab-American woman steps up to the podium" (2-3, 7-8) there is a distinct change in tone as the speaker moves from one perspective to the other. Although the poem simply refers to an "audience", the spectator's associations and thoughts indicate that their attitudes towards the Arab American woman are quite different. Where the first audience peers at the woman with notable curiosity (1), the second audience is expectant rather than prying, as it eyes the woman with watchful consideration (6).

As Majaj delineates the associations and thoughts of her first audience, it becomes evident how their stance is a result of a felt dissonance between the spectators' perception of the Arab American woman's appearance – her "Light hair and skin" (3) and "unaccented English" (4) – and their preconceived expectations based on a stereotype. Here the use of the italicised term "*exotic*" (5) serves to deepen the sense of a biased audience that approaches the Arab American woman with a presumption that she will be markedly different and constitute a noticeable Other. No doubt, Said would have deemed this assumed mysteriousness a manifestation of contemporary orientalism, based on the fact that the audience clearly expects the Arab American woman to conform to the oriental trope of the dark, mysterious woman (5). What is more, by italicising the word "exotic" and placing it after a dash, Majaj invites the reader to pause and really notice how the audience distances itself from the Arab American woman by seeking ways to accentuate her foreignness. Once again it is appropriate to draw a brief parallel to *Orientalism* where Said repeatedly shows how the West has used art, and writings of fiction and non-fiction, to depict the Arab world and its inhabitants as an enigmatic and fundamentally different Other. This observation would serve the claim he is making in "The Latest Phase" (*Orientalism* 284-328), where he gives detailed examples of how latent orientalism sways popular sentiment towards the Middle East and its population.

Having considered the use of tone in the strophe, it is also important to note how this plays into Majaj's objective of throwing light on the situation of Palestinian American women and their ability to negotiate seemingly incompatible cultural identities in an environment that strikes one as culturally biased. Taking the above analysis into account, Majaj seems to use this first strophe of "Cadence" to indicate the difficulty of being recognised as American in an environment that has a specific idea of what it means to be an Arab woman. Rather than looking for similarities that form a common ground, the audience watches the Arab American woman through a lens of difference. On this note, I would like to include a passage from

Majaj's poem "Guidelines" (2009) where she, without becoming judgemental, introduces her readers to a speaker who offers a number of directions on how to tackle all the tiresome, curious and hostile confrontations that seem to be a part of the Arab American experience. In the strophes five and six, Majaj writes:

> If they say you're not American,
> don't pull out your personal,
> wallet-sized flag. Instead, recall
>
> the Bill of Rights. Mention the Constitution.
> Wear democracy like a favorite garment:
> comfortable, intimate. (12-18)

Rather than responding with anger and frustration, the speaker in "Guidelines" depicts the appeasing effect when adopting a conciliatory tone. Although it might seem counterintuitive, the narrative voice compels the Arab American to draw on the shared values of equality, freedom and democracy, sooner than becoming confrontational. In a commentary, fellow Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye puts it beautifully when stating how "Guidelines" reminds her of "the power of language to ease situations of potential conflict. Instead of backfiring with fury the poem gently engages and expands" (Naomi Shihab Nye reads Lisa Suhair Majaj's 'Guidelines'). Where the poem "Guidelines" narrates a scenario where an individual's Americanness is questioned, with the objective of providing guidance, the narrative voice in "Cadence" displays a type of prejudice that is less candid as the audience reveals a more latent lack of acceptance on the basis of their racially-motivated assumptions. Thus, Majaj is able to show how the Arab American's will to claim an intermediate position that allows her to root her identity in both an American and an Arab context, may be complicated by a popular tendency to emphasise difference rather than accepting the hybrid nature of her identity.

Where the first audience displays a narrow view, the audience that is outlined in the second strophe immediately appears to give prominence to a diverse range of identities as the

Arab American woman is recognised as "cousin, compatriot, | fellow-traveler Arab resonance | in a place far from home" (8-10). Here Majaj brings into view those aspects of identity that are related to kinship, nationality, and shared experiences of relocation, all aspects that mark this audience as Arab. However, the Arab American woman responds with hesitation (11) as it becomes evident that neither her American nor her Arab audience seems to fully understand her wish to move freely between both sides of the hyphen. This is expressed more explicitly a little later in the poem where the speaker longs for the freedom to make her own decisions without being judged. She yearns, "to walk in the forest empty handed, | climb up a mountain and down again, | bearing no more than what any person | needs to live. She dreams of shouting from | a high place, her voice cascading down || wild rivers" (16-21). This dream of creative freedom stands in stark contrast to the protest she receives as the Arab community maintains:

> "We have so many problems!
> – our identity to defend, our cultures under siege.
> We can't waste our time admiring trees!" (23-25)

Even though the Arab audience considers parts of her that are of great importance to the development of her ethnic identity (8-10), they still confine her to an Arab framework. Where, on one side, the concept of a hyphen opens up for the creation of a linguistic connection between two different frameworks of cultural identity, hyphenation also comes with a great amount of flexibility. Here the figure of the Arab American woman becomes a vehicle to address the sense of destabilisation that arises as individuals become subject to cross-pressure, in addition to showing the internal imbalance that arises in the face of an external reluctance to accept an individual's wish to retain a hybrid identity. Hence:

> The Arab-American woman hesitates.
> She's weary of living on only one side
> of the hyphen. Her poems aren't just translations. (11-13)

By the means of words such as “hesitates” and “weary” Majaj conveys a mood of uncertainty, latent frustration, and fatigue. Here a sense of two-ness emerges as the reader is introduced to a person who is visibly discontented by constantly being forced to choose between her ethnic identity and her American citizenship. In this manner, Majaj is able to demonstrate how both in-group and out-group assumptions and attitudes may impose boundaries upon those who wish to move freely between worlds, and search for an identity that is rooted on multiple levels. This then becomes the point of departure of Majaj’s exploration of a many-sided self, and her journey towards a position in which Arab American women are free to negotiate those multiple identities.

At the core of DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness lies the desire to find a way to unify the different fractions of the self. However, prior to a process where different strands of an individual’s identity can merge, there needs to be a realisation that one is, in some way or another, divided at the core. DuBois describes this as a mental struggle where the individual is caught in a cultural limbo (17). In the case of the “Arab-American woman” the different parts of the compound suggest a complexity that is in want of some additional refinement when it comes to the description of this intermediary position. Thus, as this chapter draws to a close, I will take a brief look at Majaj’s portrayal of how Arab Americans can transcend binary representations and cultural bias and come to terms with their competing cultures. In strophes six and seven Majaj proclaims:

> The Arab-American woman knows who she is,
> and it’s not what you think. She’s authentic
> in jeans or in an embroidered dress.
> When she walks up a mountain, her identity
> goes up with her and comes back down again.

> Besides, she's learned a secret.
> Two cultures can be lighter than one
> if the space between them is fluid,
> like wind, or light between two open hands,
> or the future, which knows how to change. (26-35)

At this point of the poem, the narrative voice seems to turn her attention to the reader. As the speaker proclaims, "it's not what you think" (27), the reader is made aware of his or her own distorted and limited understanding of what it means to claim a hyphenated identity. This notion is further emphasised by stressing the authenticity of Arab American women regardless of their appearance, here illustrated by way of a choice of garments. To be able to understand the significance of these pieces of clothing, it is important to note how jeans are a traditional symbol of the American West, an item that evolved and became a token of protest, democratisation and globalisation (Hegarty). This symbol of modernity, then seems to pose a contrast to the "embroidered dress" (28) which evokes associations to the lavishly decorated traditional national costumes of Palestine. These costumes, originally a sign of regional and familial identity, have "become one of the dominant representations of Palestinian cultural identity" and "been invested with multiple meanings as a result of the dispossession and exile of Palestinian communities» (Sherwell). By virtue of this juxtaposition, Majaj seeks to cancel out a superficial understanding of ethnic and cultural identity, drawing her reader's attention to the fact that neither clothes nor geographical context make the Arab American woman less able to find a footing in both an American and an Arab cultural context.

In the following strophe, the speaker develops her argument declaring that the Arab American woman is in no way in need of being defined by an exterior third part, but is able to express her identity when given the chance to enter a space which permits her to negotiate the different roles and identities that intersect and make her who she is. Neither her American audience nor her Arab audience seems to fully comprehend her wish to travel freely between two worlds, a wish that becomes evident as the speaker reveals that the Arab American

woman has “learned a secret. | Two cultures can be lighter than one | if the space between them is fluid” (31-33). Rather than recognising her as a cultural mediator and agent in both spheres, her two audiences are split in their understanding of her identity. In contrast to these two opposing views, the speaker implies that the web of identities is perpetually changing. The speaker does this by referring to the space of cultural translation and transformation as “fluid” (33). In addition, she is comparing it to unpredictable elements such as “wind” (34) and “light” (34), the image of a set of “open hands” (34), and dynamic concepts such “future” (35) and “change” (35). It is here that Majaj may be seen to transcend the dichotomy inherent to the concept of hyphenation. By letting different identities collide, the Arab American woman enters a Third Space that enables her to successfully negotiate between the different identities. To her being Arab American is only one out of many identities claimed by a human being. So, when the figure of the Arab American woman in “Cadence” approaches the podium:

> She wants to read a poem about climbing
> a mountain. It’s the song of what travelers
> take with them, leave behind, transform.
> From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence. (36-40)

The speaker and the Arab American woman alike seem to find closure in this notion of an imagined in-between that opens up for cultural transformation rather than cultural translation. In this instance one begins to realise a more profound meaning behind the claim that “[h]er poems aren’t just translations” (13), instead they are the sum of personal history shaped by what “travelers | take with them, leave behind, transform” (38-39). Thus, one can see how the Arab American woman, who seemingly is “fractured at the core” can still be “whole inside [her] skin and in [her] heart” (“Origins”14).

Chapter 2. Bridging the Divide Between the I and the Other in Naomi Shihab Nye's "Two Countries" (2002)

Love means you breathe in two countries. ("Two Countries" 15)

Palestinian American award-winning poet and writer, Naomi Shihab Nye published *19 varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002) as a way of responding to the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11th, 2001. As the title suggests, most of the poems depict the daily lives of people in the Middle East. However, throughout her collection she keeps returning to the figure of the displaced Arab, whether in form of an immigrant or a refugee. Equivalent to Edward Said, who in "Identity, Authority, and Freedom" (1994) explains how his Palestinian American identity is marked by a sense of belonging "to more than one world" (11), Nye acknowledges how people who have to leave their home and place of origin behind, will "always have other worlds in their minds" (xiii). Here it is possible for Nye to draw upon personal experience as she was brought up in an ethnically and culturally diverse setting by a father who is a Palestinian refugee and a mother of German and Swiss descent. Additionally, she also spent her childhood in St. Louis, Jerusalem and San Antonio, and has done a substantial amount of travelling in her adult life ("Naomi Shihab Nye" [*Steven Barclay Agency*]). This multicultural background and Nye's interest in travel has been a source of inspiration, and elements of cultural diversity and multiplicity feature in many of her works. As a person who, all her life "thought about the Middle East, wrote about it, wondered about it, lived in it, visited it, worried about it, loved it" (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* xii), 9/11 became a watershed moment for Nye; a point in her life where she simply could not refrain from using her poetic voice in response (xviii). As she realised how this act of terrorism tainted Arabs in the U.S., but also on a global level, it became important to her to profess that this is "not who we are" (xiv). Thus, one of her objectives with *19 Varieties of*

Gazelle is to show the world how the atrocities committed on September 11th, are by no means representative for the Arab world at large.

Moreover, Nye's assemblage of the sixty-two poems also serves to address the overarching issue of a general lack of cross-cultural understanding between Arabs and Americans ("Naomi Shihab Nye" [*Poetry Foundation*]). Much like Majaj and Abulhawa, Nye is a wearer of many hats, and she expresses a firm identity as both a Palestinian and an American. At the same time, she acknowledges the fact that her hyphenated identity places her, and other Palestinian Americans, in a position where she is "blessed and doomed at the same time" (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* xii). This realisation shows how the "plurality of vision" (185-186) that Said describes in "Reflections on Exile" (2001), comes at a price. This ambiguous position becomes Nye's stepping stone as she channels her wish for cross-cultural understanding through the medium for which she is most known, namely poetry. In an interview with scholar and fellow poet Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nye discloses that to her "writing [is] a way of thinking", something which helps "identify what makes the whole geography of our lives" ("Talking With Poet Naomi Shihab-Nye"). In combination I found these two remarks thought-provoking as they point to poetry as a medium that, to a larger extent than others, connects the miniscule details of language, with the larger experience of human existence. Her poetry pays attention to all those small details that display how a sense of belonging in more than one world may enrich an individual's take on reality. What is more, in her introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle* Nye specifies how poetry, "slows us down" and "cherishes small details" (xiv). To her, the varying degrees of transparency in poetry become an aide that helps the reader to gradually notice those details. This then, I believe, becomes Nye's reason for tackling 9/11 through poetry rather than any other medium.

Remembering Nye's objective of bridging the gap of cultural ignorance that characterises popular sentiment towards Arabs, I wish to use this chapter to take a closer look

at the poem “Two Countries” (2002) (Appendix 3). Although this poem is not linked to the Palestinian Arab American community in any explicit manner, it features topics that may be seen in relation to the Arab American experience. Furthermore, I wish to argue that the poem is a suitable example of how Nye uses poetry to illustrate how cross-cultural dialogue enables individuals to negotiate multiple identities. By the means of a wide range of poetic forms and images Nye is able to further emphasise her overall aim of promoting inclusiveness, pluralism and cross-cultural understanding. I will begin by taking a look at Nye’s use of personification, before moving on to a discussion about her use of similes in the first strophe of the poem. Subsequently, I will proceed to the second part of the poem, where I will address the juxtaposition of body and place. Finally, I will also take a brief look at some alternative readings of “Two Countries”.

2.1 Frame of Reference

At first glance the title of Nye’s poem “Two Countries” (2002) alludes to a dichotomy. The title seems to suggest two distinct realities that manifest themselves in the existence of two countries, and idea that aligns with the fact that Nye is a bicultural writer with roots in both America and the Middle East. However, as the poem unfolds, the reader is bound to realise that what Nye is doing is much more than a demonstration of difference and a testimony of a bicultural identity. Instead she uses literary devices – such as personification, metaphors, similes, imagery, mood and rhyme – to draw the reader away from any initial assumptions, causing a re-evaluation of what it means to bridge and transcend boundaries, be they tangible or intangible. In her endeavour of bridging relational gaps, she is aided by the complexity of her metaphors, which enable her to address the human experience of invisibility, loneliness and love in an untraditional way. Equally important is that her choice of diction and literary

devices make it possible for her to voice an individual's demand for recognition without becoming overtly moralising or judgemental.

A further point to be considered is that the poem, which initially appeared in *Words under the Words: Selected Poems* (1995), was slightly rearranged and reprinted in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* as part of Nye's response to the September 11 attacks. In consequence, this change of framework will add to the poem's multiple layers of meaning and give way to new interpretations. That is to say, Nye revisits her poem and redefines it by letting it become a part of her overall aim to portray the Arab world in a more truthful and accurate way. This implies that though the themes of loneliness, love and recognition are kept, they now become part of her overall aim to promote cross-cultural empathy and understanding.

To better understand how the change in the poem's frame of reference will affect its content, I wish to restate the need to understand the hyphenated identities of Palestinian Americans against a backdrop of U.S.-Palestinian relations. Central to this intricate political situation is the matter of recognition. With respect to recognition, the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (1). Given that, at present, the United Nations has 193 member states who have all signed in line with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there seems to be a general consensus that the normative dimension of recognition, namely the wish to promote equality, assign dignity and respect to all, is central to the understanding of the concept today. It is important however, to note that recognition also has a psychological dimension (Iser). In *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics of Recognition* (1992) philosopher Charles Taylor points out that,

> […] our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (25)

Here Taylor's words seem to echo the claim made by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where Fanon outlines the demeaning powers of racism and misrecognition in the context of colonialism. Based on the supposed link between identity development and recognition, Taylor's conclusion is that recognition is far more than an act of civility and consideration, constituting "a vital human need" (Taylor 26). It is this particular and fundamental human need to transcend the relational gap, to be seen, recognised, and confirmed physically, that forms the core of Nye's poem "Two Countries", and which, by extension, may be connected to her overall aim to raise awareness and promote intercultural understanding in a multicultural society.

2.2 The Personification of Skin

Although there are multiple metaphors in the poem, some of which I will address in time, there is one metaphor that is of central value to the poem as a whole. Where anthropomorphisms are typically used with non-human entities, Nye's use of the device is less conventional. Rather than using the voice of a distinct speaker to convey her message, Nye personifies skin and uses the human body as her lens throughout the entirety of the poem "Two Countries" where it becomes a bridging device on multiple levels. On a physiological level, human skin is the bridge between our inner and outer self. It is our largest organ, our connection to the outside world, the place where we have our sensory receptors, where we connect with others, and are affirmed in our existence through touch and pain. By personifying something as mundane and tangible as skin and investing it with a number of human capacities such as the ability to remember, to eat, walk and sleep, wave goodbye and to hope, the skin becomes a compelling symbol for what it means to be a human. This particular metaphor also enables Nye to make a wider appeal to her audience. While a word such as "skin" may be seen as strongly associated with our outer selves and our appearance, it

is also the container of our inner self. Where the word "skin" refers to our outer layer, a canvas on which our emotions become visible to the ones surrounding us, the metaphorical sense of the word allows skin to become a mediatory device through which our sense of self, and all the invisible aspects of our identity, encounter the world, and vice versa. It is this mediatory effect which enables Nye to address the experiences of loneliness, love and recognition.

In addition, one may also interpret the respective metaphor of skin as part of a larger analogy. Such a line of inquiry would establish a parallel between the ideas that, just as human skin is a significant communicative bridge between two, physiologically speaking, vastly different milieus, poetry may help human beings transcend their biases and approach interpersonal differences with appreciation and consideration. Such a reading aligns with the apparent intention of Nye to employ her poetry as a bridging device between cultures. To further illustrate my point, I would like to draw on the words of fine-art photographer Jan Großer, who in the essay "Markus Rock - The I and the Other" (2015) states the following about the human body:

> Its physical existence poses the boundaries, behind which the subject is protected and imprisoned in a sort of existential isolation. Never will I really be able to feel what another feels, never will I take his place or be fully united with him. He will always remain the Other to me, the unfathomable. Yet, the body is also the means, by which to come into contact with the Other and, at least, in part overcome this loneliness acquired at birth. … In this manner, the Other may become part of me and I of the Other and we thus break through our isolation. (Großer)

Großer explores the contradiction that emerges when one considers the body as posing both a boundary and a means of making contact with the Other. Similarly, Nye's opening strophe of "Two Countries" presents the human body as a bounded entity where skin becomes a boundary, something that limits human contact. Nye writes:

> Skin remembers how long the years grow
> when skin is not touched, a gray tunnel
> of singleness, feather lost from the tail
> of a bird, swirling onto a step,
> swept away by someone who never saw
> it was a feather. Skin ate, walked,
> slept by itself, knew how to raise a
> see-you-later hand. (1-8)

Here she seems to portray what misrecognition might do to an individual who seeks confirmation but is effectively overlooked and discarded. This she does by tying together the lines of her poem by the means of enjambment, something which also enables her to elaborate on her complex ideas, and thus make some of her more enigmatic proclamations somewhat more transparent. Examples of this may be seen when Nye explains the sense of loneliness that may arise when the lack of contact with the Other deprives an individual of sensual and emotional impressions. Here she uses the image of “a gray tunnel” (2) and the analogy of a lost feather “swirling onto a step, | swept away by someone who never saw | it was a feather” (3-5) in order to create a mood of loneliness and isolation. The image of tunnel, as it appears in the poem, is depicted as a dark and colourless place. In extension of the opening lines, this image serves to further amplify a sensation of a speaker who is in a place where there is not yet light at the end of the tunnel, and the hope of emerging from the tunnel remains a distant dream. In view of the respective strophe’s context, this “grey tunnel of singleness” presents the human body as a secluded place, where the identity of the speaker remains unfathomable to the Other. In other words, what Nye seems to say is that when people do not take part in each other’s lives, bodies become prisons. This idea is further developed in the following lines where the analogy of the lost feather epitomises how important recognition is to the development of human identity. Rather than confirming the presence of the feather, it is simply “swept away by someone who never saw | it was a feather” (5-6). With these words Nye addresses the way we absentmindedly sweep through our lives apparently oblivious to signs left by those that might be in need of a token of recognition. Thrown against the

backdrop of her wish to depict the Arab people in a more accurate way, one may say that this particular part of the poem serves as a reminder of how a lack of cross-cultural encounters imposes boundaries on individuals and prevents humans from different backgrounds to truly acknowledge and understand each other.

While professing that people are able to enter into a dialogue with each other, the poetic diction in "Two Countries" attests to the fact that there are still instances where people are deprived of this "vital human need" (Taylor 26). Here the words "skin ate, walked, | slept by itself" (6-7) become Nye's way of address such an act of refused recognition. These lines show how a person is reduced to a bundle of actions – eating, walking, sleeping – that all contribute to sustain the physiological functions of the body, while the self seems to fade away. The body, which at first posed a barrier, now becomes an empty shell, a hollow casing only capable of superficial contact with its surroundings. The previous point is sustained by the way "[skin] knew how to raise a | see-you-later hand" (7-8). Here the split in the run-on-line serves to add additional distance to the relation between the unrecognised object, and the potential recognising subject. As a consequence, this passage illustrates that, despite the fact that people are physically capable of making contact with one another, this does not automatically mean that they are willing to cross the boundaries that divide the I and the Other and enter that space between cultures where both parts are "free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities" (*The Location of Culture* 38). In which case it becomes evident that cross-cultural understanding stands and falls on each individual's willingness to let their guard down and permit the Other to "leave emotional traces" (Großer) as they cross any boundaries that prevent mutual recognition.

2.3 Identity, Body, and Place

Up to this point, I have in several instances chosen to read the title of the poem "Two Countries" in a metaphorical sense, as a crossing of borders between the self and the Other on both an interpersonal and a cultural level. However, as a glance at the poem's title will confirm, there is also the possibility of reading the poem in light of two distinct geographical positions. At the core of this argument are the various similes found in the five final lines of the first strophe. Here Nye holds on to the image of the isolated and invisible individual from the former lines, as she depicts how a deep-seated interrelation between identity and place remains unseen in the absence of a will to recognise and connect with the Other. Continuing her metaphor of skin, she writes:

> […] But skin felt
> it was never seen, never known as
> a land on the map, nose like a city,
> hip like a city, gleaming dome of the mosque
> and the hundred corridors of cinnamon and rope. (8-12)

Here the speaker describes an experience of unasked anonymity, where the phrases "never seen, never known" (9) contribute to create an atmosphere of invisibleness and namelessness in the poem. A similar tone of involuntary anonymity is found in the prologue to African American writer Ralph Waldo Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) where he writes:

> I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - - indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

Here the reference to a "man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids" bears semblance to Nye's metaphor of skin in "Two Countries". Like the speaker in Nye's poem, the man feels invisible and by way of analogy the reader gets a sense of an invisibility that in

one moment makes the man translucent, and in the next makes him feel as though there is an unbridgeable barrier that prevents others from truly seeing and recognising him. Here I wish to draw a brief line back to something that I stated in my introduction where I used the DuBoisian concept of a "veil" and aligned it with the way in which the hostile discourse of xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, gender related, and cultural biases creates a distorted image of Arabs and Muslims in America. Although this is less prevalent in the poem in question, these contemporary misconceptions of Arabs and Muslims are what seems to have spurred Nye to write this particular collection of poetry in the first place. Thus, one may argue that the tone of invisibility displayed in lines eight and nine in Nye's poem demonstrates how false impressions may cause someone to feel misunderstood. Where the narrator in *Invisible Man* describes his sensation of invisibility as a barrier, the speaker in Nye's poem refrains from explicitly defining such an obscuring obstacle, instead she shifts her focus to all the things that remain hidden due to her invisibility.

In the subsequent lines Nye challenges this initial tone of anonymity as elements of the speaker's identity are gradually uncovered through her metaphorical juxtaposition of body and place. Here I wish to mention in passing that there is no clear-cut definition of a term such as "place". Where in one instance it may refer to a specific location identified by its visible hallmarks, able to be geographically defined by its latitude and longitude, it will inevitably hold certain abstract qualities as well ("Place and Identity"). These immaterial elements could be memories and associations that are as significant to a person's place attachment and sense of place than any tangible qualities. Beyond this, neuroscientists have begun to uncover how our brains form spatial representations of our surroundings, helping us to navigate the world (Bisby and Burgess). In consequence, all the places that one visits will leave traces of sensory information. In the poem, the speaker draws on such a selection of geographical and spatial comparisons, hereby highlighting how a person's identity is

connected to a place, both in the tangible and intangible sense of the word. This may be seen in the first geographical comparison, where the speaker observes how, unlike "a land on the map" (10) located in time and space, those around her do not seem to recognise her point of reference. To understand the significance of this particular spatial comparison one might consider the respective poetry collection's particular framework in conjuncture with the poet's background as a Palestinian, Arab American. Considering the importance of the intersecting factor of nationality in the process of identity development, the reference to "a land on the map" (10) may be seen in light of the collective memory of historical Palestine, which, while lingering in the minds of millions, is no longer recognised as a land on the map.[8]

The suggestion that bodies are shaped in relation to spaces, is further emphasised in the following similes where Nye takes body parts such as "hip" and "nose" (10-11) and compares them to a city with a distinctly Middle Eastern identity. Illustrated by way visual and olfactory imagery – a "gleaming dome of a mosque" and "the hundred corridors of cinnamon and rope" (11-12) – the poet's diction causes the initial two-dimensional comparison of "a land on a map" to give way to a three-dimensional representation of a city that is vivid, dynamic and multi-layered in nature. What is more, Nye adds to the complex web of intersecting identities through the image of the "gleaming dome of the mosque" (11). A dome, for a long time associated with the sky and heavens (Melaragno 7), may also serve as a marker of religious identity. In the poem "Ramadan in el Ghorba" (2013) Susan Abulhawa expresses a similar experience of how the dominant culture is ignorant of her religious identity. Here her speaker observers, "All the restaurants are open | Taunting with various scents | Most don't even know it's Ramadan | Or that I'm fasting" ("Ramadan in el Ghorba"1-4). Where Nye's reference to the speaker's religious identity is subtle and conveyed through the material dimension of religion by way of sacred architecture, Abulhawa

[8] Here I refer to the historical region of Palestine, a part of the former Ottoman province of Greater Syria that became the Mandate for Palestine after the Great War.

explores religious identity from a more personal and introspective angle in her poem. Still both of them seem to suggest that religious identity and place identity are connected and note how both factors are ignored by others.

In addition to the former juxtapositions of body and place, the final line of the first strophe shows how Nye uses the image of "hundred corridors of cinnamon and rope" (12) to convey a sense of globally intersecting histories. In this line Nye conjures up an image that may be seen to direct attention to a global history of trade and commerce that lasted for hundreds of years, [9] and that, historically speaking, linked the East and the West. A similar, yet more explicit reference to the way in which Arab Americans are grounded in world history may be found in Majaj's poem "Claims" (2009). Here her Arab American speaker proclaims, "I have learned the world histories, | and mine are among them" (23-34). Arguably, this passage provides an illustration of a speaker who demands to be recognised and does so by verbally asserting her place in world history. Notwithstanding the fact that Nye's poem is much more subtle in making such a claim, both passages resonate with the concepts of globally intersecting histories and cultures. Bearing in mind Nye's wish to use poetry as a connective device between cultures, such an intercultural perspective is of relevance.

2.4 Breathing in Two Countries

In the final strophe of the poem, the atmosphere of loneliness undergoes a shift as the poet's diction is supplemented with words that convey a mood of thankfulness and hope. Nye writes:

[9] During the hightide of Imperialism in Europe, cinnamon was the most cost-effective spice in the Dutch East India Company. ("Cinnamon")

> Skin had hope, that's what skin does.
> Heals over the scarred place, makes a road.
> Love means you breathe in two countries.
> And skin remembers--silk, spiny grass,
> deep in the pocket that is skin's secret own.
> Even now, when skin is not alone,
> it remembers being alone and thanks something
>   larger
> that there are travelers, that people go places
> larger than themselves. (13-21)

As I see it, the framework of the poem allows me to approach this section of "Two Countries" from multiple angles. On the one hand, the respective lines may be read as an acknowledgement of the human ability to transcend the boundaries of the self and engage in a dialogue with the Other. On the other hand, I wish to argue that the words "two countries" could be read as a reference to biculturalism, which would suggest a slightly more literal reading. Consequently, I will explore the respective strophe from both angles, in order to show how both vantage points ultimately serve to support Nye's agenda of bringing to light a more nuanced understanding of cultures that differ from one's own.

In light of the rather solemn tone of the previous section, the speaker begins this part of the poem by establishing how "skin had hope" (13) hereby ascertaining how there is something inherently human about believing in recovery and restoration. This is further amplified in the following line where the speaker observes that "what skin does" (13) is that it "[h]eals over the scarred place, makes a road" (14). In these two lines Nye expands her metaphor of skin by drawing on its inherent ability to mend. Where on one side the scar that has developed in the process of healing is a visible token of a trauma that skin would have had to endure, it simultaneously is the place where separated parts are re-joined. What this comparison might suggest is that broken relations, be they on the level of nations, between groups of people or individuals, can be overcome if given time. In this way, Nye seems to challenge the idea of loneliness and seclusion that was put in place in the former section of the poem. Instead she challenges the boundaries that she acknowledged in the previous

strophe by elevating the "liberating possibilities of border crossings" (Emenyi and Okon 576), when her speaker observes how "Love means you breathe in two countries" (15).

In spite of the obvious possibility of interpreting these "two countries" as two nations on a map, I will begin by suggesting that in this particular context, the act of "breathing in two countries" refers to the human aptitude to go beyond the boundaries posed by our physical bearing which both protects and isolates us. In this line Nye is providing the argument that although there are parts of our lives that for ever will remain hidden "deep in the pocket that is skin's secret own" (17), there are ways in which humans can transcend this isolation by opening up to the Other's world. In this sense, one may argue that the human ability to cross those boundaries is brought about by love rather than loneliness, a love that prompts us to, metaphorically speaking, "travel" into a relation with the Other. As I see it, the source of this "love" may be found at the very end of the poem when the speaker "remembers being alone and thanks something | larger" (19-20). Here the word "larger" is singled out in this particular version of the poem. Indented and standing on a line of its own, the collocation "something | larger" (19-20) may allude to a deity or something larger than the ego, such as love and idealism, that impels people to challenge the borders nature has drawn between us. In the final lines, Nye refers to these people as "travelers" who "go places | larger than themselves" (21-22) hereby expressing what I believe to be a rehabilitated belief in humanity. From this perspective the speaker acknowledges the potential of connecting with the Other despite any obstacles that may appear along the way. Ultimately, the analysis above shows how individual differences may be overcome as people choose to follow their inherent ability to open up to one another and commit themselves to "travel" into a space where mutual recognition is possible.

Contributing to the tone of disconnectedness and isolation in the poem is the way in which Nye plays with sound in both the poem's strophes. These sonorous aspects of internal

rhyme are presented to the reader, both in the form of assonance and in instances of perfect rhyme. In the initial strophe the first example of internal rhyme is expressed in the words: “step”, “swept”, and “slept”. Later the /oʊ/[10] in words such as “known”, “nose”, “dome”, “rope”, “hope”, “road”, “own”, and “alone” is an element of assonance that connects the two strophes of the poem together and thus aids the poet in her development of the mood and emotional setting of the poem. As instances of sound play, the internal rhyme of the monosyllabic words, “step”, “swept” and “slept”, contributes to the tone of disconnectedness that characterises the first strophe. Aided by the combination of the hissing quality of the initial sibilant sounds and the abruptness of the word-final plosives, the words intensify the impression of a disjuncture. In a connotative fashion this particular sample of sound play reinforces the metaphor of a boundary between the I and the Other. The rhyming words are drawn to each other by more than a likeness of sounds. A “step” (4) denotes the foothold we need when ascending, rarely do we pay attention to where we put our feet, instead our eyes are fixed on our destination. By way of internal rhyme, Nye seems to urge her reader to mind their step and tread warily (“step”). Without moralising she seems to pose the question of how many people we overlook while pursuing our self-centred ambitions. This sentiment is sustained by the collocation “swept away” (5) which indicates the continuous motion of clearing out or doing away with something or someone (“sweep”). When reading the words “two countries” against Nye’s Palestinian background, the act of sweeping could arguably refer to the history of her people. Unrecognised and driven away from their ancestral lands, they have been “swept away”. With the result that their descendants are spread across the globe, and metaphorically speaking “sle[eping] alone” (7), in their isolated state of exile.

When considering the poem on the page, Nye’s use of assonance bridges the divide between the two sections of the poem. Here the words “known”, “nose”, “dome”, and “rope”

[10] Due to the fact that the poet is American, I take an American pronunciation (AmE) as the linguistic point of reference for my analysis.

are found in the first strophe, whereas the words “hope”, “road”, “own”, and “alone” are found in the second strophe. Apart from the final word, all the others are monosyllabic words, however they all feature the same diphthong, /oʊ/. Where assonance typically occurs in nearby words, spreading the respective words out has the effect of both visibly and acoustically tying the strophes together, something which creates a sense of coherence. In effect Nye is not dealing with two conflicting personas where one is isolated and lonely, and one is hopeful. Instead, this internal repetitiousness creates the sense of one speaker, who is seeking to negotiate her identity through experiences of both loneliness and love, seclusion and unity. In this manner, Nye’s use of rhyme becomes a powerful tool as she explores the instable and volatile nature of human experience.

One example where the poem’s sonorous aspect is brought to the forefront can be found in the work of choreographer and dancer Ruby Josephine Smith who has translated “Two Countries” into an observable “poem-in-motion”. Her visual representation of the poem is a creative interpretation that removes the poem from the page and transforms its original form into a three-dimensional portrayal. In the pretext to her artistic expression of Nye’s poem she describes how, in her view, Nye’s poem captures, “that complex exploration of being a body and a heart split between two worlds, feeling acutely the gaps between cultures and trying to merge what you can” (“A Poem in Motion”). In the figures and shapes of her dance Smith has tried to embody this compact poetic description with which Nye expresses the feeling of multiple belongings. The result is a performance that epitomises the personification of skin as Smith embraces the metaphor with her dancing body. Here the elements of rhythm and rhyme that are present in Nye’s work enable Smith to connect to the poem’s message intellectually, but also emotionally and physically. Bearing in mind the poem’s metaphor of skin, the many references to the human body, and verbs aspiring to motion and movement, I find this kind of physical explication both befitting and intriguing.

The idea that the poem might be approached from a more autobiographical angle has been addressed by a number of scholars and literary critics. Therefore, I now wish to explore some of the arguments that have been put forward to suggest that, with Nye's Palestinian American background in mind, parts of the poem could be read as a reference to personal experiences of a dual heritage, and in a broader sense as a reference to biculturalism. One such example may be found in the anthology *Arab-American and Muslim Writers* (2010), where writer Rebecca Layton chooses to read the lines, "Skin had hope, that's what skin does. | Heals over the scarred place, makes a road" (13-14) in light of the Arab-Israeli conflict. She suggests that this particular part of the poem demonstrates how Nye "is optimistic when it comes to peace" (68). In order to understand Layton's argument, one has to consider the fact that the poem in question was originally published in 1995, and thus written during a time where the Western world celebrated the watershed moment of two sets of agreements between the PLO and the Government of Israel. [11] What she seems to say is that, when Nye draws attention to "healing", she aspires to a potential of reconciliation and peace, hereby contradicting the perception of a conflict that is too firmly rooted to ever come to an end. Taking into account that the present relationship between Israel and Palestine is rather tense, [12] Layton's reading does offer an interpretation which may be easily overlooked from a current point of view. With this in mind, I do think Layton's conclusion that Nye uses the poem to suggest "that peace is attainable, no matter how long it takes" (68) is worth some consideration. Other literary scholars who follow suit are Imoh Emenyi and Imo Okon who, in their essay "Beyond Poetic Justice" (2014), support an autobiographic reading as they draw a parallel between Nye's dual heritage and the persona in the poem. They observe how, "In

[11] The PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, is "an organization formed to protect and to represent Palestinians [and] seeks to establish an independent Palestinian state" ("PLO"). The signing of the so-called Oslo Accords, Oslo I and Oslo II, in the 1990s was part of an international plan to secure the peace.

[12] Although current U.S. president Donald Trump expresses a belief in the success of the U.S. regional peace plan, the newly re-elected Israeli right-wing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government, has yet to show interest in peace-making (Gadzo).

her perception, ‘Love means you breathe in two countries’ (15). The persona moves between the poet’s Palestinian and American heritage, the culture of the South-West where she resides, and the different countries she has visited, to examine markers of cross-cultural identity” (576). Here it becomes evident how a literal reading of the words “two countries” enables the reader to interpret the poem in an autobiographical way.

There are, no doubt, other poems by Nye which address the idea of a cross-cultural identity more explicitly than “Two Countries”. Still, this particular poem is in line with Nye’s overall positive stance on her multicultural upbringing and dual perspective, which time and again has prompted her to explore the cultural perspectives of others (“The Gravities of Ancestry” 266). Taking not of Nye’s wish to provide a corrective narrative that opposes the mainstream U.S. portrayal of the Middle East (*19 Varieties* xiv) the line “Love means you breathe in two countries” (15) stands out. By suggesting that it is possible to “breathe in two countries”, Nye seems to express a sense of simultaneity of the self, where the persona is present in two places at once, hereby evoking the sense of a transnational identity that allows the speaker to be rooted in multiple places at once. This sensation of existing in multiple places, seems to be as much a natural part of the speaker’s existence as her ability to breathe. Such a line of thinking resembles the words of Edward Said who maintains that where “[m]ost people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (“Reflections of Exile” 168). Here he illuminates this sense of a simultaneous consciousness that enables exiles to be aware of multiple settings at once. In a similar fashion Nye uses her poem to illuminate this profoundly personal and “complex exploration of being a body and a heart split between two worlds, feeling acutely the gaps between cultures and trying to merge what you can” (“A Poem in Motion”).

To sum things up, Nye resorts to poetry to traverse the space between the cultures of the U.S. and the Middle East. What she does is an act of intervention in a political situation as she uses her poetry as a mediatory device to call into question the stereotypical representations of Arabs. This way she hopes to promote cross-cultural empathy and understanding, something which she achieves by providing readers with poems that feature a variety of narrative voices and perspectives. The poem “Two Countries”, which forms the basis of the above analysis, may be seen as one part of her mediatory undertaking. As she appeals to the universal experiences of love, loneliness, and hope, Nye uses aspects of life that all humans can relate to. In this fashion she transcends those boundaries that emerge between different ethnicities and cultures. By showing how identities are negotiated both internally and interpersonally, she challenges her reader to appreciate that there is something within us that enables us to recognise others, and approach them with openness, love and respect.

Chapter 3. Claiming Blackness in Susan Abulhawa's "Black" (2013)

I was born Palestinian
And I am become Black ("Black" 4-5)

When talking about ethnic and racial identity, one quickly draws parallels to a group's physical appearance, way of speaking, eating habits, choice of clothes, and other visible or audible factors. These elements are all connected to the concepts of ethnicity and race, yet over the past five decades sociologists and cultural theorists have started to view these concepts more and more as cultural constructs. In other words, sociologists trace the roots of these concepts back to ideas in our society and reject that ethnicity and race are inherent and absolute. In many cases these constructs provide a scaffolding for our understanding of identity, at the same time as they enable us to identify stereotypes and instances of racism. Despite our attempts to attain a more nuanced understanding of race and ethnicity, the sociologist John Clammer points out how easily we tend to "overlook other significant, and fluid, forms of identity formation and transformation" (2159). Instead he suggests that ethnicity is *performed*, hereby linking the interdisciplinary field of performance studies to his field of sociological research.

Depending on the academic context, the terms "performance" and "performativity" mean different things to different scholars. Thus, multiple variants of the terms are now found in a variety of academic fields as the terms intersect with speech-act theory, feminism, psychoanalysis, comparative literature, critical race theory, queer theory, communication studies to mention some. According to Clammer, performance studies are "a means of identifying and foregrounding human action patterns that contribute to self-presentation, identity formation and the embodiment of collective memory (or 'culture') in sets of practices that express a particular way of being-in-the-world" (2160). This particular theoretical

framework may be seen as a valuable means of analysis when working with questions related to how ethnicity is developed and performed, in addition to serving as an important reminder of how identities are fluid and "the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentred rather than centred, virtual as well as actual" (McKenzie 18).

As Palestinian Americans attempt to negotiate their multiple roles, their ethnic background and their American citizenship, it is likely that their choice of performing ethnicity will have different outcomes. On one side, one might have individuals who feel at home in both worlds, such as Majaj whose speaker finds ways to bridge her hyphenated identity as she uses her poetry to dramatize hyphenation through the interaction between her multiple identities. On the other side, Abulhawa's poem "Black" (Appendix 4), a poem found in the first section in her collection *My Voice Sought the Wind* (2013), displays a different kind of hybrid identity as she challenges the traditional understanding of ethnic and cultural identity. I have chosen this particular poem because it illustrates how the development of identity of an Arab, Palestinian American woman is not confined to the framework of hyphenated identities, but may as well be rooted in self-ascribed cultural identities that transcend the conventional understanding of ethnic identity and performance (Clammer 2161).

As suggested by the title of her fist section, "Palestinian, Black & Blue", the thirteen strophes of the poem "Black" tell a story of a people bruised by acts of war, incidents of racism, and experiences of dispossession and exile. In the opening strophes the reader encounters a speaker who, after boldly self-identifying as both Palestinian and Black, begins to question the legitimacy of her claim. She discovers a paradox, because where her physical appearance deviates from the majority culture's ideas of beauty, she is still granted access to white privilege. In the course of the remaining eleven strophes the speaker tackles this paradox by embarking on a personal quest for blackness. Her inquiries take her from the Arab

slave trade (15-19), to the establishment of the state of Israel (23-32) and into the 21st century where Palestinians continue to strive for recognition (45-55). After failed attempts at blending in, she chooses to move beyond the traditional understanding of ethnicity as she, a Palestinian American, once again presents herself as having "become Black" (67).

In the following sections I will therefore take a closer look at the concept of blackness, and the binary opposition that it alludes to. I will also explore the multiple functions of the word *Black* and the work it does in this particular poem. Here I will draw on the work of Fanon and Bhabha. In addition, I will include relevant examples from one of Abulhawa's opinion pieces published in *The Electronic Intifada,* "The Palestinian Struggle is a Black Struggle" (2013), a piece of writing that mirrors the poem "Black" in more than one way. Whenever I deem it necessary, I will also include works by the other writers to highlight the poem's intertextuality. This will lead me to my second point of focus, where I will take a closer look at the poem's opening strophe and the concept of naming and cross-cultural solidarity. Here the poets June Jordan and Suheir Hammad will play an important part in my analysis of how Abulhawa uses their poetry to assemble a new Palestinian American language of identity. Finally, I will dedicate the last section of this third chapter to the way in which Abulhawa depicts multiple ways of pursuing identity, as she brings out the contrast between the different ways in which Palestinians in America may choose to negotiate their multiple identities.

3.1 The Concept of Blackness in Abulhawa's "Black"

In the poem "Black" Susan Abulhawa uses the word "black" a total of eight times. Moreover, by way of the personal pronoun "it" in the anaphora "I find it" (15, 20, 23, 38, 45, 56), it is alluded to in an additional six places in the poem. In all instances where the word is mentioned explicitly, it is capitalised. Seen in light of the poem's title, and the clear binary

that emerges when it is juxtaposed with the term “white”, not to mention the suggestion of a combination of a Black and a Palestinian identity, I wish to explore how Abulhawa uses the concept of blackness. However, before I take a closer look at the function of the word “black” in Abulhawa’s poem, I would like to consider some of the prominent voices who have participated in and shaped the discussion on the concept of blackness.

In *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), Ashcroft et al. trace the debate about blackness and Black identity back to the concept of Négritude developed in the 1930s by Martinician Amié Césaire and and Senegalese Leopold Sedar Senghor (20). Their wish to establish a theory of African writing, based on the celebration of the specific characteristics and qualities of Black identity and culture was, however, criticised for reinforcing stereotypical representations of Black culture, rather than diminishing it (123). Twenty years later, the French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon played an important role in nuancing the term as he, in his essay collection *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), discusses racial implications of blackness. It is on those grounds that cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar gives credit to Fanon for having written the first book to truly tackle the psychological impact of oppression as Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks,* “examines how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors” (Sadar x). In my analysis, I will come back to this complex of inferiority, for now, suffice it to say that Fanon’s understanding of a term like “blackness” is unmistakably a binary understanding of race and identity formation, which may be illustrated in a paired opposition of “black” and “white” (Ashcroft et al.124).

One scholar who attempts to move away from “blackness” as a fixed category is Homi Bhabha. As I mentioned in the introduction, Bhabha wishes to circumvent binary logic when discussing the construction of identity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Still, Bhabha upholds a difference between the coloniser and the colonised as he seeks to explain how, in a

globalised world with clear imbalances of power, the colonised will eventually begin to adopt certain elements of the colonisers culture (Parker 298). Bhabha refers to this process as "mimicry" a term used to describe the complex mirroring effects that may occur between the coloniser and the colonised. His use of the term in *The Location of Culture* explains how this act of cultural simulation is more than a demonstration of inferiority. What may initially be perceived as acts of imitation or emulation where the colonised wishes to pattern himself on a culture seemingly worthy of esteem, may come to appear in a different light as the act of mimicry serves to create uncertainty and doubt in the coloniser. According to Bhabha, mimicry involves "adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values", yet "the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits" (Ashcroft et al. 125). When the coloniser is faced with the colonised's mimicry, it is as if he was gazing into a distorting mirror. The image presented to him is "almost the same, *but not quite*" (*The Location* 86) as it will be a mixture of repetition and difference. In this respect Bhabha maintains that mimicry holds the potential of empowering the Other. In the encounter between the "white presence and its black semblance" (*The Location* 90) the colonised may turn imitation into mockery hereby undermining the colonial agenda to uphold the ceaseless separation of an "Us" and "the Other" (*The Location* 88-89; "Of Mimicry and Man" 131).

The fact that Abulhawa uses the term "black" in combination with the word Palestinian suggest that she looks beyond the immediate link to an African origin. Equally, in her introduction to *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996), Palestinian American poet, performer and political activist Suheir Hammad shows how the term "black" brings together the histories of many, and is of significance when trying to understand the term's past, present and future. She writes:

There are many usages of the word "Black":

Black:	like the coal diamonds are birthed from like the dark matter of the universe the Black September massacre of Palestinians the Arabic expression "to blacken your face" meaning to shame.
Black:	like the opposite of white the other Indians in England, Africans in America Algerians in France and Palestinians in Israel The shvartza labour of cleaning toilets and Picking garbage
Black:	like the genius of Stevie, Zora and Abdel-Haleem Relative purity like the face of God the face of your grandmother

> Choose as many definitions as you want. Make up your own, and get comfortable in it. But use it responsibly, consciously. Have respect for the energy behind words. (*Born Palestinian* 12)

What this passage suggests is that there are multiple ways to interpret and use the term "black". Nevertheless, Hammad stresses the word's political, social, and cultural significance and cautions the reader to tread carefully. In this passage, she chooses a term that is historically laden, and uses it as the central node in an imagined mind map that branches out into multiple examples of historical trauma, colonial struggles of independence, and ethnically motivated political violence. However, she also seems to urge the reader to consider the term's positive connotations as she brings up the names of "Stevie, Zora and Abdel Haleem" (12), alluding to the musical, literary and scholarly achievements of people of colour. Soraya J. Abuelhiga (Ph.d. in Literature at the University of California San Diego) notes how Hammad in these lines identifies a collective marginalisation as she categorises the different usages of the word "black" (71). Abuelhiga observes how Hammad opens the passage with the negative associations of blackness (e.g. the colour of coal, the absence of light, the colour of death and shame). She then locates blackness in an ethnic context, where it becomes a metonym for the black struggle on a global scale (e.g. a history of slavery, the

apartheid regime in South Africa). Finally, Abuelhiga notes how Hammad, in her final section, presents blackness as something that is both relational and empowering and is to be celebrated as a source of creativity (71-72). In light of Abuelhiga's reading of Hammad's contemplations on blackness, the identified multitude of definitions that may be derived from the word "black" will serve as a reminder when embarking upon a poem that bears the word in question as a title.

Having considered different perspectives on blackness and the black-white binary, it is also appropriate to look at Abulhawa's understanding of the term. I doubt Abulhawa could have said it any more clearly than she does in "The Palestinian Struggle is a Black Struggle" (2013). Here she states, "To me, blackness is what has been and is the recipient of colonialism and supremacy, with all that this entails in clashing forces of internalization of inferiority, resistance, black power and black empowerment" ("The Palestinian Struggle"). In a manner similar to Hammad, Abulhawa brings together the past and the present as she lists both the destructive and generative potential that lies embedded in a term like "black". Hence, Abulhawa seems to present a somewhat condensed definition which touches upon many of the same key factors as Hammad does in her reflections. As I see it, her understanding of blackness transcends the immediate racial connotations, as she confronts the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of the word. With this usage, she aspires to advocate solidarity amongst the oppressed, where the term "black" represents a means of unity and empowerment, a perspective which is echoed in her poem "Black". In her poem then, Abulhawa seems to suggest that elements of a Palestinian American identity are shared with other marginalised groups who historically have and still are striving for recognition. Abulhawa accomplishes this by giving voice to a speaker who accentuates the black side of Palestinian heritage and retraces the steps of the Palestinian people to establish a link of

solidarity with people who share in the historical trauma of displacement, and who understand the struggle for liberation in a more profound way than any white person ever could.

3.2 Claiming Blackness

To be able to understand how Abulhawa uses "Black" to locate Palestinian American identity within a global framework of marginalised peoples, a natural point of departure will be the function of the word "black" in her poem. Throughout her poem, Abulhawa consistently capitalises the word. Although this kind of mid-sentence capitalisation serves as a marker of emphasis, as it makes a word jump off the page, the word gains in prominence if one considers how Abulhawa contrastingly keeps using lowercase letters when employing the word "white". African American writer and critic Lori L. Tharps, addresses this particular phenomenon in her article "The Case for Black With a Capital B" (2014). Here she observes the arbitrariness embedded in the fact that the majority of academic style guides "insist on black with a lower-case b" (Tharps) while simultaneously instructing writers to capitalise the names of nationalities, peoples, races and tribes. Here she also points to DuBois's fight for the capitalisation of the term "Negro" back in the twenties and juxtaposes it with the present-day tendency to "demote [the initial letter b] back to lowercase" (Tharps). When taking note of this particular debate one should consider the political implications that are embedded in the poet's choice of consistently capitalising the word. It is worth noticing how, in English orthography, the capitalisation of adjectives is used to refer to a group of people who share a common history, culture or heritage. By implication, this turns the word "black" into a demonym as the adjective by means of capitalisation, changes from being merely a descriptive term, to becoming a referent of a unifying common history. Thus, the poet's orthography may be seen to illustrate how the marginalised collective can turn the tables on

acts of simplified generalisations and othering, by means of the capitalised blanket term "Black" (1, 5, 14, 60, 61, 67, 68, 70).

Seen in combination with its collocates, the capitalisation makes the adjacent phrases and sentences stand out. In the first line of the poem the idea of having been "born Black" (1) seems to suggest a certain racial identity, where blackness is something one is born into. However, as the word reappears at the end of the first strophe, the speaker may be seen to move away from this racialised interpretation. Instead, the speaker proclaims, "I was born Palestinian | And now I am become Black" (4-5). The sentiment expressed in the quotation, embodies the view that people can rise above ethnic categories in a process of identity formation. Here Abulhawa appears to have made a conscious stylistic choice in order to underline the ongoing nature of the transformation that takes place as her Palestinian speaker adopts a Black identity. These lines then, with their enjambment and use of the archaic *to be* present perfect, bring together the speaker's past identity with her development of a Black identity.

A further point to consider emerges when the speaker, a little later, expresses the wish to "search for the Black in me" (14). Such a statement suggests that the source of blackness is to be found, an idea that is repeatedly confirmed as the speaker depicts the many instances in which she has been able to find "the Black in [herself]". In her quest for blackness, the speaker in "Black" frequently moves from the general to the particular, and intermittently shifts her gaze as she seems to scrutinise the past for confirmation of her blackness. Here Abulhawa uses the salient anaphora of "I find it" (15, 20, 23, 38, 56) and the similar formulation of "It is" (33) and "I feel it in" (45) at the beginning of each strophe to further emphasise that this quest for identity is also a phase of exploration and identity formation. As the speaker explores the history of her community, she is thus able to establish a pattern that seems to legitimatise her claim of blackness. These references to blackness as a matter of

choice have caused me to wonder whether it is in fact possible to adopt Black identity in the way the speaker suggests. In this case one needs to take a closer look at the strophes that follow the initial remark of "I am become Black" (5), where the bold proclamation gives way to a subtle scepticism, and the speaker suddenly comes across as reluctant when she asks, "But is it really so?" (6). In the lines that follow Abulhawa creates the impression of someone looking into the mirror, taking in the sight and identifying a distressing discrepancy between what meets the eye and what the mind wishes to see:

> My hair is straight-ish
> My skin is brown
> My nose is big and long, crooked and pointy,
>   and all kinds of fucked up
> Still, I can access white privilege if I want
>
> But that would be worse
> Would rip my soul
> So I search for the Black in me (6-14)

In this strophe, the speaker describes her hair, skin and nose, indirectly confessing that, although she feels black at heart, her appearance seems to leave her in a limbo. It is not so much her features themselves as the words she chooses that turn this strophe into a contemplative pause. It is almost as if Abulhawa uses this break to see if the reader is willing to consider her argument of blackness as an umbrella term for collective marginalisation.

In the passage above the speaker in "Black" may be seen to engage in an act of personal deconstruction as a response to the distorted image that emerges as she begins to take a closer look at herself. As the speaker verbally dismantles her features, the different fragments seem to tell contradicting stories, with the effect of destabilising the speaker in her quest for identity. By describing the speaker's struggles to accept the fact that there seems to be no clear line between blackness and whiteness, Abulhawa challenges the circles drawn around the binary opposition of black and white. Someone who has written at length about this arbitrariness of language is the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida. When

Derrida introduced the neologism *différance*[13] in 1986, he was making an attempt to describe the mysterious flexibility of words. In his endeavours he arrived at the conclusion that stable binaries do not exist as the relationship between a signifier, a word, and the signified, whatever the word is trying to describe, is arbitrary (Parker 94-98). According to Derrida there will always be a difference between the signifier and signified since the excess of potential connotations evoked by the signifier will ultimately defer the signified (Parker 95). In consequence, there will never be such a thing as a stable meaning. The reason why I decided to bring this particular aspect of Derrida's complex and rather enigmatic theory into my discussion of the speaker's self-examination in "Black" is that I have detected certain parallels. When the speaker boldly claims, "I am become Black" (5), she begins to second guess the legitimacy of her claim in the second strophe. What she assumed to be a clear, binary construct of black and white, turns out to be intricate and hard to distinguish. This becomes evident in her attempts to stabilise the internally felt mismatch between aspects of her physical appearance (7-10) and her access to societal privileges (11). In other words, where there are certain aspects of her life that seem to support her quest for blackness, others defer her claim. In this manner Abulhawa brings to the forefront the unstable nature of the black-white binary and the way the arbitrariness of colour intersects with the individual's identity development.

As we have seen, the process of self-scrutiny destabilises the individual in her quest for blackness. An equally significant effect of this ambiguous self-portrayal becomes evident when taking a closer look at Abulhawa's diction in the respective passage. Here the work of scholars such as Bhabha and Fanon provide valuable insight into how these processes may be

[13] The term *différance* is a word Derrida himself coined in order to describe the relationship between speech and the written word. The word is a combination of the French words for «difference» and «defer». In French it becomes a homophone as it is pronounced in the exact same way as the French word *difference.* Thus, the word is an attempt to describe in practice what Derrida is trying to prove in theory. Namely, that there is no direct connection between the signifier and the signified, and that the multiple connotations evoked by the signifier will ultimately defer the signified. (Parker 95)

understood. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha asserts that cultural assimilation and mimicry generate ambivalence, and he argues that a sense of otherness, will remain, leading to a state in which one is “not quite / not white” (92). Samples of this “almost, but not quite” may be seen in the respective strophe “My hair is straight-ish” (7) where the speaker adds the suffix “-ish” (6), suggesting that, albeit her hair is not altogether straight, it is so to some degree. In this the speaker may be seen to characterise her hair as approaching the quality of “straightness”, suggesting that there is a certain quality of hair that is worthy of esteem. Simply put, even though her hair is somewhat straight, it is still “not quite / not white” (92).

Furthermore, Abulhawa’s diction in the respective passage contributes to a tone of discontent. Her use of a chain of adjectives forms part of the speaker’s critical description of her nose as “big and long, crooked and pointy | and all kinds of fucked up” (9-10). Here I wish to pause for a brief moment in order to draw attention to the aesthetics of this particular line. Not only has Abulhawa chosen a diction that clearly spells out the speaker’s frustration over her physical appearance, but the way the line itself seems messed up as it breaks with the overall pattern of the poem, helps bring out the sense of dissatisfaction to an even greater extent. This interpretation evidently requires a reductionist view of beauty, and an awareness of the restricted and specific versions of beauty portrayed in contemporary media and popular culture. As I see it, the author’s diction serves to show how the speaker, bold as she may be, is not unaffected by certain stereotypical ideals of beauty. To be able to understand the complicated relation between blackness, body, and ideals of beauty I will once more turn to the works of Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon observes, “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (83). When Fanon mentions his “bodily schema” he is referring to his appearance, and how his blackness is emphasised by the

presence of the white man. It is in encounter with the white man that he himself becomes aware of his own blackness. In the foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks,* Ziauddin Sardar points out that when Fanon describes this moment of awareness, his first reaction is that of self-loathing (xiv). This contempt seems to derive from the fact that in society at the time of Fanon, blackness equals “ugliness, sin, darkness” and “immorality” (149). This then seems to be the cause of a great “existential deviation” (6) placed on the black man in his encounter with the white man. Although Fanon wrote his book in the fifties, his immediate reaction to the discovery of his blackness resembles that of the speaker in “Black”. When confronted with her reflection, the speaker in Abulhawa’s poem is thrown into a whirlwind of conflicting images of what she wants to be, who society tells her that she ought to be, and what she can be. Evidence in support of this position, can be found in the concluding stanza, “Still, I can access white privilege if I want” (11), a remark that could be interpreted as a confession, but also as an element adding to the speaker’s torn body image. It can be seen from the following analysis how a line like this adds historical depth to the poem as well as placing it into a larger context of the Arab American experience.

Where the speaker in Abulhawa’s poem claims and celebrates her blackness, the first Levantine immigrants in America fought legal battles in order to be classified as white. These first migrants from the areas of Greater Syria resigned their minority status, and adapted to American society simultaneously discarding their traditions, language and cultural heritage. This was the price they paid for being accepted as citizens of the U.S. at a time where rigid quota systems were being introduced as part of American politics of immigration (Majaj, ed. Hornung & Kohl 62). In light of the historical reason for why the speaker is free to access societal privilege based on her ethnical background, it becomes almost a paradox that she does the exact same things as her predecessors while striving so hard to achieve the complete opposite. In other words, where they wanted to be seen as white, she wants to be seen as

black. In their attempt to be recognised as white and intellectually equal, the early Arab migrants willingly surrendered parts of their identity. Remembering Bhabha's thoughts on mimicry, this cultural conversion will never result in true acceptance. Consequently, it is compelling to see how the speaker in "Black" moves from the culture of the historical oppressor, into associating herself and her identity with the culture of the oppressed when she decides to "search for the Black in [herself]" (14). The underlying argument being that only here genuine compassion and mutual understanding can be found.

Throughout the poem, the speaker suggests that she finds the "Black in [herself]" (14) in a shared history of colonial abuse of power, in loss and dispossession. She traces the roots back along the ancient trans-Saharan trade routes, and links personal history with the networks of communication that linked the great civilisations of sub-Saharan Africa with the Maghreb, the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant.[14] One of the desired "commodities" that was shipped from the Horn of Africa, across the Red Sea to the Arabian Peninsula and across the Gulf of the Persian Empire were slaves from Africa's eastern coast.[15]
It is this part of history that is echoed in the lines:

> I find it in the Ethiopian women
> Enslaved by my African forefathers
> Those women who lost their identities
> Gave birth to Arab babies
> And injected Africa into my veins (15-19)

This passage offers some compelling word choices on behalf of the author. It is interesting how the speaker, who seems to denounce the legacy of white imperialism and the societal

[14] In a timespan ranging from the 10th to the 19th century, annually between six thousand and seven thousand slaves were transported northwards across the Sahara Desert (Fage and Tordoff 256).
[15] We are looking at quite a timespan here (10th to 19th century), thus the term "Persian Empire" is used as an umbrella term. In truth it refers to a series of dynasties that ruled, and whose seat of power was within the area of present-day Iran. Although the Persian Empire is not considered Arab, they played a central role in the patterns of trade in the Middle East. What is more, the Arab Slave trade was not one-directional. Arab women were sold into slavery to West Africans on pilgrimage (El Hamel 129). This may be seen in the travel writings of the medieval Berber Scholar Ibn Battuta report of an encounter with slave girl from Damascus whom he met in vicinity of Timbuktu, an important centre of commerce in the Mali Empire (Battuta 65).

privileges that seem to linger on in postcolonial times, claims the imperial slave owners of Africa as her "forefathers" (16). This uniting of one people with another could be read as the foreshadowing of a shared future as colonised. What is interesting here is, that instead of cursing them, the speaker seems to tell a story of loss and gain in the sense that "those women who lost their identities" (17) enriched the cultural heritage of both Arabs and Africans by embodying a merging of cultures and becoming the antecedents of a people. An equally significant aspect of the passage about the Ethiopian women is the way in which Abulhawa seems to downplay the obvious act of rape that must have taken place. She is able to gloss over some of the brutalities of enslavement by the means of her diction. Here the use of the word "inject", contributes to present a speaker who seems to regard this particular part of history with clinical detachment.

In contrast there is a shift in tone and diction as the descriptions become rather graphic and violent in the following strophes. The speaker proclaims:

> I find it in
> The white supremacy
> That raped me
>
> I find it where
> A European took my grandma's house
> Painted my country white
> Kicked us out to the cold curb
> Killed our neighbours
> Cut my brother's balls off
> Motherfuckers fucked my mother
> Then dragged me by the hair
>   and told me I needed liposuction
> And a nose job (20-32)

Gone is the linguistic cover up as the speaker moves rapidly from the general to the personal. This shift in focus may be seen in her move from concepts such as "white supremacy" and the reference to the generalised "European" culprit, to specifically naming her grandmother, brother and neighbours. Not to mention how her use of personal pronouns marks the incidents

as a personal matter. In a language that becomes increasingly specific and vulgar as the strophe evolves, the speaker seems to demonstrate an identity marked by the atrocities of war and encounters with racist ideology. As these strophes unfold, the language displays a build-up in tension as the speaker lists one atrocity after the other, all pointing back to the European as the actor and instigator. The frequent use of the k-sound in words such as “kicked”, “cold”, “curb”, “killed”, “cut”, “motherfuckers” and “fucked” (26-32) adds a cutting suddenness to the passage, which in turn creates the effect of a greater pace and contributes to increase the sensation of aggression. This tone of aggression is a powerful tool when people demand to be heard, a point that taps into sentiments and ideas familiar from the history of Black struggle, for instance as expressed by human rights activist Malcolm X. In one of his speeches, Malcolm X gives prominence to the capacity for agency that may be found in human anger. He states:

> […] usually, when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition.
>
> But when they get angry, they bring about a change. When they get angry, they aren't interested in logic, they aren't interested in odds, they aren't interested in consequences. When they get angry, they realize the condition that they're in – that their suffering is unjust, immoral, illegal, and that anything they do to correct it or eliminate it, they're justified. When you and I develop that type of anger and speak in that voice, then we'll get some kind of respect and recognition, and some changes from these people who have been promising us falsely already for far too long. (X 107-108)

Here Malcolm X calls for a language that displays an anger with the status quo, a language that demands to be heard, recognised and respected. His reasoning is based upon the notion that anger holds a certain instrumentality that fuels humans to speak up for justice and strive for freedom and independence. In like manner, rather than succumbing to the paralysis of sadness and hopelessness, the speaker in “Black” embodies this concept of anger to agency by searching for the black in herself and proclaiming it to the world. Thus, these sensations of

outrage and anger based on a specific historical event, seem to be a driving force for transethnic unity in this passage of the poem.

There is also, however, a further point to be considered. In contrast to the aforementioned strophe about the Ethiopian women, where sexual violence is inferred but never explicitly mentioned, the verb “raped” is spelled out in this section of the poem. There are multiple ways in which this reference to rape could be read. Undoubtedly it could be interpreted in a literal sense where the act of rape refers to the act of violating (a person) sexually (“rape”). Here a parallel could be drawn to rape as a military strategy that contributes to deepen the trauma inflicted upon civilians in situations of war. This juxtaposition of blackness and rape found in “Black” bears resemblance to the protest poem, “Poem about My Rights” (2005) by Caribbean American poet June Jordan. In the poem Jordan powerfully addresses the issues of racial injustice and gender equality through her graphic depictions of sexual violence. In her poem the speaker keeps returning to this violating act, stating that she was raped, “be- | cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age | the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the | wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic” (93-96). In comparison, the speaker in “Black” arrives at the same conclusion proclaiming, “I am the wrong kind of human” (57) after having considered the systematic objectification and dehumanisation of Palestinian refugees.

There seems to be a growing acceleration in the speaker’s need to identify with a greater, cross-cultural group of marginalised as:

> My Arab brethren
> Considered me human ONLY
> After I got a USA passport
> Because, otherwise, I am vermin
> That they can feel sorry for
> And be outraged about
> A thing
> Fit for refugee camps that aren’t fit for humans
> And good for cheap labour
> Or a cheap whore (45-55)

In this passage the speaker seems to point the finger at the Arab world as she refers to her "Arab brethren" (45). [16] In this particular strophe, her diction conveys a strong sense of irony. Considering how the word "brethren" indicates strong bonds of kinship and loyalty, the word stands in stark contrast to the way in which the other Arab states refused to recognise the Palestinian refugees as human until they had received American citizenship (46-47). This idea is further stressed by the way in which Abulhawa uses her diction to illustrate the objectification and dehumanisation of Palestinian refugees as they are verbally reduced to "vermin", "thing[s]", "cheap labour" or "a cheap whore". Further evidence in support of this position can be found in the opinion piece "The Palestinian struggle is a black struggle" where Abulhawa notes, "Rarely will any of these examples [of solidarity] be from our Arab brethren, particularly those in oil-rich nations, who have within their power the ability to affect real and significant change". In other words, in both her poem and in her article in the *Electronic Intifada* she is suggesting that true solidarity is not necessarily transmitted along ethnic and cultural lines, but must be found elsewhere.

This then, brings me back to my initial question of whether blackness is really a matter of choice. How come the speaker can "become black" (5) if she is free to access white privilege? In the binary make-up of U.S. society, many people are deprived of freedom to choose on which side they want to place themselves. In light of this, it seems as though the ability to claim and disclaim whiteness is in itself a privilege. While such factors must not be overlooked, Abulhawa displays a dynamic identity that is constantly exploring and searching for new ways to express and negotiate a multifaceted identity.

[16] Here the term "Arab brethren" (45) likely refers to the neighbouring states, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Thousands of Palestinian refugees ended up in refugee camps along the border on the Jordanian and Lebanese side and began their lives as life-long refugees in extremely poor conditions and with limited rights. In many cases they were incriminated and accused of supporting terrorism, not completely without reason as militant groups such as the PLO organised raids into Israeli territory more than once. Still, the paramilitary groups and liberation fighters where outnumbered by Palestinian refugees of all ages who were trying to adapt to a reality in host countries that classified them as second-rate inhabitants and a source of cheap labour.

3.3 Lend me your Voice – Intertextuality and Identity Construction

Although it is important not to overemphasise the applicability of the poet's personal experience in the discussion of her poetry, the prologue of *My Voice Sought the Wind* leaves little doubt that Abulhawa is writing from a point of introspection. As a child of Palestinian refugees, Susan Abulhawa experienced being uprooted more than once. Moving back and forth between the U.S., Kuwait, Jordan and Jerusalem during most of her childhood, she has first-hand knowledge of what it means to adapt to new contexts. Thus, what I am arguing in this particular section is that Abulhawa uses her poetry to depict how displacement may lead to a lack of a personal language of identity, while simultaneously proposing a way to overcome this particular felt insufficiency as she creates meaning by drawing on the work of other poets. A closer look at "Black" shows how Abulhawa formulates her ideas by means of intertextuality, where the interconnection between her work and that of the poets June Jordan and Suheir Hammad, enables her to develop a language of identity. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that she has used these intertextual elements consciously, as she explicitly mentions both poets in the opening stanza. She writes:

> June Jordan was born Black
> And she was become Palestinian
> Like my sister Suheir Hammad
> I was born Palestinian
> And I am become Black (1-5)

As she uses the names of Caribbean American poet June Jordan and Palestinian American poet and performer, Suheir Hammad, she illustrates that identity is not limited to the ethnicity and ethnic characteristics bestowed upon the individual by its surroundings. In other words, in this strophe the speaker presents a sense of self that opens up for a multifaceted understanding of cultural and ethnic identity.

As I see it, the explanation for the initial choice of June Jordan for the opening lines of "Black" is to be found in Jordan's writing. Most striking was the parallel that I discovered as I

was reading Jordan's poem "Moving towards Home" (1985). Allegedly written as a response to the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Massacre[17] (Saliba), Jordan's poem culminates in the strophes:

> I was born a Black woman
> and now
> I am become a Palestinian
> against the relentless laughter of evil
> there is less and less living room
> and where are my loved ones?
>
> It is time to make our way home. (73-79)

In her reading of the poem in *The Feminist Wire*, the Middle East scholar Therese Saliba, stresses how in these final lines Jordan juxtaposes her own marginalised position as black, and as a woman, with a wish to join hands with the Palestinians. Further, Saliba concludes that, "In this process of becoming other, the lines between I/Palestinian, my/our merge in collective grief, moving toward a kind of home in the world" (Saliba). It is this process of ongoing transformation that is intertextually reverberated by Abulhawa in her opening strophe of "Black" when proclaiming that "June Jordan was born Black | And she was become Palestinian" (1-2). Seemingly in lack of a language of identity, she adopts Jordan's reasoning, as she presents identity as something that is transformed through empathy, and thus is able to transcend ethnic and cultural barriers.

Having considered the juxtaposition of African Americans and Palestinian Americans in the works of Jordan and Abulhawa, it is also reasonable to have a look at Jordan's essay "Eyewitness from Lebanon" (1996). Here Jordan states, "I believe that Arab peoples and Arab Americans occupy the lowest, the most reviled spot in the racist mind of America" (140-141). This claim could be read as an additional source of inspiration for Jordan's multiple

[17] Sabra and Shatila are two Lebanese refugee camps that lie on the outskirts of Beirut. In the years after the Nakba, these two camps housed thousands of Palestinian refugees. According to Dølerud et al. the camps received international attention during the Lebanese civil war, 1975 – 1990 when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) had their base in the camps. During the Israeli siege of Beirut, the Israeli forces permitted the Lebanese Phalangists militia to enter the camps, which resulted in deaths of up to 2000 refugees, an incident that is known as the Sabra and Shatila massacre. (Dølerud et al.)

pieces, both essays and poems, in which she examines the question of transnational solidarity with Palestine. This sentiment is also expressed in "Apologies to All the People in Lebanon" (2005), a poem that Jordan dedicates "*to the 600,000 Palestinian men, women, and children who lived in Lebanon from 1948-1983*" (italics kept) (1-2). Similar to "Moving towards Home", this poem is a critical comment on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Towards the end the speaker in Jordan's poem confesses:

> Yes, I did know it was the money I earned as a poet that
> paid
> for the bombs and the planes and the tanks
> that they used to massacre your family
>
> …………………………
>
> I'm sorry.
> I really am sorry. (60-63, 70-71)

Here Jordan acknowledges the fact that she was aware of the acts of violence committed across the Atlantic. This poem then becomes a token of remorse, and an expression of shared grief and anger in light of the brutal reality of double-dispossession and military invasion. Although the intertextuality here is less pronounced than in "Moving towards Home", Abulhawa seems to value Jordan's ability to see beyond her own culture's historical trauma, when she participates in the Palestinian lamentations and shows her solidarity. In the eyes of Abulhawa this marks her as Palestinian, albeit not in an ethnic sense of the word.

Here I wish to leave Jordan, although there is evidently much more that could be said about her poetry. Instead I wish to take a closer look at the second name that Abulhawa introduces, namely that of Suheir Hammad. Hammad is introduced to the reader as the speaker proclaims, "Like my sister Suheir Hammad | I was born Palestinian | And I am become Black" (3-5). Whilst there is no clear evidence that this poem is autobiographical, it is worth pointing out that Abulhawa and Hammad are both children of Palestinian refugees, a notion that seems to tie the two poets together, which might explain the reference to her as

"sister" (3). Moreover, in her first collection of poetry, *Born Palestinian – Born Black* (1996), it is evident in the title how Hammad, like Abulhawa, has been influenced by Jordan's (re)birth as a black Palestinian. In *Dislocating culture, relocating identity* (2013), Soraya Abuelhiga draws the conclusion that:

> Hammad negates and negotiates varying identities in order to engage with and connect the various struggles of (primarily, though not exclusively, colored) peoples across the world. For Hammad, such identification is facilitated through a global (and globalized) sense of self coupled with collective self-love, in which we identify ourselves within others (and them within us) in order to form a global alliance based on shared affective love. (68-69)

This understanding of a "global sense of self" and the wish to "identify ourselves within others" is something which I find echoed in Abulhawa's poetry as she chooses to mirror both Jordan and Hammad in her poetry. By adopting their language and thematic concerns, Abulhawa pieces together a language of identity that she mediates through the narrative voice of her speaker. Not only does she "identify [herself] within" the black struggle, but the way in which she borrows the voices of Jordan and Hammad suggests that she literally "identifies [herself] within others (and them within us)". In this manner Abulhawa lets her speaker assemble and develop her Palestinian American identity from the various pieces of language found in the poetry of those who understand what it means to inherit the historical trauma of dislocation.

Still, there seems to be a difference between displaying solidarity and sympathy, and the ability to truly understand and show deep-felt empathy. Thus, there is an argument embedded in the choice of names. In other words, Jordan and Hammad are not chosen at random, but carefully picked out. There have been, and still are numerous activists in the West who stand up for the Palestinian people and their wish to return. Abulhawa seems to recognise this as she states "I would not deny the love and sacrifices of men and women like

Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Vittorio Arrigoniand many more.[18] I do not deny the kind of solidarity that transcends ethnicity. But there is an undeniable difference in the way peoples of different ethnicities relate to us" ("The Palestinian struggle"). Thus, although not dismissing these efforts, the Palestinian American speaker in "Black" seems to say that true solidarity is found amongst those who share in their history and are able to truly grasp the experience of political oppression, exile, dispossession and ethnic discrimination.

[18] Here Abulhawa lists the names of three Western activists who all lost their lives as a direct consequence of their involvement with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in Palestine.

Conclusion

> *We need poetry for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name.* (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* xvi)

It is through my close engagement with the many details embedded in the poetry of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Susan Abulhawa that I have been able to discover the commonalities but also the uniqueness of their poetry. American poet Mark Doty maintains that it is the project of poetry to convey aspects of human experience through "a system of words and sounds" ("Tide of Voices"). In other words, paying attention to the little details, the poet's diction and poetic style, will breathe life into the subjectivity of others. Through my experience with close reading in this thesis, I have found this to be true. The enthralling thing about poetry as a medium is the way in which the genre combines the associative and visual dimensions – aided by poetic forms and images – with the cognitive intellect required to discover, connect, and translate the different images into something that appears meaningful to the reader. This ability to bring language up to a level where it conveys the experience of what it means to negotiate this "odd, not to say grotesque, double perspective" ("Identity, Authority, and Freedom" 11) only became evident to me as I engaged with Majaj, Nye, and Abulhawa's poetry on a word level.

In their poems these three Palestinian American women all address this particular complexity of a hyphenated identity, albeit from different angles. As shown in Majaj's "Recognized Futures" and "Cadence", the use of autobiographical elements creates a meditative and self-reflective mood. By way of introspection, Majaj's descriptions of feeling torn between different cultural identities and geographical locations become profoundly personal. Particularly "Recognized Futures" presents an indefiniteness that seems to characterise the Palestinian American experience. In the poem, Majaj incorporates her names,

and uses them to illustrate her ambiguous narrative of belonging. In this way, the poem bears witness of a contested identity, showing how a name can become both a token of heritage and a burden.

Further, Majaj's poems show how the concept of hyphenation juxtaposes the idea of being "fractured at the core | yet whole inside [one's] skin and in [one's] heart" ("Origins" 14). This paradox of combining a fractured self with a sense of wholeness is explored in "Cadence" where Majaj expresses the inner turmoil that is felt when Arab Americans try to overcome the destabilising forces of cultural expectations and stereotypes. What is seen in this poem is how an inner sense of unity may arise in the space between the fragments and the whole, in a contested territory that is challenged by cultural biases and temporary sensations of doubleness. Thus, when Majaj asserts that "Two cultures can be lighter than one | if the space between them is fluid" ("Cadence" 32-32), what she seems to say is that as a Palestinian American, one is neither solely Palestinian nor exclusively American, instead one is carrier of an identity that emerges in the space between the two.

In Nye's work, the many layers of her poem "Two Countries" are fundamentally reliant on the frame provided by the preface to her collection 19 Varieties of Gazelle. In her introduction she identifies a gap of ignorance that prevents a valuable cross-cultural dialogue from taking place between the U.S. and the Arab world. Her overarching objective of using poetry as corrective device, provides the key with which the multiple layers of her poems may be opened. Here the idea of initial introspection is similar to what is seen in the works of Majaj. Yet, in Nye's work the wish to cross boundaries between cultures exceeds the individual's internal struggle to navigate the hyphen. Instead, the focus rests on the instructive encounter between cultures and on the importance of promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Nye republished the poem "Two Countries" in a time where many Arab and Muslim Americans were met with considerable scepticism. This shows that publishing poetry is also a

political activity (Faulkner and Nicole 81), as it becomes a way for Nye to shed light on a specific political situation. In “Two Countries” she addresses the context in which this negotiation of identities takes place, and points to the challenges that arise when people refrain from traversing boundaries of scepticism and cultural biases. Thus, her belief in the human ability to cross both inner and outer thresholds and engage in a dialogue with the Other, becomes a powerful political statement.

Drawn from Abulhawa’s collection My Voice Sought the Wind, the poem “Black” brings to the forefront the indeterminable position of Palestinian Americans within the American ethnic kaleidoscope. Where Majaj and Nye seem preoccupied with navigating the Palestinian American hyphen, Abulhawa uses “Black” to add an ethnic dimension to the growing web of identities. In her poem she expands the scope of a possible double perspective by asserting that “I was born Palestinian | And now I am become Black” (“Black” 4-5). In this, Abulhawa may be seen to offer an alternative way to mediate the various tensions and contradictions that are inherent to a Palestinian American’s sense of self. Rather than demarcating an identity that encompasses both the American and the Palestinian side of herself, the speaker in “Black” crosses ethnic boundaries in her quest for an identity that aligns itself with ethnic groups which are participants in a similar struggle for recognition. What is ultimately conveyed in her poem is an aspiration towards transethnic solidarity that overshadows the divisions of hyphenation.

Having considered their differences, it is important to note how the three poets complement each other in their attempts to mediate the various tensions and contradictions that are inherent to their own biography. Embedded in their poetry are shared experiences of how the concept of hyphenation juxtaposes the idea of a fractured self with a sense of wholeness. As shown in the poems “Recognized Futures”, “Cadence”, “Two Countries”, and “Black”, navigating and negotiating contested hyphenated identities is a challenging

endeavour. Majaj, Nye, and Abulhawa invite their readers to observe and imagine these challenges, as they present their readers with the reality of those who are always trying to "breathe in two countries" ("Two Countries" 15). By addressing the Palestinian American identity problematics in widely different ways, they also draw attention to a variety of perspectives found amongst Americans of Palestinian descent. Consequently, when read in combination, these three poets reject monolithic stereotypes. The power of their poetry is found as much in the unfolding of descriptions and interpretations, as in the fact that their poems may call into question one's own ability to be truly open-minded and without bias. Their poems are a synthesis of personal experiences blended with broader questions of ethnic identity, recognition, and cross-cultural solidarity. Together they show the poet's ability to creatively challenge the status quo as they disentangle and document the Palestinian American experience in their poems.

In the introduction, I argue that it is the complexity of the political situation that intensifies the Palestinian American experience of hyphenation. The implications of this claim suggest that a decline in the diplomatic relations between the two political bodies will further complicate the process of negotiating the hyphenated identity in question. While I have been working on this thesis, Palestinian Americans have had to witness further deterioration of U.S.-Palestinian relations. In a report for the Congressional Research Service, Jim Zanotti, specialist in Middle Eastern affairs, confirms that the relations between the Trump administration and the Palestinian officials are tense (2). Spurred on by Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the subsequent relocation of the American embassy, all top-level political contact between the two bodies has been suspended (Zanotti 2). According to Zanotti, this has led to reductions in bilateral economic aid and the closure of the PLO representative office in Washington, DC. (2). The lasting effects of these recent

political developments on Palestinian American identities and their literary expression remains to be gauged and will pose an interesting area for further research.

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Appendices: The Poems

Appendix 1: Recognized Futures (2009)

Recognized Futures

Turning to you, my name --
this necklace of gold, these letters
in script I cannot read
this part of myself I long
to recognize—falls forward
into my mouth.

You call my daily name, Lisa,
the name I've finally declared
my own, claiming a heritage
half mine: corn fields silver
in ripening haze, green music
of crickets, summer light sloping
to dusk on the Iowa farm.

This other name fills my mouth,
a taste faintly metallic,
blunt edges around which my tongue
moves tentatively: Suhair,
an old-fashioned name,
little star in the night. The second girl,
small light on a distanced horizon.

Throughout childhood this rending split:
continents moving slowly apart,
rift widening beneath taut limbs.
A contested name, a constant
longing, evening star rising mute
through the Palestine night.
Tongue cleft by impossible languages,
fragments of narrative fractured
to loss, homelands splintered
beyond bridgeless rivers,
oceans of salt.

*

From these fragments I feel
a stirring, almost imperceptible.
In the morning light these torn
lives merge: a name on your lips,
on mine, softly murmured,
mutely scripted, both real
and familiar, till I cannot
distinguish between your voice
and my silence, my words
and this wordless knowledge,
morning star rising
through lightening sky,
some music I can't quite
hear, a distant melody,
flute-like, nai through
the olives, a cardinal calling,
some possible language
all our tongues can sing.

(*Geographies of Light* 63-64)

Appendix 2: Cadence (2009)

Cadence

The audience watches curiously
as the Arab-American woman steps up
to the podium. Light hair and skin,
unaccented English … they thought
she'd be more – you know – exotic.

Or: the audience waits attentively
as the Arab-American woman steps up
to the podium. She is cousin, compatriot,
fellow-traveler, Arab resonance
in a place far from home.

The Arab-American woman hesitates.
She's weary of living on only one side
of the hyphen. Her poems aren't just translations.
But if she blinks, someone always cries out,
Look at those Arab eyes!

She longs to walk in the forest empty handed,
climb up a mountain and down again,
bearing no more than what any person
needs to live. She dreams of shouting from
a high place, her voice cascading down

wild rivers. Already she can hear the questions:
"Do Arab women do things like that?"
And the protests: "We have so many problems!
– our identity to defend, our cultures under siege.
We can't waste our time admiring trees!"

The Arab-American woman knows who she is,
and it's not what you think. She's authentic
in jeans or in an embroidered dress.
When she walks up a mountain, her identity
goes up with her and comes back down again.

Besides, she's learned a secret.
Two cultures can be lighter than one
if the space between them is fluid,
like wind, or light between two open hands,
or the future, which knows how to change.

She's standing at the podium, waiting.
She wants to read a poem about climbing
a mountain. It's the song of what travelers
take with them, leave behind, transform.
From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence.

(*Geographies of Light* 65-66)

Appendix 3: Two Countries (2002)

Two Countries

Skin remembers how long the years grow
when skin is not touched, a gray tunnel
of singleness, feather lost from the tail
of a bird, swirling onto a step,
swept away by someone who never saw
it was a feather. Skin ate, walked,
slept by itself, knew how to raise a
see-you-later hand. But skin felt
it was never seen, never known as
a land on the map, nose like a city,
hip like a city, gleaming dome of the mosque
and the hundred corridors of cinnamon and rope.

Skin had hope, that's what skin does.
Heals over the scarred place, makes a road.
Love means you breathe in two countries.
And skin remembers--silk, spiny grass,
deep in the pocket that is skin's secret own.
Even now, when skin is not alone,
it remembers being alone and thanks something
  larger
that there are travelers, that people go places
larger than themselves.

(*19 Varieties of Gazelle* 104)

Appendix 4: Black (2013)

Black

June Jordan was born Black
And she was become Palestinian
Like my sister Suheir Hammad
I was born Palestinian
And I am become Black

But is that really so?
My hair is straight-ish
My skin is brown
My nose is big and long, crooked and pointy,
    and all kinds of fucked up
Still, I can access white privilege if I want

But that would be worse
Would rip my soul
So I search for the Black in me

I find it in the Ethiopian women
Enslaved by my African forefathers
Those women who lost their identities
Gave birth to Arab babies
And injected Africa into my veins

I find it in
The white supremacy
That raped me

I find it where
A European took my grandma's house
Painted my country white
Kicked us out to the cold curb
Killed our neighbours
Cut my brother's balls off
Motherfuckers fucked my mother
Then dragged me by the hair
  and told me I needed liposuction
And a nose job

It is where I believed I was ugly
When I tried to be white
When I put down my flat bread and picked up a fork
And Mrs. Wall said I was "white enough" to
Stop being a "nigger-lover"

I find it where White boys dug up my ancestor's bones
Built a "Tolerance Museum" over their graves
Put on uniforms and held me at gunpoint
For laugh
'Cause little white girls pushed
Me out of the pool one day
Screaming mean things at me in Hebrew

I feel it in the way
My Arab brethren
Considered me human ONLY
After I got a USA passport
Because, otherwise, I am vermin
That they can feel sorry for
And be outraged about
A thing
Fit for refugee camps that aren't fit for humans
And good for cheap labour
Or a cheap whore

I find it in the dictates that
I am the wrong kind of human

Because I'm Palestinian
And Jesus was Palestinian
And Jesus was Black

I find Black from
The poetry in my heart
The song on my lips
And music in my hips

I am Palestinian
And in the blue and bruise of my heart,
I am become Black
Because Black is beautiful
And the beautiful in me
Is Black

(*My Voice Sought the Wind* 21-23)