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From Eastern Prophets to Syrian Yankees: Tracing the First Generations of Arab American Writers

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Abstract

The article discusses the first generations of Arab American writers with the aim to identify the narrative strategies they employed. The focus is primarily on the representatives of the Mahjar movement (Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani) along with observations of the roles that they adopted through their writing pursuits (the role of the prophet/man of letters). Furthermore, the text examines selected literary works of Salom Rizk, Vance Bourjaily, and William Peter Blatty as the representatives of the second generation of Arab American authors who desired to be identified as Americans. The article argues that in the first two generations of Arab American writers, the authors' storytelling techniques are generally rooted either in self-orientalizing narrative strategies as represented by the character of an "Eastern prophet" or by an assimilating strategy epitomized by the character of a "Syrian Yankee."

Keywords

Arab American literature, immigrant narrative, self-orientalizing, assimilation

Introduction

When in the 1990s Barbara Nimri Aziz founded the "Radius of Arab American Authors," the main aim of which was to support American writers of Arab origin, the organization comprised only several members.[1] In 1994 Mohja Kahf coined the organization's nickname—RAWI[2]—for *rāwī*, the name for a "storyteller" in Arabic which proves eloquent, since reciting and otherwise transmitting oral literature has a long tradition in the Middle East.[3] Gradually, the number of the storytellers registered in RAWI has increased to almost two hundred.[4] The lengthening list of Arab American authors initially went hand in hand with the American reader's curiosity in the Arab world, an interest which burgeoned after 9/11. As Layla al Maleh argues, "the irony of Anglophone Arab literature is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those 'Arabs' really were."[5] The beginning of the 21st century saw mass market American publishing houses introducing the first books authored by Americans of Arab origin; it saw American universities open up more courses on Arab American culture and literature; and it saw scholars increasingly publishing their

1 Abdeen Jabara, "RAWI (Radius of Arab-American Writers) Provides Creative Matrix for Writers Across America," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs,* January/February 1998, <https://www.wrmea.org/1998-january-february/rawi-radius-of-arab-american-writers-provides-creative-matrix-for-writers-across-america.html>.

2 Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 22.

3 For further discussion see Abdelfattah Kilito, *Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

4 For more information, see <https://www.arabamericanwriters.org/about/vision>.

5 Layla al Maleh, "Anglophone Arab Literature: An Overview," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 1.

research on the Arab and Arab American world.[6] Layla al Maleh suggests that it is "a pity that this visibility was filtered through 'terror', rather than through the catharsis of Aristotelian 'pity and fear.'"[7] Since the Arab American story only began appearing more frequently in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, the history of research into Arab American literature and traditions is quite short, only about three decades long. As Steven Salaita argues, "as an institutional category, 'Arab American literature' is still a teenager."[8]

The relatively rapid development of post 9/11 Arab American literature and related research might suggest that before 9/11 there was no "rawi" at all to tell his story ("her" Arab American story would come later). Yet the "rawi" has been living in the United States for more than a century, having first left Lebanon in 1871,[9] and has been present but mostly invisible until the infamous World Trade Center attack. In beginning to examine this burgeoning canon in detail, one must first acknowledge that the term Arab American is not a homogenous concept. From a religious perspective, the majority of Arab Americans are Christians, though in recent years, the number of Muslim Arab Americans has been on the rise.[10] As far as their country of origin is concerned, the largest number of Arab Americans come from Lebanon, followed numerically by Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine.[11] Moreover, Arab Americans do not belong to one specific political or social group.[12] The population's heterogeneity makes it difficult to identify general characteristics that all post 9/11 Arab American authors share. For Rebecca Layton, all these authors have fragmented identities: they often attempt to oppose political discourses which demonize the Arab population in the USA, but, most importantly, they struggle to find a home, which they find neither in the United States nor in the Middle East, but somewhere in-between.[13] In her poem "break," the contemporary Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad struggles to rebuild the fragments of her life, some of them left in "beirut," others in "tel aviv," "gaza," "khan younis," and "nyc": "i am looking for my body/for my form in the foreign/ in translation."[14] Her struggle is reflected through her language, a mixture of English and Arabic which unabashedly defies rules of grammar. To retrieve her home, she struggles to rebuild her broken identity, then she can rise like the immortal phoenix: "break will be fire baptism/and in the ashes/is my body."[15]

The problem of identifying home differentiates contemporary Arab American authors from previous generations of Arab Americans. Evelyn Shakir divides Arab American literature

6 Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*, 1.

7 Al Maleh, "Anglophone Arab Literature," 2.

8 Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 3-4.

9 Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48.

10 Although recent exact data are not available, according to various sources, including the Arab American Institute, the Arab American National Museum, and Colombia University 65-70 per cent of Arab Americans practice the Christian religion, while around 25 per cent are Muslims.

11 "Arab American Heritage Month: April 2024," *United States Census Bureau*, accessed May 4, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/arab-american-heritage-month.html>.

12 Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction*, 9.

13 Rebecca Layton, *Arab-American and Muslim Writers* (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2010), 8-10.

14 Suheir Hammad, "break," in *breaking poems* (New York: Cypher Books, 2009), 11.

15 Hammad, "break," 15.

into three distinct phases: early, middle, and recent.[16] By tracing the first two phases of the Arab American literary heritage, this article argues that the Arab American writer's invisibility must be seen in terms of the storytelling technique of the "rawi," which in the American context is rooted either in self-orientalizing narrative strategies as represented by the character of an "Eastern prophet," or by an assimilating strategy embodied in the character of a "Syrian Yankee." These two writing strategies demand to be seen in the context of inventing one's home.

Self-Orientalizing Narratives of Eastern Prophets

The beginnings of Arab American literature date back to the 1870s, when the first immigrants stepped onto Ellis Island from what was known as Greater Syria (today's Syria, Lebanon, and parts of Palestine), then part in the Ottoman Empire.[17] Most of the writers who later formed the so-called "Al-Rabita al-qalamyia" (the Pen League) were either teenagers (Gibran, Rihani) or in their twenties (Rihbany) when they first came to America.[18] Moving to their idealized "Amreeka" was triggered by the dream of a better life.[19] The most common trait of these authors is that first, they wrote in Arabic. Most of them became well-known in Arab countries as pioneers of prose poetry.[20] In America they formed the "Mahjar" movement (etymologically derived from the Arabic word "hajara" – to leave or to migrate).[21] The group remains well-known in Arab countries today as the movement which "exercised a liberating influence upon modern Arabic poetry"[22] by introducing prose poetry – verse which eschews line breaks and meter – into Arabic literature. Another common denominator of these authors is that they did not consider their stay in the United States a permanent one. Lisa Suhair Majaj considers these writers "sojourners, not immigrants [who mostly settled in the area near Boston and New York] and fully intending to return home one day, they voiced a mainly diasporan consciousness."[23] By writing in English they wanted to create links between East and West.[24] Waïl S. Hassan argues that through their Arabic and English works, they intended to translate the Orient to the Occident as well as to problematize orientalist

16 Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 3.

17 Khater, *Inventing Home,* 48.

18 Waïl S. Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 41.

19 Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 1-17.

20 See Aida Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani, and Naimy: East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century Arab Literature* (Oxford: Inner Farne Press, 2009), 15-23.

21 In addition to Mahjar, some authors such as Aida Imangulieva (Gibran, Rihani and Naimy, 2009) use the term "Syro-American School."

22 Mohammed Mustafa Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 203.

23 Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments," *American Studies Journal* 52 (2008): par. 1, accessed May 8, 2024, DOI: 10.18422/52-02. <http://www.asjournal.org/52-2008/arab-american-literature-origins-and-developments/#>.

24 Al Maleh, "Anglophone Arab Literature," 4.

discourses.[25] Mahjar writers had a first-hand experience with the orientalism extant in American society, which was mainly reflected in stereotypical views of Arabs. At the age of fourteen Gibran was asked to sit for Boston publisher and photographer Fred Holland Day dressed in the turbans and exotic attire that would conform to western images of an oriental, thus making for the easier commodification of artifacts for the public.[26] Similarly, Ameen Rihani was aware of the received binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident:

> The East prays, the West dances; the East dreams, the West thinks; the East broods, the West plays. What is a mark of respect in the East is considered an offense in the West: the Oriental, when he enters a house, slips off his shoes at the door, the Occidental finds a hat-rack for his hat. The Oriental inquires about the health of your wife and children, before he "bleeds" you; [...] the one is suave and insidious, the other is blunt and often crude. The Oriental is imaginative and metaphoric, the Occidental is literal and matter-of-fact.[27]

In his awareness of these oppositions, Rihani saw himself as a suitable cultural mediator between East and West, one who could translate the East for the West and vice versa. As Waïl S. Hassan argues, Mahjar authors "knew that addressing American readers required more than just the ability to write in a foreign language. They had to situate themselves in relation to a powerful discourse through which their readers had already formed their ideas about that distant culture."[28] These writers did so by adopting the role of Eastern sages who offered to the American reader Eastern spirituality that many readers were looking for in the early modernist era of the early 20th century. In the words of Evelyn Shakir, they "dressed carefully for their encounter with the American public, putting on a guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters. They could not hide their foreignness, but they could make it respectable."[29] My article will now examine Gibran's role of an Eastern prophet as described in his most famous work *The Prophet* as well as Rihani's position of a man of letters mirrored in the first Arab American novel, *The Book of Khalid.* First, I focus on better-known and more-stereotypical Gibran despite the fact that his best-known work was published a decade after Rihani's liminal, multi-layered narrative that tried to bridge the East and the West.

An Arab American best-seller

Gibran's masterpiece *The Prophet* (1923) needs no long introduction. It remains today one of the best known works authored by an Arab American. The description of the author on the original book cover reads: "Poet, philosopher and artist, Kahlil Gibran was born in 1883 near Mount Lebanon, a region that has produced many prophets."[30] These words are accompanied with an ethereal self-portrait by Gibran, who can be assumed to represent the work's protagonist, Almustafa. The

25 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives,* 41.

26 Alexandre Najjar, *Kahlil Gibran: A Biography* (London: Saqi, 2008), 27-32.

27 Ameen Rihani, "Where East and West Meet," *The Open Court* 929, no. 2 (April 1934): 66.

28 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 40-41.

29 Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," 6.

30 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), book cover.

identification of the author with the character and the major speaker of the book reflects the Arab as well as romantic image of the prophet as the speaker of the community.

Despite the ongoing popularity of this work of prose poetry fables over the decades, since the late 20th century aspects of the book have come under some reassessment. One major critique concerning Gibran's most famous work is linked to the fact that by imaging himself on his book cover as a prophet, Gibran was meeting the demand of the marketplace. Academic Waïl S. Hassan refers to this approach as "marketing orientalism,"[31] but reproaches towards Gibran have not come through literary criticism alone. Poet and professor of literature Eugene Paul Nassar writes:

> One's context, my friend Gibran, one's center, one's place, one's tradition.
> You who spurn the walls of one's house and hunt vaporous birds, come and be one of us.
> Do not seek to put man in a cosmic dimension, but to humanize the cosmos, for there surely is laughter, and strength against tragedy.[32]

This criticism is aimed at Gibran's philosophy, which is filled with abstract antitheses and paradoxes that might (perhaps too) easily fit either Eastern and Western thought with no contradiction. Before leaving the city of Orphalese (representing Boston), Almustafa is addressed by a crowd of people who ask him to speak on various topics—justice, love, marriage, children, beauty, etc. The prophet's sermons (or counsels, as Gibran preferred to call them),[33] expressed through a chain of prose poems, are based on aphorisms and paradoxes which avoid concrete Arab American themes. Furthermore, the universality of the counsels does not link them to a specific religion or philosophy. Very often, Gibran relies on the juxtaposition of two opposing ideas or paradoxes that are general, even vague in character: "Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf,"[34] "Your children are not your children/They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself,"[35] "Your clothes conceal much of your beauty, yet they hide not the unbeautiful."[36] The people demanding the sermons remain unnamed. Like the poems recited by Almustafa, which represent ambiguous concepts, the counsels are elicited based on professions (the weaver asks about clothes, the judge enquires about crime and punishment, the mason wants advice about houses).

In contrast with many contemporary Arab American authors who employ Arabic words in the English text to denote culture-specific concepts like food, greetings, or clothes, Gibran's text contains only English words and with the exception of two names containing the Arabic definite article *al* (Almustafa and Almitra), the entire text includes only one Arabic word "Ielool,"[37] which is a transliteration of the Arabic name for September. Gibran often uses archaic and poetic English

31 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 59.

32 Eugene Paul Nassar, "A Disputation with Kahlil Gibran," in *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*, ed. Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa (New York: Interlink Books, 1988), 153.

33 Suheil Bushrui, "Kahlil Gibran: The Poet," in *The Art of Kahlil Gibran*, ed. John Harris (Savannah: Telfair Books, 2010), 39-40.

34 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 17.

35 Gibran, *Prophet*, 18.

36 Gibran, *Prophet*, 38.

37 Gibran, *Prophet*, 3.

words ("aught,"[38] "aye,"[39] "naught,"[40] "raiment,"[41] "ere,"[42], etc.). The archaisms, along with numerous parallelisms and rhetorical questions, create a text that might remind the reader of the Bible or Sufi mystic writings. Nevertheless, Gibran does not point to one specific religion. As opposed to many contemporary Arab American or Arab English authors who openly discuss their religious identity (Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, Leila Aboulela, etc.), Gibran's religious views do not adhere to a specific church or faith. In his counsel on religion, Almustafa makes his purpose clear: "Have I spoken this day of aught else?"[43] For Gibran, religion includes everything, as it is life itself: "Your daily life is your temple and your religion./ Whenever you enter into it take with you all."[44] Religion should not be confined to laws or dogma, but it should spring from one's own soul:

> And he who defines his conduct by ethics imprisons his song-bird in a cage.
> The freest song comes not through bars and wires.
> And he to whom worshipping is a window, to open but also to shut, has not yet visited the house of his soul whose windows are from dawn to dawn."[45]

Most contemporary Arab American authors point to their personal experience of fragmented identities – their own and those they see around them – within a wider political context.[46] In contrast, Gibran does not reflect on such liminal or fragmented senses of self, even in the poems discussing community rules, laws, crime and punishment. When a lawyer queries Almustafa about establishing legal principles and guidelines, the poet replies:

> You delight in laying down laws,
> Yet you delight in breaking them.
> Like children playing by the ocean who build sand-towers with constancy and then destroy them with laughter."[47]

The rest of the poem abounds in metaphorical expressions, archaisms and abstract notions. It never points to a specific political issue that Arab immigrants were facing in the United States in the 1920s.

Gibran's emphasis is on universal values, whether in personal relationships (e.g. with children), community rules (laws, crime and punishment) and religion. Such abstraction, along with his seeming neglect of the issues of the Arab American community so often described in Arab American writing beginning at the end of the 20th century (e.g. by Diana Abu-Jaber, Rabih Alameddine, Laila Lalami, Naomi Shihab Nye) such as fragmented and double identities, uprootedness and belonging, contribute to Gibran's image (then and now) of a universal poet-

38 Gibran, *Prophet*, 12.

39 Gibran, *Prophet*, 19.

40 Gibran, *Prophet*, 8.

41 Gibran, *Prophet*, 19.

42 Gibran, *Prophet*, 17.

43 Gibran, *Prophet*, 84.

44 Gibran, *Prophet*, 85.

45 Gibran, *Prophet*, 85.

46 See Layton, *Arab-American and Muslim Writers,* 7-10.

47 Gibran, *Prophet*, 48.

prophet rather than an Arab American. At the end of the collection, the mysterious prophet steps on a ship and leaves Orphalese, moving eastward in an image of a spiritual sage. For Waïl S. Hassan, it is predominantly this "aura as spiritual guru or Oriental wise man, bolstered by his self-styled prophetic posture"[48] that is responsible for the immense market popularity of *The Prophet* for more than a century. Through this self-orientalizing attitude, Gibran, in fact, reified orientalism in American society at the time. As Hassan puts it, Gibran "tried to negate Orientalist negation through Orientalist transcendence, a move that ensured the failure of his project on the personal, social, and intellectual levels, although it brought him tremendous popular and commercial success."[49] *Grape Leaves*, the first "serious anthology of American poetry"[50] to include Gibran's work was initially published in 1988. Interestingly, the volume includes no passages from *The Prophet*, but mostly only English translations of his earlier Arabic works.[51] While the editors of the anthology praise Gibran's politically and socially involved poetry, they dismiss *The Prophet* as "fast food [that America] supped on."[52]

Not an Easterner nor a Westerner

Ameen Rihani, another representative of the first generation of Arab American authors, is a true pioneer, as he authored the first-ever published Arab American poetry collection (*Myrtle and Myrrh*, 1905), the first Arab American play (*Wajdah*, 1909), as well as his English language masterpiece *The Book of Khalid* (1911), the first Arab American novel. Similarly to Gibran's Almustafa, Rihani's protagonist Khalid can also be considered a prophet and a sage, although he is quite different from the seer of Orphalese. While the people of Orphalese celebrate a prophet who speaks their language and whose aphoristic message can be easily understood, no one celebrates Khalid, whose English is "sprinkled" with Arabic words, word-for-word translations of Arabic idioms, and numerous allusions to both Arabic and Western literature and philosophy, some of which embrace metafiction.

> That is why I find no exaggeration in Khalid's words. For when he loafs, he does so in good earnest. Not like the camel-driver there or the camel, but after the manner of the great thinkers and mystics: like Al-Fared and Jelal'ud-Deen Rumy, like Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi, Khalid loafs. For can you escape being reproached for idleness by merely working? Are you going to waste your time and power in useless unproductive labour, carrying dates to Hajar (or coals to Newcastle, which is the English equivalent), that you might not be called an idler, a loafer?[53]

Structurally, the whole book resembles a sacred text. The very first chapter of the novel is called "Al-Fatiha" (literally "the opening"). This is also the title of the first sura of the Koran, but since the word is not explained in the English text, readers who do not speak Arabic or are

48 Waïl S. Hassan, "Gibran and Orientalism," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 65.

49 Hassan, "Gibran and Orientalism," 90.

50 Gregory Orfalea, Sharif S. Elmusa, "Introduction," in *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, ed. Gregory Orfalea and Sharif S. Elmusa (New York: Interlink Books, 2000), xvi.

51 See Orfalea and Elmusa, *Grape Leaves*, 17-44.

52 Orfalea, Elmusa, *Grape Leaves*, xvi.

53 Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1911), 11.

unfamiliar with religious texts of Islam cannot see the connection. The next part, entitled "In the Exchange," depicts Khalid as a picaresque kind of a prophet, a sort of an Arab Don Quijote who undergoes a "via dolorosa"[54] from the Middle East to the United States accompanied by his rational friend Shakib, who shares many of the traits of Sancho Panza. In America, Khalid works as a peddler selling small items from the "Holy Land" to local customers. It is at this time that he becomes a voracious reader of second-hand books. Surprisingly, upon reading each text, he burns it:

> "To me," writes Khalid in the K. L. MS., "there is always something pathetic in a second-hand book offered again for sale. Why did its first owner part with it? Was it out of disgust or surfeit or penury? Did he throw it away, or give it away, or sell it? Alas, and is this how to treat a friend? Were it not better burned, than sold or thrown away?"[55]

Khalid's act of book burning may evoke medieval burning of texts that carried ideas which opposed a particular religious or political doctrine. In Khalid's case, the act of reading seems to represent the process of internalizing the book's ideas, while the act of burning stands for discarding the ideas and traditions that might limit his mind. In the next part of the book "In the Temple," Khalid begins to involve himself in American politics. Having become familiar with various ideas and philosophies (religious, atheistic, sensual) bustling in American society at the beginning of the 20th century, Khalid encounters contradictions of American democracy. After criticizing one politician, he is imprisoned, following which he returns to Lebanon. The title of the final section of the novel is "In Kulmakan," which can be translated as "everywhere." Because of his ideas, Khalid is forced to escape to Egypt, where he takes on the life of a hermit and soon disappears in the desert. No trace of his whereabouts remain, no character in the story has any idea of where he has disappeared to. This denouement resembles the fate of a Mahdi (a messianic character in Islamic eschatology), who lived on earth for some time, then disappeared and will not return until the Judgment Day when, he will bring justice to the world. Khalid, too, disappears, declaring his belief "in both the Camel-driver and the Carpenter."[56] In this reference by Khalid/ Rihani to Muhammad and to Jesus Christ, Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk argue that "the one is the complement of the other: the two combined are [his] ideal of a Divinity."[57] In other words, Rihani wants to bridge and reconcile the East and the West. The ideal for him is neither a pure Westerner nor Easterner but "a person who combine[s] the finer qualities of the Western genius and the Eastern prophet."[58] Should Khalid be this ideal, this Occidental-Oriental figure seems to be out of reach. Rihani's prophet leaves no trace of his whereabouts, as if he were burned away like the books he has absorbed and discarded. Through Khalid's mysterious disappearance, Rihani seems to be inferring that the time for such a Western-Eastern prophet has yet to come.

54 Rihani, *The Book of Khalid,* 25.

55 Rihani, *The Book of Khalid,* 61.

56 Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 295.

57 Rihani, *The Book of Khalid,* 295.

58 Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk, "Introduction: Ameen Rihani's Imagination Liberation Movement," in *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West,* ed. Nathan C. Funk and Betty J. Sitka (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004), xviii.

Syrian Yankees and Their Stories

The members of the first generation of Arab American authors presented themselves as Eastern sages whose origin gave them the background to translate the East to the West and the West to the East. Some sages and their followers who came later in the 20th century took a different route: in seeking to fight stereotypes of the orientalist discourse, they paradoxically often served to support them. According to Evelyn Shakir, Mahjar's "American-born children—those who came of age in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—costumed themselves as 'regular Americans' and hoped to pass, which may be why they produced so little literature."[59] If in the first phase, the writers pointed to their origin through spirituality, later the Arab origin of these authors is either not visible at all, or is viewed with contempt and mocked.

In the heading to this section I borrow the term "Syrian Yankee" from Salom Rizk's autobiography, published in 1943. The author sees America as a Promised Land, the qualities of which are, in Rizk's account, exaggerated to upmost detail: "the land of hope […] the land of peace […] the land of contentment […] the land of liberty […] the land of brotherhood […] the land of plenty […] where God has poured out wealth […] where the dreams of men come true."[60] The novel is a typical example of an immigrant narrative featuring an orphaned boy who undertakes a long journey from his home country to the country of his dreams. Due to the fervent oppression and political upheaval, Syria offers no future for him. In contrast, America seems a land of multiple possibilities. His business idea to repair shoes for socially disadvantaged people for free makes him a well-known figure at the time. Having returned to the United States from a short trip to Syria, he begins a career as a public speaker. Rizk lectures Americans on their own exceptionality, which has largely been forgotten in American society in the context of the economic crisis of the 1930s and the Second World War:

> Back in the United States again, I was assailed with an overmastering urge to get my feelings about this European experience off my chest. I wanted to seize people, button-home them on the street, tell them what wonderful things we had here: peace, plenty, tolerance, freedom, friendliness, opportunity, genuine human happiness – the greatest, the most beautiful, the most miraculous things on earth.[61]

Eventually, Sam becomes a ferocious proponent of the American dream and the West. Carol Fadda-Conrey describes Rizk's autobiographical novel as a work showcasing an "assimilative bent"[62] – texts portraying the authors' desire to assimilate to the country where they moved. Elmaz Abinader also calls Rizk's narrative "an immigrant story with the undertone of assimilation and acceptance."[63] Rizk does not offer to the American reader the spirituality of the East, but his willingness to fully absorb America and its values, to become and exemplify a true American. At one point in the narrative, one of his acquaintances tells young man: "Sam, you've got a message

59 Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," 6.

60 Salom Rizk, *Syrian Yankee* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1943), 71.

61 Rizk, *Syrian Yankee*, 274.

62 Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*, 18-19.

63 Elmaz Abinader, "Children of al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," *U. S. Society & Values: Electronic Journal of the Department of State* 5, no. 1 (2000): 12.

that every American ought to hear. I'm not fooling when I say that that's the best story I've ever heard, and the most enlightened Americanism to boot."[64] In the context of the social and political conditions that Americans faced at the time, Rizk succeeded in finding recipients for his ideas, as Americans, often facing poverty in the interwar and the Second World War era, were more than willing to be reminded of their own putative exceptionality. In his speeches across America, Rizk proclaims his wish to fully assimilate to American culture, a desire exemplified in the very title of the book. As Hassan argues, however, the expression Syrian Yankee is "a bold assertion that a Syrian can be an American, the paradox being, of course, that it is only possible when he repudiates Syria."[65]

Vance Bourjaily (1922-2010) was the son of a Lebanese father and an American mother. Like Hemingway, he volunteered as an ambulance driver in the Second World War.[66] Though praised for his distinctive writing style reminiscent of Hemingway's iceberg theory of writing,[67] in his novels he rarely reflected on his Arab origin. Bourjaily presents his readers his Arab family roots in only one part of his novel *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960). In a chapter entitled "The Fractional Man," Bourjaily performs what Evelyn Shakir calls "role-playing,"[68] as his protagonist Quince plays the game of pretending to be an Arab only when it suits him. The title of the chapter alludes to his origin, as demonstrated by his name.

> Ulysses Snow Davids Quincy – the fractions of my heritage are in it: a quarter of what is more or less colonial American, of which my mother tried to teach me to be proud. A quarter Welsh, of which no one ever said anything much. Half Lebanese, the largest fraction, pretty well concealed by my unintending godfather, the sideburned Ellis Island man. I was brought up not so much to conceal as to ignore that fraction; it was not particularly a secret, rather something that my father dismissed. He was busy being an American, a successful one which I guess means a good one or used to.[69]

During his military service, which covers the span of approximately four years, Quince finds himself in the Middle East, where a couple of times he tries "to wear an Arab face."[70] With his Cherokee Indian friend Hal, who is fluent in Arabic, he performs a few plays pretending to be an Arab just for fun. These innocent role-plays carried out in various Middle Eastern countries prepare him for a trip to the place in Lebanon that his grandmother left at a young age. Once in Kabb Elias, a small village situated on a slope of Lebanese mountains where his relatives still live, Bourjaily's protagonist and an alter ego meets the roots of his largest fraction, only to realize that in comparison with his Lebanese relatives who are "steadfast and proud,"[71] he is "uselessly complicated and discontent."[72] Quincy's ethnic roots are not the reasons that complicate his understanding of

64 Rizk, *Syrian Yankee,* 280.

65 Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 110.

66 Bruce Weber, "Vance Bourjaily, Novelist Exploring Postwar America, Dies at 87," *New York Times*, September 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/03/arts/03bourjaily.html>.

67 Weber, "Vance Bourjaily."

68 Evelyn Shakir, "Role-Playing: Pretending to Be Arab in Vance Bourjaily's 'The Fractional Man,'" *MELUS* 9, no. 1 (1982): 7.

69 Vance Bourjaily, *Confessions of a Spent Youth: A Novel* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 238.

70 Bourjaily, *Confessions*, 240.

71 Bourjaily, *Confessions*, 272.

72 Bourjaily, *Confessions*, 272.

home and belonging, as he considers his narrative just one of many similar stories experienced by post WWII young Americans:

> It pleases me to think that I might win your consent to that point of view, for then I could consider this document, as I wish to, not as a record of unusual and exotic events, but as a specimen account of how a contemporary youth is spent – not misspent nor well-spent, merely spent – exhibiting no special depths of degradation, nor special heights of intellectual or sensual joy, but only such ordinary ones as most youths know.[73]

Our third author considered in this context is William Peter Blatty. While many would recognize the name as the author of the bestselling book and later popular horror movie *The Exorcist* (1971), few people would know that Blatty is a child of Lebanese immigrants. Blatty mocks his Arab background in the autobiography *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1960). In this humorously crafted memoir, "[w]ritten in a mocking tone and brimming with scenes bordering on slapstick,"[74] Blatty gives an appealing account of his "childhood drama," the main protagonist of which is his Lebanese-Catholic mother, who has a habit of humiliating her son in front of his friends (often girls) by disclosing private things from his life, e.g.: "My God, my Will-yam he never dirty his diaper!"[75] From the opening sentences of the book, the reader is aware of the satiric attitude that "Will-yam" takes towards his Arab origin: "MY MOTHER is an Arab, which would make me half Arab, except that my father was an Arab too. But already I digress."[76] Growing up an Arab "from his mother's and from his father's side" in New York, he is alienated from other kids, preferring to stay at home and read rather than ramble the streets and face cold stares and mocking comments aimed at his racial and cultural otherness:

> After school hours, when I wasn't quincing[77] it was less of a strain just to sit home and read rather than roam the streets in my wild velvets, inviting the usual gibes of the freckle-faced "American" kids in the neighborhood. I was also operating under a vague but promising delusion that if I stayed out of the sun I might lose some of my tan. I became a grammar-school recluse. [78]

At the age of twenty-two, he tries his luck at a career in Hollywood, where he is repeatedly told that he is not "the type" that Hollywood people are looking for. It is at this time that he considers the question of belonging:

> "The trouble with you is you want to act!" my agent told me later, but the real trouble with me was that I still didn't know who I was or where I fit in. Was I a "Biblical" Arab who couldn't get a Hollywood contract because Arabs are not "The Type," or was I an aspiring Mickey Rooney who couldn't act in

73 Bourjaily, *Confessions*, 434.

74 Nicole Waller, "Arabs Looking Back: William Peter Blatty's Autobiographical Writing," in *Transnational American Memories*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 129.

75 William Peter Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?: From Brooklyn to Beirut: The Adventures of an American Sheik* (New York: Lancer Books, 1960), 11.

76 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 7.

77 A reference to Lebanese quince jelly that William's mother sold to support the family; William was often asked to accompany her.

78 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 19.

> a Biblical picture because I didn't look enough like an Arab? I mean, where did blue-eyed Arabs who went to Georgetown go to register?[79]

Blatty sprinkles the question of identity with sarcasm. The American stereotypes of quintessential dark-eyed Arabs complicate his understanding of who he is and where he belongs. His blue eyes, quite frequent in the Lebanese population, work against the common expectation that an Arab should be dark-skinned and dark-eyed, surely not a university boy. When it seems that his Hollywood dream will not come true, William tries his luck in the U.S. Information Office, which is looking for Arabic language speakers. William is soon sent to Lebanon. From the very first moment he steps foot on the Lebanese soil, he is struck by the "otherness" of Arabs, and finds it hard to get used to their strange habits—belching after eating, inability to follow traffic lights, superstition, and above all, postponing things to "bukra" (tomorrow): "What I mean is, a Lebanese Arab's promise or estimate that such-and-so will happen or be done 'tomorrow' is about as attainable of fulfillment as a panty raid at Union Theological Seminary."[80]

Blatty's narrative represents a transition between earlier and recent phases of Arab American literature. On the one hand, he satirizes Arabs and reifies the orientalist dichotomy between East and West, while on the other, he is aware of his otherness in both the United States and Lebanon (he refers to his home in America as "an island Araby," and his temporary home in Lebanon as "an island America"[81]), which brings him closer to the themes that contemporary Arab American authors tackle. Nevertheless, as Fadda-Conrey suggests, neither Bourjaily's nor Blatty's return to the Arab homeland leaves them "with a renewed self-awareness that revises the essentialist and nostalgic versions of Arab identities with which they had grown up in the United States."[82] In other words, the act of coming to the homeland of their ancestors does not challenge their perspective, which remains quintessentially American. This is clearly demonstrated at the end of Blatty's novel when William praises Lebanon to his Lebanese-born mother, with her son suggesting that she should go back to Lebanon for a visit. This suggestion does not impress her at all. She replies: "What the hell I want with Lebanon? […] I'm American!"[83] Such a bold and unequivocal assertion puts a sarcastic full stop to Blatty's narrative. Throughout the novel he, a Manhattan-born boy, struggles with stereotypical American views of Arabs which turn his American home into an Arab island. Paradoxically, his Lebanese-born mother defines herself as an American without any hesitation. Blatty then closes his novel with the sardonic comment to the reader "[y]ou can never tell about mothers."[84] Blatty can, however, tell about himself. The stereotypes of Arabs might complicate William's life, but they do not challenge his identification as an American. When he comes back to Hollywood after his stay in Lebanon, he plays a practical joke on the Hollywood people by pretending to be a Saudi prince. While earlier his acting was rejected because he was not the type of an all-American boy that they were looking for, now the American boy pretends to be an Arab

79 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 45.

80 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 69-70.

81 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 5.

82 Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*, 65.

83 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca,* 246.

84 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, 246.

and all of Hollywood believes him. The American boy's act of pretending to be an Arab turns out to be more authentic for the Hollywood audience than the American boy's acting in the role of a native son. It is significant that for both Bourjaily's and Blatty's protagonist, being an Arab is merely acting, a role performed either in the Middle East or Hollywood. When Quince and William return home to the Atlantic coast, they do not have the need to perform these roles anymore because despite their Arab roots they identify as Americans. For both Quince and William, their short-term returns to their parents' homeland do not challenge their identification as Americans. For them, being an Arab equals acting in a short melodramatic episode.

In their autobiographical or semi-autobiographical narratives, Rizk, Bourjaily, and Blatty locate their homeland in America. In contrast with Bourjaily and Blatty, who were both born in the USA, Rizk immigrated to America at the age of 18, thus in the work analyzed here the autobiographical protagonist primarily considers Syria his homeland. Upon his arrival to America, however, he proclaims his desire to fully assimilate to his new country. Bourjaily and Blatty, both born in the United States, first knew the Arab world only from the nostalgic accounts of their parents. Their works reflect an awareness of their otherness, but as they grew up as Americans, their protagonists' visits to the home country of their parents did not challenge this American perspective. Both confront their Arab roots by employing humor and grotesque. What is clear is that the stories of Rizk, Bourjaily, and Blatty all demonstrate either the characters' will to assimilate to or their complete identification with American culture. The difference is only to what degree.

Conclusion

In his 2001 novel, *I, the Divine*, Lebanese American author Rabih Alameddine portrays Sarah, a first-person narrator who throughout her narrative struggles to find her home (as well as her place in the story). With a Lebanese-American background, Sarah repeatedly moves between America and the Middle East, never quite sure where to remain: "Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not."[85] Home is never definite; for Sarah, it never occupies one specific geographical locale on a map. By reinventing the concepts of "here versus there," Rabih Alameddine, Suheir Hammad along with many other contemporary Arab American authors problematize the understanding of home and belonging. In contrast, for the selected representatives of earlier phases of Arab American literature discussed in this article, home has a more definite meaning.

In the early phase, the authors of the Mahjar movement garbed themselves as Eastern sages who offered to the American reader a spirituality that was putatively lacking in the culture. This spirituality stemmed from universal, generally Christian values, since most of these writers were Maronites. At the end of Gibran's *Prophet*, Almustafa departs to the east. Similarly, Khalid first disappears in the east. These endings reflect these Mahjar writers' understanding of home. America for them was just a temporary residence, since most of them repeatedly moved between the Middle East and the United States intending to return to the Arab world one day. Therefore, in

85 Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (New York: Norton, 2001), 99.

their English writings these writers did not engage much with the question of belonging, as most contemporary Arab American authors would later do.

In contrast, the writers of the second phase of Arab American literature often suppress, ignore or mock their Arab roots. In his works Salom Rizk demonstrates a clear determination to assimilate to American culture, degrading Syria for its backwardness and political oppression. He is literally a "Syrian Yankee" (his mother having American citizenship), and as his autobiographical narrative proceeds, he gradually moves towards the Yankee half of his persona. To compare, Vance Bourjaily and William Peter Blatty engage with their Arab roots through grotesque and ridicule. The half Anglo-half Lebanese Bourjaily and half Arab (but mostly American) Blatty identify as Americans, despite being aware of their otherness. By mocking Arabs and their culture, these authors stress their identity as Americans, while at the same time they perpetuate stereotypes about Arabs in American society.

The earlier self-orientalizing and assimilating narratives discussed above contributed to the overall invisibility of Arab Americans, as the writers generally expressed themselves either as Easterners eager to offer their universal spirituality to the American reader, or as Yankees whose Arab roots were at best unimportant, at worst even grotesque. These narratives are in sharp contrast with most contemporary works by Arab Americans, who present more complex, multi-layered tropes of identity and belonging.

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