

UPROOTEDNESS: DWELLING ON LIFE THROUGH DISRUPTED LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Leaving one's homeland involves seeking recognition in new surroundings, coming to terms with the reality of displacement, resisting the uprootedness or living in memories. In this thesis, I tackle the idea of being displaced and living away from one's own place of birth, whether the leaving was by force or by choice, whether it was a physical or mental displacement and whether the result was negative or positive. I explore these questions: How does one navigate through the complex journey of reconstructing one's life in a new place? Does writing poetry heal some of the suffering? Can one leave the past and live in the present? I also try to explore questions related to the miseries of war, the complexities of bilingualism, and the cultural and identity shifts associated with the teaching of English in the context of non-native speaker teachers and the challenges they face.

Using the methodology of poetic inquiry, I attempt to reflect on the topic of starting a new life and tackling nostalgia by breaking up the language and displacing words through generative processes to re-present the text and unearth meaning by mapping my life's journey and thus exploring the notion of what makes a home a home. My thesis is essentially an attempt to invoke the past to reconstruct the present through experimenting with different forms of processed iterations through different constraints to produce poems that reflect my journey. I am hoping that the emerging poems based on autoethnography through the lens of poetic inquiry will resonate with others, no matter how they interpret them.

Lay Summary

The present thesis explores uprootedness in terms of the feelings of displacement and being a stranger in a strange land, both physically and mentally, and the consequences of this displacement. It delves into the notions of memory, the meaning of home, the struggles of war and the importance of family ties. It also delves into the issues of bilingualism and teaching English as a non-native speaker as well as the cultural and identity shifts associated with them.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished work of the author, Wasan Qasim.

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List of Abbreviations

ESL	English as a Second Language
NNESTs	Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers

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Dedication

To the late Dr. Carl Leggo, an inspiring professor who was originally my supervisor and whose legacy remains to this day.

To my mother, whose presence is obvious throughout this thesis. She is the constant person in my life and the reason for my willingness to dwell on the past.

To my husband, whose support and encouragement made this thesis possible.

To my children, Sally and Omar, who represent the present and the future.

“The last thing apt to happen in writing is ‘self-discovery.’ Instead, what happens in writing is a forever becoming-present.”

Jasper P. Neel
(Neel, 1988, p. 124)

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of poetry and narrative that seeks to examine existing relationships between language, poetry, and the idea of displacement based on lived experience through the lens of poetic inquiry. Wiebe (2015) stresses that “[b]eing in and part of the world, whether we are contemplating it, interpreting it, re/visioning it, or something else entirely, to inquire poetically is to attune our senses to this world.” (p. 153). In line with Wiebe’s sentiment, I inquire into self-expression, inner knowing and how to live poetically, following Leggo’s (2010) proposal of using poetry as a discursive practice to appreciate and recognize lived stories. This thesis can also be seen as a form of self-study, or a form of autobiography, which, like fiction, as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggest, “reveals to the reader a ‘pattern in experience’ and allows a reinterpretation of the lives and experience of both the writer and the reader.” (p.16).

Writing about life in the form of narrative is a way to (re)construct memories about the past. Bruner (2004) states that “narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” and that “[l]ife in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as ‘a narrative’ is.” (p. 692). He goes on to say that “there is no such thing psychologically as ‘life itself.’ At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one’s life is an interpretive

feat.” (p.693). Thus, memories are the remnants of a past life that was once complete with the lived experiences of the people who witnessed it.

Leggo (2004), states that autobiographical writing is a way we use to know ourselves and the others, to connect and communicate. It is a kind of writing that is driven by inquisitiveness and curiosity. It is our way to pay tribute to our past memories by sharing them with others:

Writing autobiographically is entering into a chorus of voices. All writing is social and communal, and entails a complex network of connections with the multiple voices of others. There is no such thing as a solitary writer. Writers collaborate in order to add their voices to a longstanding and ongoing conversation. (p. 320)

Connelly and Clandinin (2019) state that narrative inquiry has long been used as a form of qualitative research. They suggest that narrative is a way of depicting the human experience, and that “we restory earlier experiences as we reflect on later experiences, so the stories and their meaning shift and change over time.” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2019, p. 9). I think this also applies to readers of other people’s stories. The way they connect with these stories means that these stories and experiences keep changing and evolving, as the readers use them to reflect on their own lives and add their own understanding of these experiences.

According to Satchidanandan (2001), other people’s autobiographies help us delve deep into our own emotions and better understand where we come from. He thinks that “[a]n autobiography is more than a history of the past or a book currently circulating in the world, it is also a monument of the self as it is becoming. We go to autobiography to learn more, not about other people and the past, but about ourselves and the present. Autobiography is the most characteristic form of symbolic memory.” (p.8).

Perhaps the best way to describe this exploration is that it is an autoethnography as a research methodology. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) propose, autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” (p.1). According to them, autoethnography merges features of autobiography and ethnography in that the author writes about past events and experiences after the fact in a selective manner, and also tackles certain cultural aspects that influence the author’s memories.

In reference to Rapport and Hartill’s (2012) work, Wiebe (2015) states that poetic inquiry methodology is more like a way of being. He maintains that Rapport and Hartill offer five ways of this being in poetic inquiry: “(1) attending to and prioritizing humanness, (2) expecting the unexpected, (3) holding forth for multiple truths; (4) exploring literary form and theory, and (5) creating possibility through iterative remixing.” (p.158). While all these ways apply to my work, I found that the fifth one most correctly describes my own methodology in this thesis.

Through poetic inquiry, I explore the idea of unearthing meaning and finding myself within the displaced words and the rubble of the language which I disturb in the process of my inquiry, using different writing constraints. My goal is to approach my past from different angles in an almost chaotic way, in the hope that reconstructing the language will reflect my journey of being displaced from my homeland. By choosing poetic inquiry, I open myself to all possibilities to explore the idea of displacement, following Leggo’s (2008) suggestion to avoid closing up the narrative, and instead open it up so that readers can take part in making sense and meaning out of the stories we tell.

My research revolves around using poetic inquiry to come to terms with reconstructing life and embracing memories of the past to achieve some sense of belonging. The thesis explores

the development of a collection of narrative prose and poetry to (re)discover the self, and its multiple identities in response to the notion of displacement in its various representations. It is an attempt to explore uprootedness, nostalgia, seeking recognition in a different place, being displaced inside the mind, and seeking asylum in one's own thoughts. According to White (1995) "[a] useful starting-point for the discussion of the representational outcomes of migration experiences lies in setting up a conceptual framework consisting of a series of possible shifts in identity that occur in relation to migration, both at the individual and at larger-group levels." (p. 2).

Even though leaving my country was by choice, it was not entirely out of choice. There was no way for me to have continued to live in Iraq without feeling unsafe, without being threatened by the brutality of the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. Therefore, in a way, leaving meant that I had to choose some sort of a self-inflicted exile in which I tried to reconstruct myself and come to terms with all the changes that an immigrant must deal with in the process of relocating to a new country. This process of reconstruction was all the more urgent, as Said (2000) put it:

Because exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past ... Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology – designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world. (p. 177)

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Methodology

I consider lived experiences through the autoethnographic method, where the language I use reveals my inner feelings and where the reader contributes to the meaning making process. I chose this approach based on my conviction that the personal is a reflection of the universal, conforming with Park (2005), that “[b]y enlarging the concept of the individual self to include the relationship with others and the world, we can look at expressive writing as a far more complex function than originally thought.” (p. 136). I focus on the idea of identity and place: identity as a way of self-recognition; and place as the grounding notion of identity. I use my lived experiences in a creative way through prose and poetry to explore these focal points that will guide my writings.

Writing autobiographically, however, does not mean writing an essay about my life, with chronologically ordered events. It means that I reflect on my past, focussing on certain moments in my life that resonate with me until now. These are the parts that I *feel* rather than *remember* the most, and my reflections try to stress the affective rather than the informative value of these moments. A way that touches people’s emotions and stays with them. Miller and Paola (2012) suggest that “you can often find clues to your own imagistic or metaphoric organization when you recall the sensory association a thought or experience calls to mind.” (p. 174).

Graham (2012) says that “the memories we have of our lives are not a continuous narrative. Instead, they are more akin to the several arcs of a skipping stone—three, four, five, six splashes and onward” (Graham, 2012, p. 1078). Therefore, in the narrative part of my thesis,

I attempt to skip stones in terms of shedding a light on different “moments” in my life that impacted me the most.

I write snapshots from my past. I am, therefore, selective in telling my stories. As Leggo (2008) suggests, “[w]e make many choices throughout our lives, choose many paths, and exclude many paths. This is the way of living, and this is the way of narrative, too. We are always engaged in an ongoing process of selection and exclusion” (p.16). Leggo (2005) also writes about how an autobiography is never complete but fragmented and partial, and that “the holes are more striking than any semblance of the whole (or wholeness).” (p.5).

In autobiographies, the “I” of the author is very prominent because it is the author’s life and memories that are the subject of the narrative. There is no way to escape it. Miller and Paola (2012) state that “It is this ‘I’ that picks and chooses among the facts. This ‘I’ re-creates those essential scenes and makes crucial decisions about what to include and what to exclude.” (p. 146).

It is this lens through which the narrator zooms in on certain aspects of his or her life that makes it a real memory worth holding to and conveying to others. Memory is selective, and so is the person who remembers. There is a purpose for focusing on certain events to reflect certain emotions. It could be to reflect on a certain emotion in a happy event or a traumatizing incident. Both the happy and the sad memories are part of the person who is trying to put the past together, but if that person wanted to focus only on the happy event, it does not mean that he or she is trying to distort the past reality. It is simply an attempt to reflect on that particular event at that moment in life.

In my opinion, choosing to tell part of the truth in the past does not discount the truth we are trying to tell because even if we tried, there is no such thing as remembering the whole truth.

In their book, *The Philosophy of Derrida*, Dooley and Kavanagh (2007) tell us that “part of what we are endeavouring to understand defies our longing to make it transparent. And the reason for that is that everything has a long and convoluted history that cannot be rendered fully present.” (p. 3). This is the essence of Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction, and what he calls the ‘catastrophe of memory’ which essentially means that memory cannot be trusted to tell the truth. According to them, that is why Derrida never wrote his autobiography.

I agree with Derrida that any knowledge of the past is limited, even self-knowledge. However, I think that there is nothing wrong with the selective or subjective memory. In his memoir, *Angela’s Ashes*, Frank McCourt (1996) writes in such clarity and genuine authority that it seems as if he had previously recorded every conversation he narrated. But he could not have possibly done that, and he could not have possibly remembered every word that was uttered in his presence as a little child. He managed, however, to capture the atmosphere and emotion of the past, especially in his childhood by relaying it with such authenticity and purity. Therefore, when I write, later in the thesis, about the time we, as children watched images of the battle on TV, it is not that I remember all the details of that incident. I simply write about a glimpse of that time.

In dealing with my lived experience, I shed some light on my childhood in Iraq, in which I focus on three themes: roofs and other home stories: memories of the childhood that were once intact and in place; archaeology: the idea of ruins, being in close proximity with the past and the traces left by ancestors; and war: living through traumatic times, a disrupted life. By writing my past, my hope is to make sense of my present, and that this might provide me with signposts for my future and, in the process, my life experience might resonate with others.

The idea of *homeland* carries a lot of meanings: home and land. *Home* as the personal, focal place of belonging, the small-scale source of nostalgia, the childhood house, the structure that holds one's dreams and aspirations; and *land* as the broader point of origin, the large-scale source of nostalgia, the geographical space that holds one's existence. The word *homeland* as one word evokes the idea of a country that holds one's place of belonging. Within this idea, I tackle the concept of nostalgia, or "restorative nostalgia," which is best presented by Svetlana Boym (2001):

The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its "original image" and remain eternally young.

Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. *Reflection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time. (p. 49).

2.2 Approach

The writing process that I adopt uses language as a form of discovery, where newly created pieces emerge to symbolize the idea of displacement. I try to journey in writing narratively about this topic, through memories and present feelings, but I also try to disrupt the syntax in my poetry in an attempt to excavate new language. This seems contradictory, in the sense that usually old (not new) things are excavated. However, the process that I use involves creating a new, surprising, and fresh text from an old one. It is, in a way, like burying language and then unearthing it to give it a new, restored life.

I agree with Leggo's (2012) statement that poets are "always seeking to recall the etymology of analysis that includes notions and connotations and denotations of unloosing, loosening, releasing, breaking up, unfastening, setting free, as in loosing a ship from its moorings." (p. 13). I, therefore, attempt to give a free reign to the syntax to come up with surprising ideas and emotions.

Some of the poetic parts of the thesis are constructed through processing my own biographical or creative writing and some are the result of processing writings of other writers that I chose for relevance and emotional value, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese American writer, poet and visual artist, who wrote in both Arabic and English. I chose him because he lived a great part of his life away from his original birthplace and was part of the "immigrant poets" (*al-Mahjar*) group. Another writer that I relied on for this process is Edward Said, a Palestinian American writer who wrote extensively about the notion of exile. In his Memoir *Out of Place* he talks about his exile and reflects on the past and how it has transpired into the present. Other poems might be a combination of both, my writing, and others'. Practicing different forms of writing involves making choices to internalize my poems.

In my poetic exploration, I use different constrained methods for my inquiry. However, I mostly use iterations of textual regeneration, working with algorithmic software like the GTR Language Workbench (Klobucar & Ayre, n.d.) and the Cut-Up Machine (n.d.), but I also experiment with machine translation to generate new syntax and expressions. The choice of this remix technique springs from my belief in the creative potential of this tool and its ability to nourish poetic inquiry, a potential that is highlighted by James (2015) when he states that "[i]nsofar as it maintains its openness, its endlessness and perpetual reuse, iterative remix

provokes and sustains inquiry and curiosity that awaken our relationships not only to one another, but also with the not-other, our algorithmic familiars, our cybernetic selves.” (p. 144).

2.3 Why I write

“Why I write,” seems like a simple question. There should be no reason for me to write, or to explain why I write if I write privately, to myself, for self-expression or as a cathartic way of emotional self-cleansing. If, however, I write for the public, especially in the realm of academia, I need to say why. I need to explain myself. I write to understand and to know. I write to reveal, disclose, and to inform myself and others, but I also write to hide in my poetry, or to choose my own reality. Poetry allows me to express my life experiences and portray them in a way that not only defies limitations but allows me to delve deep into an area I seldom reach to bring about new aspects of my life.

I agree with Leggo’s (2019) sentiment when he says:

I am not revealed in my poetry. Poetry provides a site where I can create chimeras and illusions. I grow more invisible in my poetry. I escape in my poetry. I disappear in my poetry even as I am given appearance. There is no truth in my poetry, and there is only truth in my poetry. (p. 209).

I have lived in many places and can totally relate to the idea of trying to find common grounds wherever I am. I was born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq. In 1997, I moved to Dubai, and six years later, I immigrated to Canada, where I currently live. Even though I have been here for almost 20 years, I feel that part of me is still trapped in the past. I somehow feel that I have lived three lives instead of one. Each country shaped something in me, something that I consider part of my identity and that I might be able to explore through writing.

2.4 The concept of identity

Identity is not only something that someone adopts in relation to things he or she experiences individually, but it also reflects the communal experiences they accumulate in the process of growing up. It is also not something that is fixed but changes constantly. I agree with Tilley (2006) that “[i]dentity is transient, a reflection on where you are now, a fleeting moment in a biography of the self or the group, only partially connected to where you might have come from, and where you might be going.” (p. 3).

In talking about the diaspora, the notion of identity becomes an essential part because, as Tilley (2006) says, “[o]ne thinks about identity whenever and wherever one is not sure where one belongs and where one is going.” (p. 10). Identity in this sense is something that individuals might think a lot about and value when they are faced with the possibility of losing ground (literally) when they move to another place.

Identity and memory construction are very related when individuals are displaced. Memory becomes their way of grappling with who they remember themselves as and who they see themselves as becoming. This idea is aptly expressed by Tilley (2006):

Diasporas and transnational communities retain communalities of identity despite displacement through shared memories and representations of lost localities and homeland that may be particularly strong. They may typically care much more about place, about homeland and origin, about who they are, than peoples who are not so displaced. (p.13).

Even though one way of keeping the past memory of my homeland and staying connected to it is to connect with people from my country, I found out – throughout the time of

my displacement – that sometimes this has an opposite effect on me. Because people’s identities change with changing places, these people themselves are no longer representative of my past experiences. They have also adopted different identities, in different degrees.

Following the news is also a failed attempt at keeping the invisible ties between me and my country of origin. The place has undergone a major and catastrophic change that has rendered it unrecognizable for me. In fact, I would much rather not follow any piece of news from that part of the world, in an attempt to keep the good memories alive in my mind.

Therefore, the most authentic attempt at keeping the past memories alive for me, is to listen to songs, talk with my mother about my past childhood memories, tell my own children anecdotes about Iraq, how we lived, our daily lives, my school experiences and my dreams.

2.5 Poetry as a healing process

Creative writing, and especially poetry, helps people express their feelings and come to terms with traumatic events in their lives. Poetry has been used as a form of therapy and a healing tool for some time. Bolton (1999) talks about how the therapeutic value of writing poetry exceeds the initial expression of feelings through writing. She says that “[t]he redrafting of poetry is a powerful, deeply thoughtful process of attempting to capture the experience, emotion, or memory as accurately as possible, in apt poetic words and images.” (p. 120). I use writing, in general, and poetry, in particular, to make sense of my world and my past and present experiences. The same is true of Leggo (2004) when he said “I am caught up in language, in word-making, in meaning-making, constantly striving to create the world, or at least a sense of place in the world.” (p.5).

Back when I was still in Iraq, and even with all the traumas of war, I did not write poetry. I did not see the benefit of pouring my heart out on paper. Perhaps I preferred to bottle it all up and throw it in the depths of the giant sea of my unconsciousness. It was safe there, and it was to be left alone, undisturbed. I moved on (both literally – when I moved to Dubai – and metaphorically – when I decided to bury these emotions – but there was always something nagging at the back of my head. I unconsciously wanted to voice my emotions, air them, at least to myself.

Only years after moving to Canada did I find in myself the need (and the courage) to write about that time during the war in the form of a poem.

The following poem was the result:

Inscribed Wounds

I don't know
When or why
For years,
We couldn't stop
The sound of tears,
My mother's voice
The house reverberates
Much has passed
The sound of raids
Explosions, yells of pain
Wells so deep, we lost
Ourselves inside
The bottom,
A wound so old
Engraved
In the ruins
Of the core
I don't know
When or why
All this started
All I know is that

For years,
We couldn't stop
The sound of wailing.

In this poem, I was trying to capture the mood of what we went through during the forty days of the first Gulf War. What came out from that soul-searching process is raw, unpolished emotions that matched my disrupted life.

I understand that the process of disrupting the language I am proposing in this thesis is a little different than what Bolton and Leggo talk about, in terms of not choosing the syntax consciously because I will be choosing from the new material created by the constraints; however, even with this process, I think the poet can make conscious choices about how to arrange words to reflect certain ideas and emotions.

2.6 Constrained writing

I chose to use constraints when writing my poetry because it better fits the idea of disrupting the language and creating new syntax from the rubble of previously written pieces. I am convinced that using constraints does not limit my freedom, as it might be thought; rather, it gives me avenues to create new language, in an attempt to link the past with the present. The original written pieces represent the past, while the new emerging texts are seen as the present. Baetens (1997) considers constrained writing a kind of technique that frees the writer as well as the reader, in that the reader is freed from the cliché of something that is written easily, while the writer is freed from having to produce unoriginal writing by being forced to be creative.

According to Baetens (1997), the term constraint "indicates any type of formal technique or program whose application is able to produce a sense of its making text by itself, if need be without any previous "idea" from the writer. A constraint-ruled text is thus the opposite of a text

in which the author tries to express an idea or a meaning he saw or felt within his own mind before he started to write.” (P.2).

Along the same lines, James (2017) suggests that “[o]ne of the wonderful aspects of poetry when seen as a process of inquiry rather than as a product of inspiration is that it allows writers to experiment freely and explore how language works without the pressure to produce a personal masterpiece or great work of art.” (p. 260). This notion appropriately resonates with my experience. I think that a poet would be more expressive and attuned to his or her feelings if freed from the burden of having to think, consciously and intentionally, of how to capture these feelings in the form of a poem. Instead, the randomly generated syntax stimulates the poetic inquirer’s creativity. The process of inquiry is in a sense more fulfilling than just writing from inspiration.

As my intention was to invoke the past and unearth the language to create new syntax that is more surprising and untraditional, I found that using constraints was a great tool that perfectly fits this purpose. I am convinced that using constraints enabled me to be more creative and produce poems that are highly emotional and truly reflect the intended mood.

Contrary to what criticisms of using iteration tools to produce poetry might suggest in terms of freedom-restricting, the writer has a lot of choice when it comes to what words to include and what expressions to create from the processed writing. According to Baetens (1997), defenders of free writing might think of constraints as an obstacle, but, in fact, they are an incentive or a stimulus that is necessary to produce good writing, whether it was poetry or prose. I agree with him that writing constraints are stimulating because when the writing is put through an iteration or any constraint tool, the disrupted text that emerges provides the writer with

infinite possibilities to work with. It is, therefore, a great tool to get the juices going and create well-written poetry.

This idea is reiterated by Deming (2009), who emphasizes that “[t]hinking about the use of constraints as a means to produce writing can therefore generate questions about freedom as well as choice, agency, and perhaps even history.” (p. 654). He also maintains that the process of constrained writing involves some kind of conflict, as the writer thinks about the possibilities of the form and language, which suggests dialectical thinking. I experienced this when faced with the new processed texts, after applying the tools, such as the Cut-Up Machine or the GTR Language Workbench. There was a conscious decision-making process within which I had to decide what to keep (and in what order) and what to discard.

It is this process of experimenting with the randomly generated syntax that makes poetic inquiry so powerful as a research tool, as the poet deconstructs the new emerging ideas and meanings and makes sense of them. This idea was emphasized by James (2009) when he maintained that “[e]xperimental intervention occurs in the lexical selection and syntactic reconstruction of the poem as research artifact, enacted in the moment of calculation, performance or sustained poetic concentration comprising the research event.” (p. 61).

Citing the cut-up poem as an example of machine produced text, James (2009) further explains that “[t]he cut-up poem, not as a product but as a process, is a record of erasure, like emptying a container so that, when struck, it may resonate clearly and distinctively.” (p. 61). I think it is this emphasis on the process, rather than the product, that makes writing constraints effective. The whole process provides the poet with an opportunity to write unique poetry through experimentation with fresh word combinations and surprising syntax.

2.7 Nostalgia as a source of meaning

According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, nostalgia is defined as follows:

1. The state of being homesick: homesickness from (*nost*, meaning “homecoming” and *algia* meaning “pain.”
2. A wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition.

While *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as:

A feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past.

I do not know if I am truly homesick, but I certainly yearn to return to a certain past period, with a mixed feeling of pleasure and sadness. I think about a fond memory I have, of me walking to school with my cousin, when it was still warm outside. We would try to avoid stepping on the many ripe dates that have fallen from the palm trees, lining up the streets. Stepping on them would make our shoes sticky, and then we would have to rub the soles clean against the pavement, but it does not always work. The result would be sticky steps all the way to school.

Then it would become a game of who can walk on date-free spots. Maybe this is how I developed the habit of looking down when I am walking. The warm air would be filled with the smell of the overripe dates which, in time, almost turn to molasses after they hit the scorching pavement and get pressed by many pairs of shoes. It is hard to leave these dates stuck in their sweet piles, but we cannot pick them up and eat them, so we leave them, and pray that they would be food for other creatures.

There is seldom a house in Baghdad, that does not have a *nakhla* (palm tree), either in the garden or – if the garden is too small – outside the fence of the house. Our small garden, which already housed orange, *narenj* (bitter orange) and olive trees, had no space for palm trees, so three of them were planted outside. My cousin's house, on the other hand, with a garden so big we could, (and did) play soccer in it, had at least ten date palms, providing a good amount of shade and dates.

Could remembering good things about the past be helpful to combat the feeling of homesickness? Routledge et al (2011) conducted research that “provides evidence that nostalgia is a psychological resource that can be harnessed to derive and sustain a sense of meaning in life.” (p.10). The same study also found that music-evoked nostalgia was associated with the sense that life is meaningful and worth living.

Barrett et al (2010) also conducted a study about music-evoked nostalgia and reported on how it affects memory and personality. They concluded that “a person's familiarity with a given song is a context-level construct that may also influence the person's nostalgic experience.” (p. 391). Participants in the study stated more music-evoked nostalgia when listening to songs that they found autobiographically striking, that were familiar to them, that they thought were touching, that induced a lot of positive and negative emotions, and that increased mixed emotions.

I found that listening to a particular famous Iraqi singer, Kazem Elsaheer, brings all kinds of emotions in me. Even though the songs are not all about homeland – in fact, only one or two of his songs are about Iraq, the rest is about love – they still take me back to my country. The familiarity of his voice invokes memories about my past life; and maybe there are some mixed emotions as well.

The following is a poem I wrote a while ago about this exact sentiment:

Take Me There

In your voice, the moment stops, the seasons, the months spin around me. When you say “ Baghdad, has God ever created anything like you?” Or alternatively “Baghdad, has God ever tortured anything like you?” with the ache that raptures my conscience, I lose myself in your consonants and vowels, imagine myself shrinking small, sliding on your vocal cords, until I reach the other side of the earth, kiss the wound on the battered city I left behind, help her up and dust her knees off, tell her I need her more than I need the rippling pumps in my heart, and before you start to sing again, I plant my feet deep in her ground, where I belong.

Then I put this poem through the GTR processor to see what new syntax or more creative sentences could come out of it. The following poem was the result of this process.

Battered Vocals

I seclude myself in your hurt
Moving on your vocal line
Until I reach another beat
Higher up, in the alphabet
I want to rapture distress
Where I go, I revolve in the quailing center
The battered letters babbling conscience
I create myself

Writing constraint: processing my poem through the GTR Language Workbench.

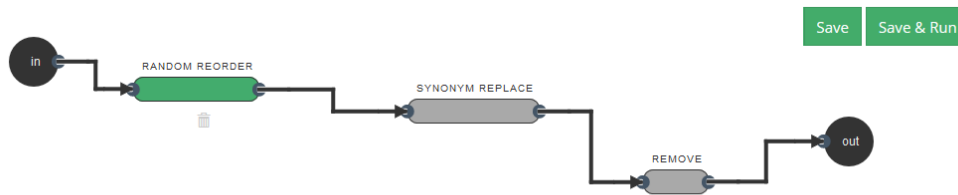


Figure 2.1 GTR Language Workbench Iteration Example 1

The new word combinations are less predictable. They are more poetic in this sense. In the original poem, the thoughts are organized and expected, albeit reflect feelings. In the recreated poem, however, the images are fresh and evocative.

2.8 The significance of place

A place has more depth and meaning when it is associated with memories. A place not only has a geographical or material existence, but also has a meaning, a value attached to it. According to Gieryn (2002), “[a] spot in the universe, with a gathering of physical stuff there, becomes a place only when it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory.” (p. 465).

Therefore, it makes sense that people are attached to places. Gieryn (2002) also maintains that “Place attachments result from accumulated biographical experiences; we associate places with fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happened to us personally there.” (p. 481). To be without a home is to be detached from the past reality. Gieryn (2002) suggests that the loss of place brings distressing consequences for individual and collective identity, memory and history.

As Gieryn (2002) suggests, attachment to place is related to the architecture of places, and people who reside in places that are in close proximity to prominent landmarks, or other identifiable structures, tend to have stronger emotional ties to these places. In my case, the fact that both of my parents were archaeologists, and that my mother was tasked with overseeing the restoration of Al Mustansiriya School, a well-known medieval house of learning and historical landmark, greatly affected my childhood and my sense of attachment to place. In chapter 4, I will explore how my own sense of place and home developed in relation to this school and my mother's place within it.

Chapter 3: Theme One: The House/Home

I fantasize about your narenj trees
the ones my father planted in your earth
the bitter oranges that start from a tiny flower
small, white like a bride's earring on her wedding day

From my poem "Weaving Content"

3.1 Introduction

A house is the first point of belonging. It is the place that shelters people and gives their lives a solid protective shell in which to grow and prosper. Writing about the philosophy of poetry, Bachelard (1964) says in the introduction to his book *The Poetics of Space* that "not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are 'housed.' Our soul is an abode. And by remembering, 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves." (p. xxxvii). He goes on to say that "through poems, perhaps more than through recollections, we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house." (p. 6). I believe this is why writing about my childhood house and room feels like the most intimate thing that binds me to my early memories.

A house is not just a physical place. It is a structure that houses and shapes one's identity. Even the environment in which the house exists plays a role in shaping this identity. Hauge (2007) argues that a lot of factors – genetic, social, and cultural as well as the constructed environment, come together to shape identity. She also argues that "[p]laces are not only contexts or backdrops, but also an integral part of identity. Even small architectural changes affect how a place facilitates different uses or attributes, such as social interaction, which thereby can also alter the meaning of a place" (p. 50).

3.2 Memories of my childhood home in Iraq

Roofs were another world in Iraq. They were meant to be summer bedrooms, outdoor chambers. I loved summer because it was my only chance to be that close to sleeping in nature's lap, smelling the fragrant jasmine in its bosom. In our garden, it climbed all the way up to the roof, and looped over the fence in wreaths of perfume. Sleeping on the roof was like camping in our own house every day for about four months, the summer months. We had some sort of a connection with the roof.

We did lots of things on the roof. We ate late evening snacks. We listened to the radio. We even played games on our beds before sunset. We told stories. We shared dreams. We discussed the future. The roof was part of our childhood. In the evenings, my mother or father would tell us children to go up to the roof to spread the bed mattresses to cool them off (we flip them over in the morning to protect them from the scorching sun). Usually, the mattresses we used for roof sleeping were made of cotton because cotton absorbs the cold.

There was something magical about the roof. Lying under the big dark dome inspired endless chatter and late-night stories. My cousin would sometimes spend the weekend at our house. They lived in an apartment at the time, so a sleepover on the roof, our summer nightly retreat, was a special occasion for her. On such nights I would put my bed beside my brother's and share my bed with her.

There was also something about the roof that always hung in my mind. I would forever dream of turning it into a huge swimming pool. How complicated can it really be, I thought? Just block the gate with something secure, close the drain, open the tab, and have a nice swim! Of course, it could not be done, but I had fun imagining.

The roof was also my surveillance tower. I used it to observe the world under me. I would go up whenever it was my turn to spread out the mattresses to cool off, or whenever I was bored. I would stand behind the roof's fence looking down at the street below, at the neighbor's, at the cats in our garden lying lazily in the sun, licking their shiny fur.

Sometimes at night I would take a torchlight to the roof and cuddle up with a book in my roof bed, so I would not miss my nightly read. It is a different feeling when you are on the roof. It is as if you are outdoor yet indoor. You have the thrill and the freedom of camping and the security and convenience of being at home.

The following poem is the result of processing a text I wrote about my home:

Mostly Untold

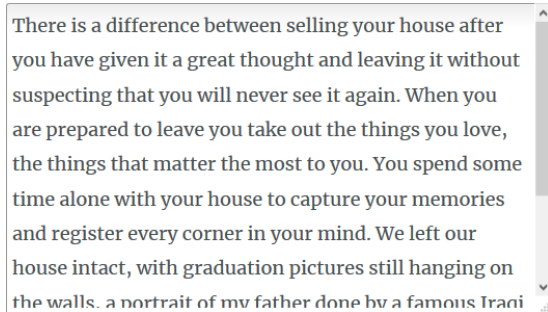
You, alone, with collectibles
in a corner, you have captured love
a great artist
the house
a difference in your pictures
registered things between mind and matter
still here, a portrait of your mother,
graduation, things you leave
years after
you are your memories
your collected crystal throughout the walls
hanging meticulously

intact

unsuspecting!

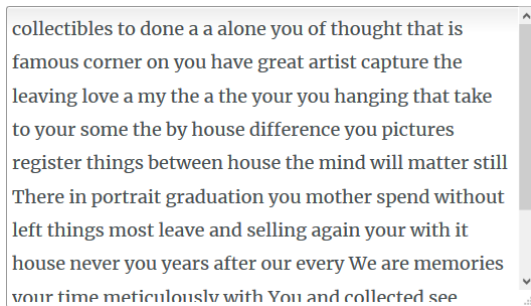
Writing constraint: Cut-Up Machine, processing my own writing.

Before



There is a difference between selling your house after you have given it a great thought and leaving it without suspecting that you will never see it again. When you are prepared to leave you take out the things you love, the things that matter the most to you. You spend some time alone with your house to capture your memories and register every corner in your mind. We left our house intact, with graduation pictures still hanging on the walls. a portrait of my father done by a famous Iraqi

After



collectibles to done a a alone you of thought that is famous corner on you have great artist capture the leaving love a my the a the your you hanging that take to your some the by house difference you pictures register things between house the mind will matter still There in portrait graduation you mother spend without left things most leave and selling again your with it house never you years after our every We are memories your time meticulously with You and collected see

Figure 3.1 Cut-Up Example 1

This poem captures the state of chaos that comes with an abandoned house. Even though my father stayed behind, in my mind, the house has become a strange entity. My room was uninhabited, deserted, alone and lonely. I think using the Cut-Up Machine helped give this poem a new life, by rearranging the words in a surprising way.

The following is a poem I once wrote about the idea of “homeland”:

A Homeland is a Breath You Take

Someone once said, a homeland is not a hotel
you leave when the service turns bad
I ask, what is it then?
A house you demolish when the base is rotten?
A ship you abandon when the hole is as big as the bottom of the sea?
Or a fire you flee from when the sun is charred to the ground
and people are cremated while still alive?
I say: A homeland is a home on a land where you rest your head
and dream of a life worth living.
A homeland is a breath you take.

The following poem is the result of processing the previous poem:

When a Homeland is not a Homeland

the bottom ground turns
when the head lands
people with demolished life, alive
a home with service
once a homeland

a still breath
a ship living in a sea
the sun abandoned

rotten, charred, cremated

once a homeland

the house, big, on fire

a rested dream flees

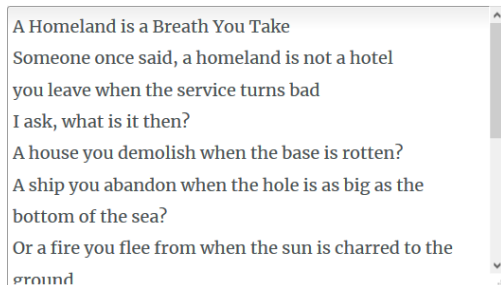
takes a hole and leaves

a base worth a while

once a homeland

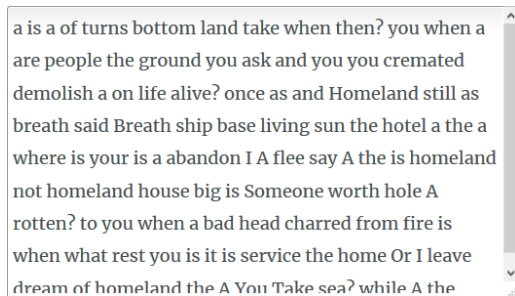
Writing constraint: processing my own poem through the Cut-Up Machine.

Before

A screenshot of a text box with a light gray background and a vertical scrollbar on the right. The text inside is the original poem:

A Homeland is a Breath You Take
Someone once said, a homeland is not a hotel
you leave when the service turns bad
I ask, what is it then?
A house you demolish when the base is rotten?
A ship you abandon when the hole is as big as the
bottom of the sea?
Or a fire you flee from when the sun is charred to the
ground

After

A screenshot of a text box with a light gray background and a vertical scrollbar on the right. The text inside is the result of cutting up the original poem:

a is a of turns bottom land take when then? you when a
are people the ground you ask and you you cremated
demolish a on life alive? once as and Homeland still as
breath said Breath ship base living sun the hotel a the a
where is your is a abandon I A flee say A the is homeland
not homeland house big is Someone worth hole A
rotten? to you when a bad head charred from fire is
when what rest you is it is service the home Or I leave
dream of homeland the A You Take sea? while A the

Figure 3.2 Cut-Up Example 2

This newly generated poem may be more successful in reflecting the idea of a homeland that is battling war, than the original one is. The new syntax is raw and jolting.

A while ago, I wrote the following poem about my home:

Weaving Content

I fantasize about your narenj trees
the ones my father planted in your earth
the bitter oranges that start from a tiny flower
small, white like a bride's earring on her wedding day
they covered the garden with a carpet of fragrance
I picked them, some were still closed like tiny light bulbs
and some were open, exposing their secrets
the tears of my longing waters them in my dream
nourishes their existence,
and in my dream, they blossom to a wreath
I put on my head, like a crown of content
I see you when you were young
a thin branch, barely noticed from the ground
the rich soil that hugged you, hugged me too

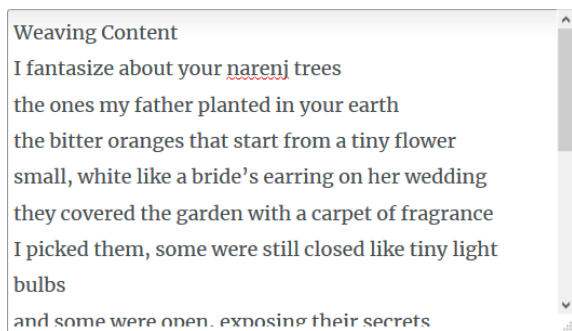
The following poem is the result of processing the previous poem:

Tiny Existence

with thin wreath secrets, soil in tiny existence, a longing dream hugged
bitter oranges from earth, bulbs young and weaving like a bride
fantasizes about open trees, crown dreams of a garden, a ground that
blossoms, planted with content, a flower covered in tears with a carpet
fragrance in a wedding.

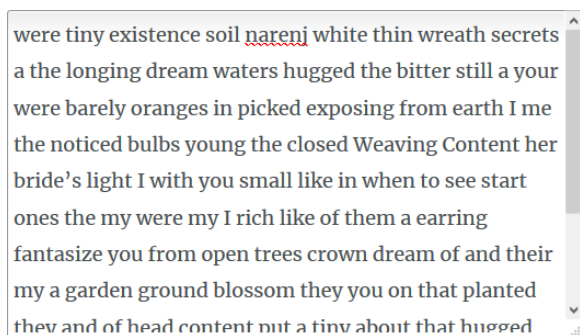
Writing constraint: processing my own poem through the Cut-Up Machine.

Before



Weaving Content
I fantasize about your narenj trees
the ones my father planted in your earth
the bitter oranges that start from a tiny flower
small, white like a bride's earring on her wedding
they covered the garden with a carpet of fragrance
I picked them, some were still closed like tiny light
bulbs
and some were open, exposing their secrets

After



were tiny existence soil narenj white thin wreath secrets
a the longing dream waters hugged the bitter still a your
were barely oranges in picked exposing from earth I me
the noticed bulbs young the closed Weaving Content her
bride's light I with you small like in when to see start
ones the my were my I rich like of them a earring
fantasize you from open trees crown dream of and their
my a garden ground blossom they you on that planted
they and of head content out a tiny about that hugged

Figure 3.3 Cut-Up Example 3

The new prose poem that emerged from the constraint seems to be shocking and disruptive in an effective way. The surprising syntax strikes like bolts to evoke feelings of nostalgia for a childhood house that I remember.

The following is a poem I wrote about my homeland:

Like a Mid-Breath Sigh

I claim that I can fold you a hundred times and put you in my pocket or swallow you like a pill, one that doesn't cure me, but rather makes me sick, for a home that I don't know if it still exists, a talisman from a time where I painted its fence and made necklaces and bracelets from its orange blossoms. I see you in black and white because colors seem to confuse me, you blur and fade into two dimensions. I claim that I can wipe your tears and squeeze them back into the *Tigris*, because they belong to you, the same cells, the same fibers, the same salt that make up your currents. Now I only see you in a snapshot, still, lifeless like a breath caught midway after exhalation.

The following poem emerged from processing the previous poem:

Midway

You seem shallow

A blur of color

Salt caught in tears,

I claim

Talisman, midway, I see it fade

Tigris blossoms and belongs

Wipe my cells

One current, confused

A home, a sigh

Because a snapshot breath

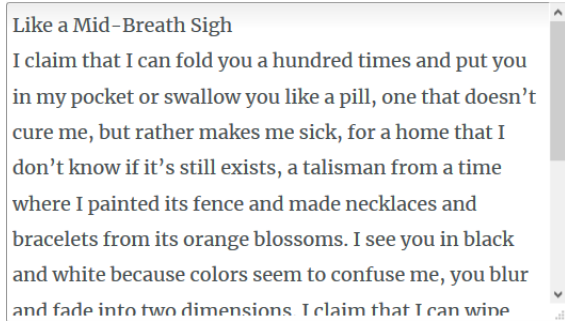
Folds me like a bracelet

A lifeless necklace

Two exhalations

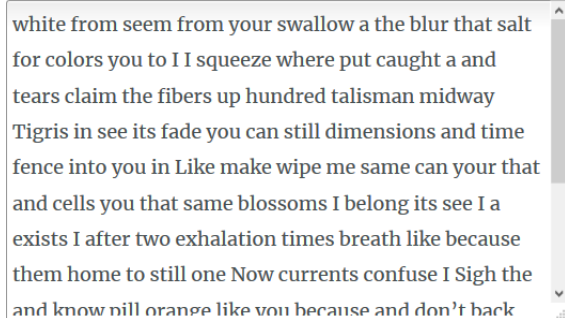
Writing constraint: processing my own poem through the Cut-Up Machine.

Before

A screenshot of a text box with a light gray background and a vertical scrollbar on the right. The text inside is the original poem 'Like a Mid-Breath Sigh' by Li Bai, transcribed line by line.

Like a Mid-Breath Sigh
I claim that I can fold you a hundred times and put you
in my pocket or swallow you like a pill, one that doesn't
cure me, but rather makes me sick, for a home that I
don't know if it's still exists, a talisman from a time
where I painted its fence and made necklaces and
bracelets from its orange blossoms. I see you in black
and white because colors seem to confuse me, you blur
and fade into two dimensions. I claim that I can wine

After

A screenshot of a text box with a light gray background and a vertical scrollbar on the right. The text inside is the result of the original poem being processed by the Cut-Up Machine, with words from different lines shuffled together.

white from seem from your swallow a the blur that salt
for colors you to I I squeeze where put caught a and
tears claim the fibers up hundred talisman midway
Tigris in see its fade you can still dimensions and time
fence into you in Like make wipe me same can your that
and cells you that same blossoms I belong its see I a
exists I after two exhalation times breath like because
them home to still one Now currents confuse I Sigh the
and know nill orange like you because and don't hack

Figure 3.4 Cut-Up Example 4

The new poem has a bullet-like quality, in the sense that it is shorter, and to the point. It delivers the sense of a broken home, rather than a complete memory. It is angry, snappy and has a temperamental representation.

I think that unearthing new poetry lines involves also changing the mood of the text. This previous poem is a good example. The original poem provided a more nostalgic, brooding, and lamenting mood, while the emerging poem delivered an angry and anxious mood.

When my mother, brother and I left Iraq, we left everything as it was, partly because my father announced that he was not leaving with us. Not yet. It was just months after the second Gulf war. Staying in Iraq was a luxury in a time when all the people I knew were ready to give everything they had for a chance to see the land borders (air travel was still not available for Iraqis due to war). I did not even bid the house a proper goodbye. I cannot remember the state that I left my room in.

I helped bring this house into existence. I was about ten when I started to go with my father to the “new” house during the time it was built. We would spray water over the cement to make it more durable. We literally watched it grow like a baby from the time it was a mere one-meter-high construction that we called *asas* (base). I saw it getting higher and higher every day. I even helped paint the window frames. Houses in Iraq are built with bricks and concrete. They are designed to endure, to last “forever.”

Ferenczi and Marshall (2013) suggest that:

Place attachment can be defined as a social attachment between an individual and a place and has been mostly investigated within the realm of environmental psychology.

Place attachment has been measured in terms of behavioral, affective, and cognitive

components. It is linked with place identity, which has been conceptualized as a process of self-categorization. (p. 2).

I feel that my attachment to my childhood house is because of my collective memories in it. That house knew all my dreams, the nights I stayed awake jotting my inspirations in the middle of the night or at the crack of dawn. I cried, I laughed, I jumped, I danced in that house. It knew me as I knew it. I wiped its floors, I cleaned its windows, I painted its walls. I watched it age as it watched me grow from a girl into a woman. I slept in it, I slept on it, I played in it, I prayed in it. Maybe my identity is truly attached to that house's identity.

Chapter 4: Theme Two: Living the Past

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is a medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried.

Walter Benjamin
(Benjamin, 1999, p. 576)

What does it feel like?

To smell a different earth
To sleep the night
And dream about the rivers
That drown a different pain

To walk under the same sun
But kiss different rays
To braid a different strand of hope
To look out from a window pane

From my poem titled “Sleep to a Different Dream”

4.1 Introduction

I believe that people are shaped by their surroundings. The cities and neighborhoods they have lived in, as well as the culture that shaped their lives, have a great effect on them as much as the houses they grew up in. The word “culture” encompasses all the customs and traditions people usually inherit throughout generations. I believe that old cities have a lingering atmosphere that stays in, no matter what gets demolished and what gets built in its place. In other words, you can tell a lot about people by their city’s history.

Moreover, every city in the world has history, but some have more than others, in the sense that they have existed longer and have had inhabitants for longer and therefore have

“witnessed” more. This is evidenced by the monuments and ruins that our ancestors left behind many years back.

Lewicka (2008) says that “‘Urban reminders’, the leftovers from previous inhabitants of a place, may influence memory of places either directly, by conveying historical information, or indirectly—by arousing curiosity and increasing motivation to discover the place’s forgotten past.” (p.209). In my case, I was constantly reminded of Baghdad’s history, and not only because I am surrounded by the many monuments in the old city, but because, as I mentioned before, both my father and mother were archeologists.

The Iraqi Museum was my playground. I used to go there with my mother and father and look at the different old artifacts that have been dug out from different sites in Iraq, like the 6,000-year-old Sumerian tablet that revealed the oldest evidence that ancient Iraqis were the first to ferment beer. Cuneiform was the earliest system of writing in Sumer, and it is how the famous Epic of Gilgamesh was written. Among the statues, a few in particular, are stuck in my mind because my mother told me a lot about them. These were the statues of a man, who was also a God, called Abu and his family, a wife and two children. Maybe they reminded me of my own family. The look on Abu’s face was of eternal surprise, as if he could not believe that he was unearthed hundreds of years later. He has big wide eyes and a long beard that almost reached to his waist.

My mother explained some of these artifacts to me, how they were found and what they meant. She had studied archaeology at university and learned Sumerian, the old language of Iraq. Some of the objects, she said, had different symbols and letters and served as stamps for deeds and contracts. My father on the other hand, was involved in archaeology out of passion. He had a

law degree, but he never practiced. Instead of solving the mysteries of living people's misfortunes, he set out to solve the secrets of dead people's past lives.

One day I went on a school field trip to the museum, and I was so proud that I have seen the place before and kept bragging to my friends about it. I had never stopped admiring the masterpieces of art and jewelry pieces that were created more than five thousand years ago without the modern tools of today. A certain collection was the most amazing in Iraq's archaeological findings. It was a treasure owned by a princess. Her remains were found in a tomb with many pieces of her jewelry, but the most distinguished piece in the collection was her crown, which had a remarkable design. It resembled a grapevine and was carved to the smallest delicate details; the vine was made of gold and the grapes were small dark purple precious stones. My mother could spend hours talking about these findings and describing every detail.

Because the archaeological sites in Baghdad were mostly close to each other, where old Baghdad used to be, most of the time my mother and father's places of work were within walking distance to each other. At one point, my mother was assigned the renovation of Al Mustansiriya, which is considered one of the oldest universities in the world during the mediaeval era and was an academy for young learners who came from all over the world to study. It was also a boarding school, so there were rooms for the students to live in, very much like the modern dorms. In each classroom there was a hidden place for the principal to climb up and sit to listen to the lecture without being noticed by the students or their master. I would go in each room and hall and wonder at the beauty of the Islamic design and Arabic calligraphy. Whenever I went there, I felt as if the place took me back thousands of years to that great cultural time.

I believe that ruins and monuments are not only traces of the past, proof that other people existed before us, but they also represent the old atmosphere these people lived in and the kind of lives they led. It is like a window to another era. According to Ahuvia Kahane (2011), at the site of every ruin, someone must have been directly involved in a conflict and not only reported on what has happened, but also given their opinion about what they thought of it. “In other words, the ruin will have provided, not merely the proof of a ‘historical’ event, but also the occasion for moral judgement.” (p.635).

Al Mustansiriya had a great effect on me especially because it was the hub of culture, even in modern days, situated beside Al Muttanabbi Souk, the famous used-bookstore alley in Baghdad. I would go there, almost every day with my mother, during the summer holidays. We would sit on a bench in the yard enjoying the morning breeze and the Turkish coffee, sheltered in the shadow from the emerging morning sun. Then my mom would flip over her small coffee cup and wait for it to make its own markings with the coffee grounds. After a few seconds, she would flip it back and look at the images that were created by the coffee grounds. She did that every time she had Turkish coffee. This was her daily ritual before the workday started.

4.2 The effect of memories

Remembering does not only involve the act of remembering past things; it also involves making meaning of these memories. When I remember certain events in my past, I start seeing them with a different perspective, almost adding another dimension to them. Moreover, in remembering my past, I do not only remember the things I used to do in my immediate surroundings. I remember the whole culture; the whole atmosphere; what it means to be someone from Iraq. I remember the games we used to play when we were children. I remember the date-

filled pastries we made during Eid, the celebration that comes after Ramadan (even though we were not religious and did not fast). I remember the smells of being in Iraq.

According to Frie (2012), humans make sense of their experiences through telling their stories and through listening to the stories of others, which is a form of communication that is called the narrative process. This process is only possible if there is a common background of language and a collective cultural understanding.

Wang, Song, and Kim Koh (2017) maintain that “The process of meaning-making serves as the essential glue to connect together the cognitive processes of remembering, the active acts of narration and personal storytelling, and the manifestation of cultural influences within and between individuals.” (p. 215). They go on to say that “Cultural influences operate not only on how we recall our experiences and tell our life stories but also what we perceive as our experiences unfold and thus what is later available to us for remembering and personal storytelling.” (p. 215). Therefore, our memories are affected by our cultural and physical surroundings.

Flipping the small coffee cup and reading the coffee grounds is a cultural thing in our part of the world. It is all part of the belief in the occult and superstitions. It is, therefore, part of my communal but also personal past. Frie (2012) says “As human beings, we are more thoroughly defined by culture and history than we tend to realize. Our histories are interwoven with narratives that precede us and that exist outside of memory precisely because they exceed what we can know of them.” (p. 331).

The following is a poem (untitled) I wrote in my poetic inquiry class, responding to a writing prompt:

Pour the coffee with the foam into the cup.

Fill it to the rim.

Drink slowly and leisurely.

Absorb the bitter sweetness of your presence.

Close your eyes and allow yourself to taste the buds.

You are awakened to the richness.

Let the aroma take you to old places, spaces to rediscover

Immerse your senses

Sip, until you hit the muddy bottom of your emotions.

Drain the goodness

Then stop!

Put the saucer on the top, and let it rest.

Do not swirl the cup.

Let your fate reveal itself.

Have patience with every step.

Hold them both with your hand and flip.

Together, inward, towards your heart, in a quick motion, and don't spill.

Put it down and wait.

Let the grounds settle and relax for a moment.

Free the cup from the saucer, tilt and rest, slanted on the edge.

Wait...and wait...and wait, and

Lift the cup and peek into your future.

Inspect it like a precious gem that has yet to be dug from the core of a mountain.

Invent your fate

Read about your treasure trove, a better job, a secret lover, a jackpot!

Then slowly, discard the cup.

Move on and live your life.

Tomorrow, devise another future for yourself.

The following poem emerged from processing the previous poem:

Stir the Grounds

Hand yourself the saucer, a mountain of richness.

Let your precious future relax and settle towards the bottom.

Like an inward hold of coffee senses.

Your heart invents the future, with every move of the buds.

Your cup, your gem saucer, slanted.

Inspect slowly the muddy foam sweetness.

Rediscover tomorrow, a core lived to be revealed.

Flip not your life and let the treasure emotions immerse.

Another lift, the jackpot cup.

Let spaces rest for you and for them.

Your drink awaits fate down goodness.

To the eyes, spill closely and wait.

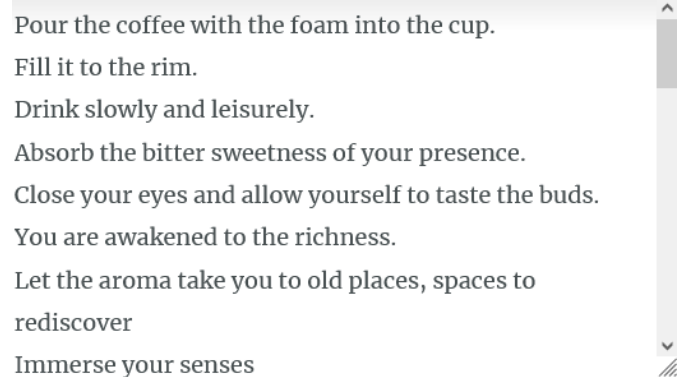
Free fate, awakened.

Drain quick until the rim.
Peek the taste edge then absorb.
Leisurely discard the top.
A lover dug in the moment.
A swirl motion with patience.
Together, a slow aroma.
Your presence fills the wait.
Pour and tilt the secret trove ground.
And wait.

The original poem consisted of several instructions to make a cup of Turkish coffee and flipping the cup to read the grounds. From the Cut-Up Machine emerged a totally different poem that takes a whole new direction. It surprised me that rearranging the syntax could turn a list of simple instructions into a poem that is almost like a reflection about life.

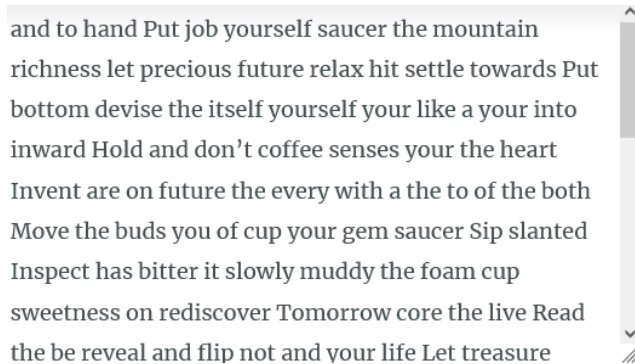
Writing constraint: processing my own poem through the Cut-Up Machine.

Before



Pour the coffee with the foam into the cup.
Fill it to the rim.
Drink slowly and leisurely.
Absorb the bitter sweetness of your presence.
Close your eyes and allow yourself to taste the buds.
You are awakened to the richness.
Let the aroma take you to old places, spaces to
rediscover
Immerse your senses

After



and to hand Put job yourself saucer the mountain
richness let precious future relax hit settle towards Put
bottom devise the itself yourself your like a your into
inward Hold and don't coffee senses your the heart
Invent are on future the every with a the to of the both
Move the buds you of cup your gem saucer Sip slanted
Inspect has bitter it slowly muddy the foam cup
sweetness on rediscover Tomorrow core the live Read
the be reveal and flip not and your life Let treasure

Figure 4.1 Cut-Up Example 5

A while ago, I wrote a poem about my mother. The constraint I put for myself is to tie her to my homeland and its artifacts.

The following poem was the response to the previous prompt:

In Your Face, a Mesopotamian Dawn Rises

Once upon your smile, a silky flying carpet,
caught up with the wind and sailed
where millions of palm trees cry dates
sweetness that sticks on the morning's cheek
turquoise domes with half-moon tops
the seven eyes that veer off evil.

Once upon your beauty,
mirrors captured your elegance
Your guardian face, a tanning peach

a tug of the sunset's braid,
the zip up of night's cloak on my roof,
the measure of glow you still emanate.

Once upon your summer's kiss
The flip of a cup and coffee grounds
secret tales of thousand nights,
A Sumerian seal you signed
Lady of Heaven trapped on earth
Inanna in eternal peace.

In this poem, I tried to combine my memories of Iraq's most prominent landmarks and artifacts with my feelings towards my mother. The challenge was to mix history with emotions. The constraint resulted in a poem that celebrates both. Perhaps I feel that my homeland is like a mother figure to me, akin to my real mother.

According to Frie (2012), "The notion that our lives are always and already circumscribed by culture and history in ways that are outside of our awareness is a central tenet of philosophical hermeneutics-an approach that seeks to understand and interpret our place in the world." (p. 334). Moreover, Frie (2012) thinks that individual memory is not separated from what is generally perceived as social, collective, or historical memory.

In my apartment in Vancouver, I still make Turkish coffee and flip my small cup to "see" the future. However, I never do it alone. I only do it when I have guests from our part of the world. In a way, it is a reminiscing process to revive these past delicious moments from my

previous life. I do the same thing with tea. If I am making tea for myself, I would just use a tea bag in a mug, but if I have guests, I do the whole ritual of using loose tea leaves, a brass pot, and the small gold-rimmed tea glasses.

The following is a poem I once wrote, remembering my homeland:

Even the Night is a Different Shade

Even the thoughts a stranger waddling
in a foreign land, losing directions.

Even the words a different breed,
the letters, the sounds a distant tune.

Even the song, a different rhythm
than the heart danced to, years after years.

Even the smells of roses are a waft
the nose has long forgotten.

Even the writing a different taste,
memories of seeds planted but doomed.

Even the dreams wither in winds
plucked prematurely.

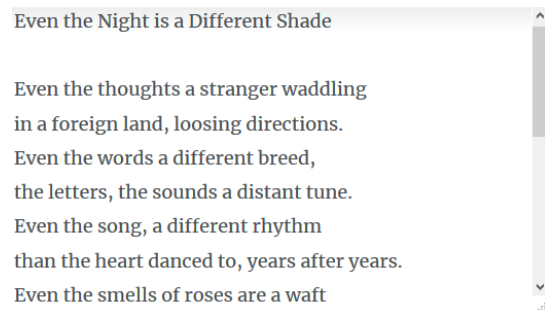
The following poem is the result of processing the previous poem:

The Sounds of Thoughts

The taste of words, memories of heart roses, prematurely waft in a night, even the winds, have a foreign distant tune, withered and forgotten are the years, the seeds a song waddling in dreams, smells, the rhythm, even a different plant plucked, but the land, long doomed, breed strangers, dance in different directions, different even in the sounds of thoughts, letters and writing.

Writing constraint: processing my own poem through the Cut-Up Machine.

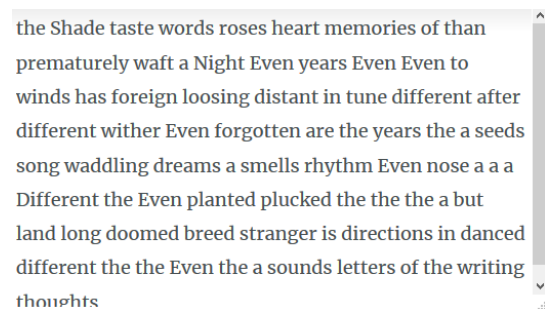
Before



Even the Night is a Different Shade

Even the thoughts a stranger waddling
in a foreign land, loosing directions.
Even the words a different breed,
the letters, the sounds a distant tune.
Even the song, a different rhythm
than the heart danced to, years after years.
Even the smells of roses are a waft

After



the Shade taste words roses heart memories of than
prematurely waft a Night Even years Even Even to
winds has foreign loosing distant in tune different after
different wither Even forgotten are the years the a seeds
song waddling dreams a smells rhythm Even nose a a a
Different the Even planted plucked the the the a but
land long doomed breed stranger is directions in danced
different the the Even the a sounds letters of the writing
thoughts

Figure 4.2 Cut-Up Example 6

In writing the new poem, I tried to keep the general idea, but opened my mind to the newly formed sentences and the syntax that was randomly generated. The result is that the new prose poem has some surprising combinations, such as (the taste of words), (the sounds of thoughts), and (smells the rhythm), as well as new ideas that were not in the original poem, like (breeding strangers) and (years that are forgotten).

When news of the U.S. invasion of Iraq reached us in Dubai, my mother's first concern was the Iraqi Museum. She knew it will be a target for looting. She was right. In the first month that followed the fall of Baghdad in 2003, Iraq lost tens of thousands of artifacts, which reach back 7,000 years to the advent of civilization. They fell in the hands of professional art thieves. The employees of the National Museum of Iraq were able to hide many invaluable pieces in underground storage rooms, but they could not save everything. This was the gruesome reality.

According to Pollock (2016), studies of looting showed that although neither looting nor the antiquities trade that it is associated with it are only war-related, wars usually facilitate and fast-track both. Hughes (2004) mentions one looted item from the Iraqi Museum, which was the Great Harp of Ur. He describes it as "an exquisite instrument fashioned by a Sumerian artist 4,500 years ago." (p.109). He says it makes him yearn for "the restoration of lost memory to the collective experience of humankind." (p. 109), and he wonders what music was played on it and what songs were sung along with his music.

I have a vague memory of myself as a little child on an excavation excursion with my parents and brother. We stayed in a camp outside Baghdad, where the excavation site was located. The grownups discussed their work and the children set out to play. Children are mystery-lovers by nature, but I was always surrounded by mysteries. I recall an old well somewhere close to the camp. We gathered around it. We were trying to make our own discoveries. Of course, we did not find anything, and the adults shooed us away.

In our fascination with treasures and artifacts, my childhood friend and I later buried small toys in the garden of their house with a note that said the year and exact date and our names. We were hoping that hundred years from now someone would dig them up and we would make history.

The following is a poem I wrote a while ago that is inspired by the Epic of Gilgamesh from ancient Mesopotamia:

Gilgamesh Should Have Known Better

A sounded note on a hunting horn when a deer is killed, a mortal
mort, birthing stupor from obliviousness, checkmate, the check is a
mate, the king is on a journey to cross the waters of death, swims
through the flood, takes the plant of youth, leaves it on the shore,
the serpent waits in silhouette, snakes around and slithers, sheds its
skin, sounds the horn, hunts the king, checkmate, shāh māt, the
king's mort is immortal.

The following poem is the result of processing the previous poem:

Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh dead on a sleigh, a breach of cross

The serpent cast death on a king

Swimming in waiting waters

Around a sleepy oblivion

A voice, a silhouette of a companion

Hunting young hunts

The dead is heavy, check the flood

Leaving the journey of death

Writing constraint: processing my own poem through Google Translate and Cut-Up Machine.

Before

Gilgamesh should be better known
A voice note on the hunting horn when a heavy death,
dead death, a sleepy sleep of oblivion, or a check, or a
check is a companion, and the king is on a journey to
cross the waters of death, swimming in the flood, a young
plant, leaving him on the beach, the serpent waiting in
silhouette , Snakes around, sleigh, cast her skin, looks
horn, hunts the king, kishik, shah shah, mort king khalid.

After

horn flood is kishik should horn a in heavy Gilgamesh
known dead on sleigh him the or beach khalid looks the
cross better Snakes the the shah king or journey the
serpent in her death a check cast death skin a king waters
swimming note waiting around sleepy be of leaving
oblivion on the to shah of and a is A voice silhouette when
plant king companion a sleep death on hunting a the mort
check young hunts a

Figure 4.3 Cut-Up Example 7

In this poem, I used Google Translate to translate the original poem into Arabic, then took this newly produced text and ran it through Google Translate once more to turn it back into English. The result, of course, was not the same as the original text that I have written. Then I put it through the Cut-Up Machine to further excavate new meanings. The result was a fragmented version of the original, but one that captured fresh images.

I wanted to explore the writing of Gibran Khalil Gibran. I took a paragraph from a piece written by Gibran called “Yesterday and Today” from his book *A Tear and a Smile*. I translated it into English through Google Translate and then used the Cut-Up Machine.

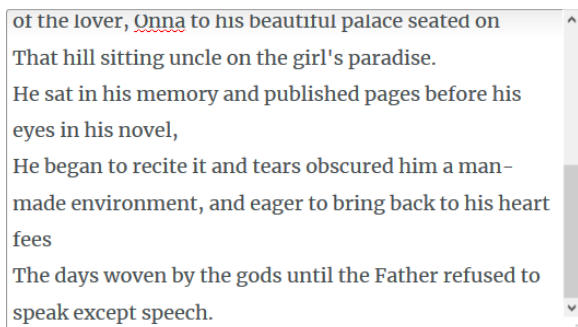
The following is the poem that resulted from the process:

Recital

The days are hills with a lover sitting lake. It obscures the flowing
walk over slapped memory, back where the gods speak and hover,
eager with steps in paradise. The one place carved in speech, made
with anxiety and seated death, a heart woven with tears and ideas in
gardens looking over eagles, bodies and mouths, eyes like statues
following before looking. Imagination brought by pages refusing to
be recited.

Writing constraint: processing Gibran's through Google Translate and the Cut-Up Machine.

Before



of the lover, Onna to his beautiful palace seated on
That hill sitting uncle on the girl's paradise.
He sat in his memory and published pages before his
eyes in his novel,
He began to recite it and tears obscured him a man-
made environment, and eager to bring back to his heart
fees
The days woven by the gods until the Father refused to
speak except speech.

After

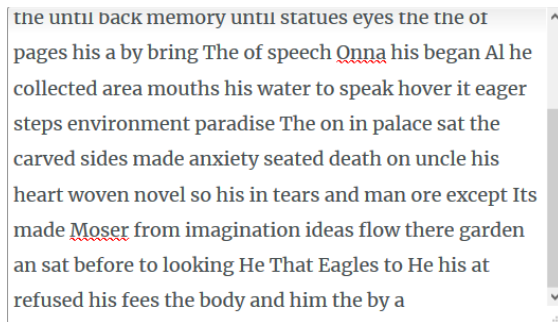


Figure 4.4 Cut-Up Example 8

It is amazing how the shortcomings of Google Translate sometimes work for the better by creating new syntax. In this case, Gibran's writing was mistranslated for reasons of syntactic ambiguity. For example, the word *wagnah* in Arabic means "cheek." The word *wa* on its own means "and." Gibran was writing about a girl's cheek. Google Translate however, separated the *wa* and translated it as "and" and took the remaining word *gnah*, to mean "paradise" in Arabic, even though "paradise" is more like *gennah*. The result was surprising even before it was put through the Cut-Up Machine. A similar thing happened with the word *khal*, which in Arabic means either "maternal uncle" or "mole," although the most popular use of it is "maternal uncle." This is why in Google Translate it was translated into "uncle." In Gibran's text, however, it refers to a mole on a girl's face.

The whole strange sentence "his beautiful palace seated on that hill sitting uncle on the girl's paradise" should have been translated into "his beautiful palace which sat on that hill just like a mole sits on a girl's cheek." However, since the purpose of this thesis is to disrupt syntax and excavate new and surprising language, this exercise worked to my advantage and produced some unintentional interesting new vocabulary.

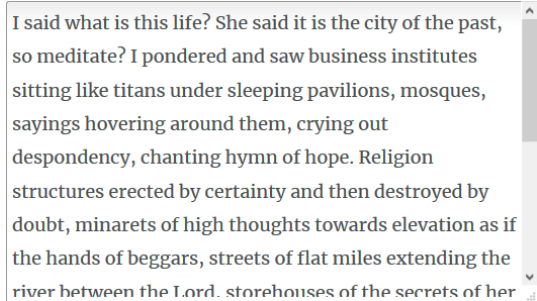
The following is another poem that was written through the same process, also from his book *A Tear and a Smile*. This one is called *City of the Past*:

Meditation

The crying, the chanting,
Then the minarets of extended certainty
Elevation by the hovering Lord,
Reason mosques unified, erected, sitting destroyed
Secrets of self-darkened streets of weakness
Knowledge has arisen by dreams
High in the ruins of despondency, doubt pondered under hope
The fears of denial, nights of ignorance, thieves of the past
Towers of vigilance in the city, like miles of hymn
A brave soul meditates thoughts of secrets, frightened.

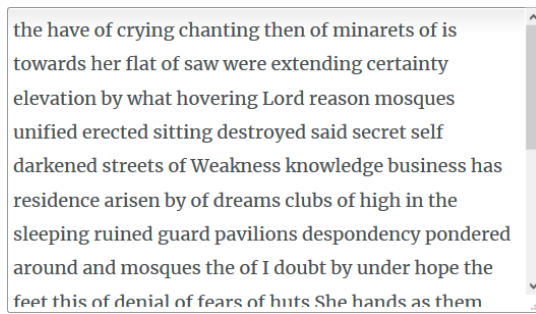
Writing constraint: processing Gibran writing through Google Translate and the Cut-Up Machine.

Before

A screenshot of a text box with a vertical scrollbar on the right. The text inside is a poem titled 'Before'.

I said what is this life? She said it is the city of the past,
so meditate? I pondered and saw business institutes
sitting like titans under sleeping pavilions, mosques,
sayings hovering around them, crying out
despondency, chanting hymn of hope. Religion
structures erected by certainty and then destroyed by
doubt, minarets of high thoughts towards elevation as if
the hands of beggars, streets of flat miles extending the
river between the Lord. storehouses of the secrets of her

After



the have of crying chanting then of minarets of is
towards her flat of saw were extending certainty
elevation by what hovering Lord reason mosques
unified erected sitting destroyed said secret self
darkened streets of Weakness knowledge business has
residence arisen by of dreams clubs of high in the
sleeping ruined guard pavilions despondency pondered
around and mosques the of I doubt by under hope the
feet this of denial of fears of huts She hands as them

Figure 4.5 Cut-Up Example 9

The poem that resulted from this process surprised me because, even though the syntax seems broken and unrelated, a certain theme emerged from the new collective text, which is religion. That is why I called it “Meditation.” It somehow has the feel of reflecting on the notion of religion and spirituality.

4.3 Ekphrastic poetry as a memory invoking tool

Art has been part of my surroundings where I grew up in Baghdad. My father used to take our family to art galleries, at least once a month, to see art exhibits. Most of my family members either appreciated art or practiced it. My cousin is an artist who works with ceramic; one of my father’s uncles was a photographer. The other one was a renowned painter and the first Iraqi scholar to study art in England in 1930.

In remembering the tastes and aromas of Iraq, I tried to find a painting as a constraint for my poetry that captures one of the Iraqi cultural elements. Mixing word and image is an effective way to conjure the past. Saffi (2016) says that “[o]ne can conceive the notion of fusing word to image to become poetic devices that can interconnect to represent the world, especially in the way it is perceived and experienced by the painter and the poet.” (p. 610). According to her, “[t]he word comes from the ancient Greek. The etymology of ekphrasis separates the word into

two parts: “ek” meaning “out of” and “phrasis” meaning “to speak.” (p. 611). I think that speaking through art is a great way to invoke memories.



Figure 4.6 Painting by Shukri, *title not known*, no date

This “untitled” painting is by the Iraqi painter Akram Shukri (who happens to be my father’s uncle); It depicts two Iraqi women in the countryside. The painting is very traditional in that the women are wearing the traditional robes usually worn by women in the countryside, sipping tea in a traditional way, where the teapot is heated on coal, which gives it a distinctive aroma, and they drink it in *istikans* – or as some suggest– east tea cans, which are the traditional tea glasses in Iraq.

Using the painting as a prompt, I wrote this poem:

Iraqi Tea

the smell of cardamom
in your tea
the gentle patting
of the palm tree
and the way you sit in ease

in the delicate *istikans*
you stir your stories
and sip the magic
of burning coal
mixed with the breeze

you become one
with your surroundings
you blend and disappear
in the background
and your secrets come alive.

By looking at the painting, I tried to, mentally, transport myself to the countryside and imagine myself talking to these two women enjoying their simple siesta from the day's chores. The past has a way of creeping to my senses when I look at such Iraqi depictions.

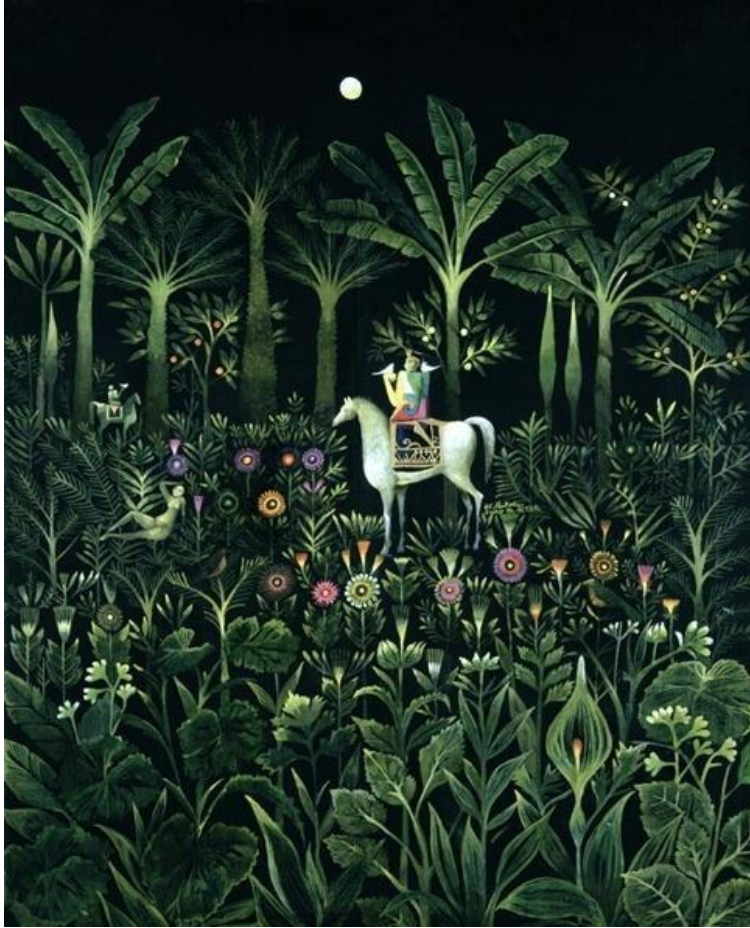


Figure 4.7 Painting by Al Attar. *A thousand and one nights*

This painting, “A thousand and one nights,” is by the Iraqi painter Suad Al Attar who is one of Iraq's leading female artists. It has a poetic and dreamlike feelings that depicts symbols from the tradition of Middle Eastern art.

The following poem was written using the painting as a prompt:

Arabian Lights

Then there is the silhouette of darkness that illuminates with hues of green,
 sheen of jade glows at the tips of stems, down to the seed, the crown of a
 dahlia, ivory glint of a petiole, a leaf blade catches the light from a far away
 moon hanging in a dim frame, a hint of purple gives off warmth on a night,
 quiet like the kiss of breeze, a counter shade of a robin, with orange chest

barely discernible, shrubs, tiptoeing with leaves held high in prayer, in reverence to the emerging knight on a white Arabian purebred, palm trees with limbs that touch the sky, dateless in this dark paradise, illuminated by beauty.

In this poem, I tried to keep the elusive and enigmatic nature of the tales of Shahryar and Shahrazad's Arabian nights, adding some ambiguity while describing the scene. For me, this painting evokes the past in its glory and makes it eternal. The more I look at it, the more images of the past jump at me and take me back to the place of my origin.

Dabbling with Ekphrastic poetry gave me a new dimension in recreating the past, depending not only on my own abstract memories, but using visual stimulation to stir my emotions. I think exploring the past has given me a new perspective about the present, as I compare the "many lives" I have lived.

Chapter 5: Theme Three: War

The night is a mare,
it stomps on my chest.
with each gallop,
I wrap my soul
around its saddle.
I pack my dreams,
and pull myself
from this nightmare.

From my poem titled “Dweller of the Past”

5.1 Living through war

When I think of the main reason why my family left Iraq, I find that it was not just the deteriorating living conditions that followed the wars that Iraq was involved in; it was also the uneasy feeling that there would always be wars. It was the constant, subtle, but lingering sense of apprehension. It is as if the whole country forgot how to live in a state of peace.

However, leaving the country was not an easy decision to make. We knew that we would be subjecting ourselves to a life of struggle. We will be strangers in a strange land. Exile is not something we were looking forward to, but it was our only way to save ourselves from a life marked by constant fear. I find that my feelings about exile are perfectly expressed in Said’s (2000) account of his experience of exile:

It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (p. 137).

War is a traumatizing event, whether one witnesses real violence or lives through times of fear and uncertainty. It is an experience that uproots people from their normal lives, jolts them out of their routine existence, and throws them into the chaos of dangerous living and the interplay of life and death. As Dauphinee (2013) aptly puts it:

For the traumatized, past experiences puncture the thin veil of the ‘present’ and move on into a future that is not-yet-realized, yet that is paradoxically equally determinative because the traumatic experience enframes – indeed, forms – the limits of the possible. (p. 354).

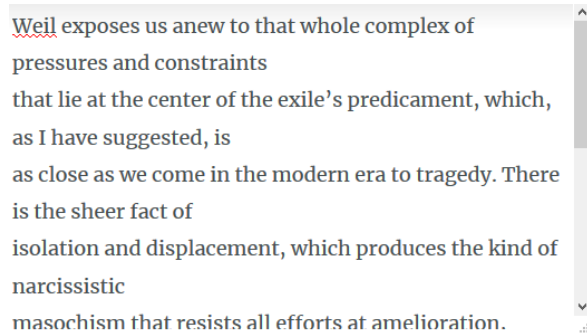
The following poem emerged from processing Edward Said’s writing about exile:

Exposure

the whole commitments
the displacement and pressures
constraints of modern tragedy
of this I resist everything
the fact is distances
querulous extremes
we fall with sheer complex
perhaps temporary isolation
predicament
an exposed prey
we exile in lovelessness

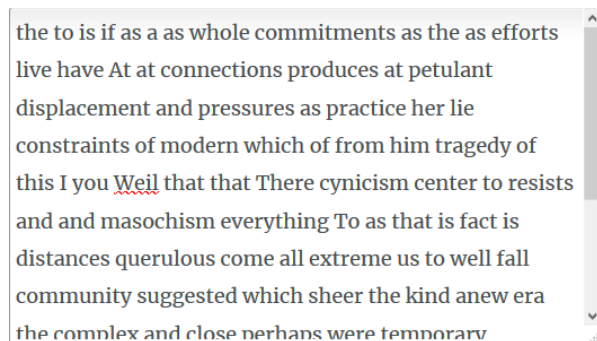
Writing constraint: processing Edward Said's writing about exile through the Cut-Up Machine.

Before



Weil exposes us anew to that whole complex of pressures and constraints that lie at the center of the exile's predicament, which, as I have suggested, is as close as we come in the modern era to tragedy. There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration.

After



the to is if as a as whole commitments as the as efforts
live have At at connections produces at petulant
displacement and pressures as practice her lie
constraints of modern which of from him tragedy of
this I you Weil that that There cynicism center to resists
and and masochism everything To as that is fact is
distances querulous come all extreme us to well fall
community suggested which sheer the kind anew era
the complex and close nerhans were temporary

Figure 5.1 Cut-Up Example 10

This poem represents the sense of loss a person feels in exile. I tried to capture the feeling by using shorter sentences and double space between the lines to reflect the idea of interrupted existence and the idea of desperation. I think the produced vocabulary helped convey the desired effect and meaning. The line that resonated the most with me is the last one “we exile in lovelessness.” It somehow captures the lost love in an exiled person's life.

I can say that I was lucky I was not directly affected by war. I was not injured and did not witness someone being injured or dying, mostly because my family and I managed to leave the

country before the last war: the US invasion. However, I still consider myself, and the rest of the people of Iraq, victims of war. To me, war has disrupted my life many times. It has ruptured the familiar and shaped my idea of a future.

I have experienced war as memory fading into an ever-expanding present. Even after I left Iraq, experiencing war from afar was painful. Even now, when there is no active war in Iraq, there is still this latent feeling of a sleeping volcano of violence that could erupt – and does erupt – any moment. I do not know if there is ever going to be inner peace for someone who has lived through war.

I think of my memories about the war as my personal reflections on events that happened to all the people who lived through them. As hard and disturbing as it is to remember the times of war, each individual person's reaction to or perception of these events is a small piece that makes up the fabric of the collective memory of these momentous events.

On the individual level, Radosav's (2018) characterization of individual memory resonates with me:

From a phenomenological perspective on memory, together with an analysis of the literary discourse of memory and orality, individual memory can be described as “ground level” memory – inner memory, recounted and communicated from the self, starting from the personal experiences from the past. (p. 5).

The following poem is the result of processing a combination of my text and Edward Said's writing:

Rivers of Regret

Baghdad

The un-promised land
a bombed mosque
Always beneath
the rubble, averred domes.
Words, a prayer of restitution
to the idol.
Blames are crumbled
like streams in the Tigris
Self-annihilation.
We watch the shadows,
pieces of regret.

Writing constraint: processing a combination of a paragraph that I had written about Iraq and a paragraph from Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place* through the GTR Language Workbench and the Cut-Up Machine.

The poem that emerged did not resonate with me because I felt that the product of the process constraint did not result in surprising syntax. However, it did reflect the hopelessness and despair of the state of war.

As Radosav (2018) elaborates, the individual memory makes a person part of the social and historical setting to transmit or relive an event and return to the past to grasp the meaning of life and the sense of self. I feel that when I re-experience the past (the war), I try to reconstruct it in relation with the future (peace of mind) that I yearn for.

On the collective level, Drozdowski et al (2019) explain it well:

Remembrance of war and conflict exposes the intricate interweaving of cultural memory and identity. Nations commemorate war to link narratives of the past with the present. This linking creates shared national narratives that temporally reinforce identities across the geography of the nation and among diverse citizenry. (p.1).

5.2 Memories of war

Drozdowski et al (2019) suggest that war memories of grief and suffering appear both in the structures of a nation and in its psyche, and that memory is linked to the individual constructions of identity, as well as to constructions of shared national identity.

Memories of war certainly created shared narratives among Iraqis. For a long time, even after people left Iraq, war was (and sometimes still is) the common subject of conversation among them, especially when they first meet and acknowledge their country of origin.

I do not remember any time in my life in Iraq that was not marred by fear. I was barely seven when the Iraq-Iran war started. It ended when I was fifteen. Less than one year later another war broke out, and then another. “The Martyr” was almost a constant subject of composition in class in my elementary school during the Iraq-Iran war. I wrote a very good piece about it and kept it with the other papers that I sadly left behind when I had to leave Iraq. In my Art class, I always drew a scene from the battlefield, with people dying on the ground and airplanes chasing each other in the sky, some catching fire.

At four in the afternoon it is time for our favorite cartoon. My brother and I would sit, with our excited innocence, waiting for it to start. But what we see is not cartoon. We are slapped in the face with the aggressive sight of severed hands and legs, mutilated bodies, charred corpses. “Images from the Battlefield” was what they called these war episodes.

Whenever they were aired during the Iraq-Iran war it was exactly before the cartoon period to make sure that we, children, see them.

These were the diluted doses of torture and murder we were exposed to. The aim was for us to be brain-washed, or rather brain-smeared. These images were supposed to be part of our daily lives. We, the young generation, had to be prepared to fight for whatever war was looming ahead. There was no “parental discretion advised,” nothing to warn our parents. We were meant to see this violent reality.

At school when I was as young as eight or nine, we had to live the cruel reality of war day by day. Even with the Iraq-Iran war where there was not that much bombing directed at Baghdad, we lived the experience. My first brush with cruel reality in Iraq happened when I was about twelve. It was when one of my classmates died in an air raid during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980's. Before that I knew our country was at war, but it was only something that we heard on the news. This area was hit, that area was bombed, but the whole thing was a blur; until that fateful day, when our teacher tearfully announced to us the death of our classmate, Zeyad.

I did not really notice his presence (or absence) until then. He was a very quiet and polite child. After his death I was very sad that I did not talk to him that much, because I would have known how to remember him. But then I would think that it was probably better that I had not known him that well because it would have pained me more to think of him.

He was the only one in his family to be killed in that raid. His brother was my brother's classmate. They were three years older than us. I remember my brother telling me how this boy's brother was devastated by his death. For years after his death, I would always think of this boy whenever I was at a milestone in my life. I would say to myself “this is when Zeyad would have

finished high school. This is when he would have graduated from university”, and I kept thinking to myself that his mother would surely be thinking the same thing.

The following poem is the result of processing my own writing:

Measured Prayers

Separate the stars and write your times, unbroken like a sign you make,
there, nested in the high, lonely brightness. It is me inside, possessed, I
breathe days like a steamship smattering. Despite what we wish, the
water will form in every shape. I hug the stamped trees, rock in morality.
Do not survive where roots await grieving behind the lonesome freedom.
Your ground is the earth that ends with aspirations, when sorrow is
looming, fortified, a gospel is sung to remember the pretension of a bare
land. Listen to the measured prayers.

Writing constraint: processing my writing through the GTR Language Workbench.

GTR configuration:

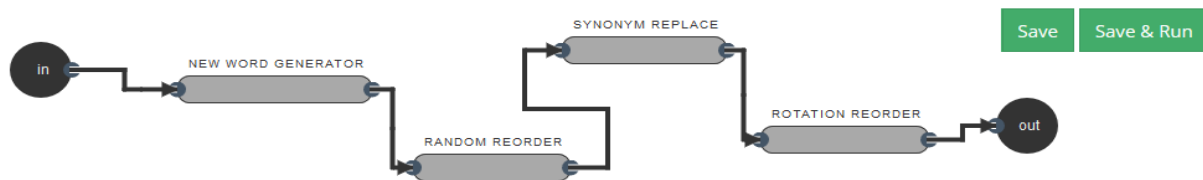


Figure 5.2 GTR Language Workbench Iteration Example 2

The prose poem that I wrote from the combined processes somehow carries my intended meaning. It represents the state of loss and desperation that I was aiming for.

5.3 The impact of war

During the Iraq-Iran war, the list of war victims kept growing. There was not a household that did not lose a person in war: a father, a brother, an uncle, a friend, a neighbor, a classmate. It was a terrible time. Men left for war. Most did not come back and for those who were lucky enough to come back ten or fifteen years later, life was never the same.

It was not just one war that Iraq was involved in. There was the First Gulf War with Iran, the Second Gulf War with Kuwait and then the American invasion, where Iraq was basically dismantled under the pretext of bringing democracy. With that came the sectarian conflict and the mess that Iraq is still suffering from, including the fall of Mosul under the Islamic State (IS) and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

The impact of war is not restricted to the devastating reality of death or life-changing injuries to soldiers and civilians. It is also the disruption of people's normal life and the destruction of culture. Whatever people enjoy in the time of peace is lost in the time of war. It is as if the whole country stands still, and people are deprived from their basic rights to go about their daily lives.

Hedges (2002) maintains that "States at war silence their own authentic and human culture." (p. 63). He goes on to say that "By destroying authentic culture – that which allows us to question and examine ourselves and our society – the state erodes the moral fabric." (p. 63). He mentions how the state directs the nation's resources to serve the cause of war. Even art is manipulated to warp reality and brainwash people into believing that war is justified.

Hedges (2002) explains that states adopt a kind of rhetoric that dehumanizes the enemy while celebrating the states. They glorify wars, which are – in his view – seen through the lens of

a mythical reality. According to him, wars then become justified, and even defeats are seen as the right path leading to the road to definitive victory.

When I was living the wars, I was not fully aware of this. I was, like most people in Iraq, living in what resembled a trance created by the powerful propaganda machine of the regime. It all became clear once we were removed from the “battlefield” and looked back at our lives.

The following poem is the product of processing my own writing:

Inhale the Shielded Song

The shielded song we hear. A sunlight above the landscape, for someone else. I rose to you and you saluted, with layers, holding leaves. A brave fortress with ghostly weeping. A spot where chanting hung in the edifice. You desire the time of wailing and abandoned, frozen grounds. A whiteness hidden in the sound, where you stood, body apart. Motion above and inside. Charred, the shape is lost down, where sustenance is the time of life. Inhale the frail ocean, my sentiments are casual, in the geography. Stuck, gruesome, a picture show, a shielded song we hear.

Writing constraint: processing my writing through the GTR Language Workbench.

GTR configuration:

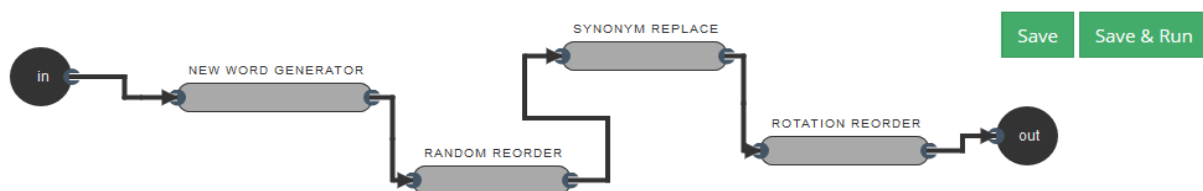


Figure 5.3 GTR Language Workbench Iteration Example 3

The disrupted syntax produced through the GTR Language Workbench from which I produced this poem worked well, in my opinion. I found the rhythm going smoothly and the

images just appeared. The emerging poem represents a disrupted feeling of disturbance, which is meant to be. It has the feel of a nightmare, with monsters attacking consciousness.

The following poem is the result of combining a paragraph from a piece written by Gibran Khalil Gibran and some of my writing:

Grieving Palm Trees

Dreams nested in a house
hidden in broken clay.
Stamp free when you walk,
behind the mourning moon.

Loneliness sail in a boat
beyond the sea of despair.
The palm trees grieve
the hugged blossoms.

Babylon is free in a cage,
when spring comes in a sea of fleets.
Coffins loom in distant lands,
doomed, in the soul of righteousness.

Time Will Die
Time will die,
tender with flowers,
golden but dead.

a heart possessed with despair.

Pain flies like birds,

breathing nails in strongholds.

Does land survive,

where writing is a poet under siege?

I remember we survived

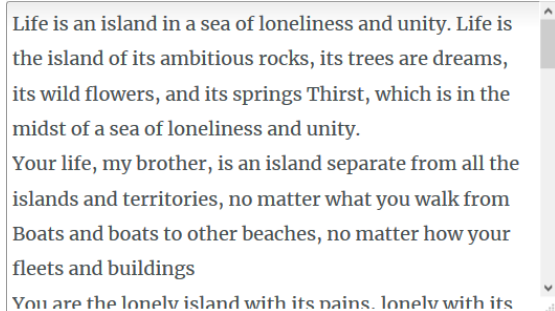
But death possessed us,

hanging like a truth we refused

to believe.

Writing constraint: combining a paragraph from a piece written by Gibran Khalil Gibran and some of my writing and processing them through the Cut-Up Machine, creating two poems.

Before

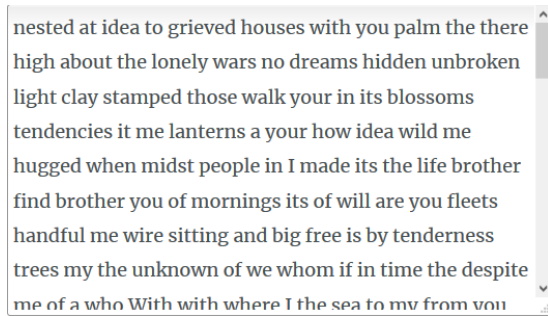


Life is an island in a sea of loneliness and unity. Life is the island of its ambitious rocks, its trees are dreams, its wild flowers, and its springs Thirst, which is in the midst of a sea of loneliness and unity.

Your life, my brother, is an island separate from all the islands and territories, no matter what you walk from Boats and boats to other beaches, no matter how your fleets and buildings

You are the lonely island with its pains. lonely with its

After



nested at idea to grieved houses with you palm the there
high about the lonely wars no dreams hidden unbroken
light clay stamped those walk your in its blossoms
tendencies it me lanterns a your how idea wild me
hugged when midst people in I made its the life brother
find brother you of mornings its of will are you fleets
handful me wire sitting and big free is by tenderness
trees my the unknown of we whom if in time the despite
me of a who With with where I the sea to mv from you

Figure 5.4 Cut-Up Example 11

I think this poem resonated with me, maybe because the syntax that emerged through the processed combination worked well with my own writing.

The poem has two different moods. The first part holds feelings of pessimism and optimism at the same time. There is “loneliness that sails in a boat,” but there is also “hugged blossoms.” “Coffins loom in distant lands,” but “Babylon is free,” even if it was in a cage. The second part, however, is gloomy. It assumes that “time will die” and “pain flies like birds” roaming the air and inflicting its despair. In my view, the strongest lines from this poem is the last three lines, “But death possessed us, hanging like a truth we refused to believe.”

5.4 Moving beyond the war

To me, being able to move on with my life did not mean that I was not frequently reminded of growing up in war. Many things could trigger these memories. Just by remembering my childhood, I am transported to the atmosphere of war and fear. However, none of these memories was comparable to what the nation witnessed upon the US invasion in 2003.

On March 28, I remember being wheeled into the operation room to give birth to my son, with the news and TV images of the air raids that had just started bombing Baghdad still fresh in

my mind. However, it was during the insurgency and civil war that ensued soon after, that people witnessed the real horrors, seeing their relatives or loved ones murdered in front of their eyes or blown up in car bombs and other targeted explosions.

I was recently reminded again of all the horrible experiences of war as I took up the project of translating a book written by an Iraqi scholar who lives in the U.S. and who had gone to Iraq after the US invasion. Part of her field work involved reporting on what people had to go through during these traumatizing times that followed the fall of the Saddam regime.

I was also reminded of wartime when I recently connected with my classmates from elementary school through a group we made on WhatsApp. We shared our childhood memories and where we ended up (most of us scattered around the world – four of us in Canada), and we remembered Ziyad, my classmate who died during the war. It was a mixture of memories of the innocent times we shared and the horrible times that we had to go through, which somehow aged us prematurely.

Hearing from those who still lived in Iraq and how they struggle in their daily lives but somehow manage to go on despite all the challenges of the dysfunctional government and lack of basic services had made me think of how resilient Iraqis were and still are. Despite all the hard times they have lived through, they are still able to smile and laugh things off and go on with their lives.

It is sad to think that for generations, people of Iraq did not know peaceful times. They had to navigate real wars, civil wars, checkpoints, lack of electricity, shortage of food and medicine, all while being a rich oil country that should have made it possible for all citizens to live comfortably, if not in prosperity.

Chapter 6: My Linguistic and Identity Shift

Even the thoughts a stranger waddling,
in a foreign land, losing directions

Even the words a different breed,
the letters, the sounds, a distant tune

Even the song, a different rhythm
than the heart danced to, years after years

From my poem titled “Even the Night is a Different Shade”

6.1 Learning English and my changing identity

When I immigrated to Canada, I went through two types of linguistic and identity shifts. The first shift, or what I call “linguistic displacement,” happened when I went from reaching a high level of proficiency in English and being considered an “expert” in my homeland, to feeling inferior compared to native speakers in Canada, as my language skills did not measure up to theirs. The second shift, or what I call “re-placement,” happened when I became an ESL teacher in Canada, which gave me the opposite feeling; the feeling of achievement and prestige and being in control, in which I reclaimed the powerful feeling of being an expert once more.

When I first came to Canada, I was no longer the expert. It was obvious from my accent that I am not a native speaker of English, no matter how hard I tried to make my pronunciation similar to native speakers. There was always certain vocabulary that I still struggled with, and I was not familiar with a lot of the cultural references in Canada. Therefore, I felt disadvantaged. I felt that, while English was a big part of my identity as an educated person in Iraq, which gave me pride in what I was able to achieve, my English in Canada made me feel like a second-rate citizen, until I became an ESL teacher.

I started learning English in Grade five in the public-school system in Baghdad, Iraq. Before my time, English used to be introduced from Grade one. Therefore, my brother, who is three years my senior, started learning English from Grade one. The first time I was introduced to English was through my brother's old English notebooks. I would go through them with fascination. I was transfixed by these weird and incomprehensible symbols. I, then, started to take a pen and trace the words, which were written in pencil. I would go over each letter, carefully mimicking the way they looped and curved. I was so fascinated with these letters, which were very much different from the Arabic script. For one thing, the writing went from left to right, instead of from right to left. But also, I was fascinated by the idea that I could learn a new language.

In a way, my experience in learning English is akin to travelling to (and settling in) a new and exciting place. First, there is the anticipation of experiencing a new place, then there is the process of getting acquainted with this place and being introduced to its culture and people, and then getting familiar with all the aspects of a new place and finally feeling at home.

I think that what made my learning experience successful was the combination of being exposed to the grammatical structure of English from a relatively early age, my passion to learn a new language – especially my fascination with English – and my desire to know more about the culture and everything that was related to the language. I was motivated by movies and music and the idea of being able to sit through a whole movie without looking at the subtitles. All these factors impacted my determination to learn the language.

I realized early on the power of being able to speak English, in terms of social status. People who knew how to speak the language properly were always thought of as refined and enjoyed a high status. According to Lightbrown and Spada (2010), communication needs and

attitude towards second language play an important role in language learning. It was mainly personal motivation that got me to learn English.

However, it was not only motivation. I believe that I was very much invested in learning English. I came to the language not only psychologically prepared, but in fact eager to learn and willing to use it for my future advantage. Peirce (1995) explains that the notion of investment tackles the relationship of the language learner with the changing social world and assumes that the language learner has a complex social identity. According to her, “The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world.” (p.18). Peirce (1995) believes that an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social identity, which is continuously shifting across time and space.

6.2 New land, new identity

The road to regaining my linguistic power was not always clear of bumps. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) struggle with the notion of competency. There are a lot of identity shifts within this area, as these teachers, including me, struggle with how they are perceived as not being competent because they are not native speakers of the language they teach. I might have been oblivious to this notion back in my homeland, but I certainly have thought about it and faced it after I became an ESL teacher here in Canada.

Therefore, on the one hand, my status as an English speaker was challenged and questioned by being compared to native speakers; and on the other hand, this very skill of speaking English gave me the power to teach this language to non-native speakers. My identity changes were very confusing.

According to Ellis, L. (2018), teachers' practices are part of their past experiences of learning, using and teaching the language throughout life, in their different ages, formally or informally and in any context. These experiences inform and shape their identities.

When I completed my MFA in writing and then worked as an ESL teacher, I tried to focus on teaching writing in general and specifically teaching creative writing. I realized soon enough that NNESTs struggled in their quest to negotiate their different and multifaceted identities while teaching students, who were themselves grappling with their own shifting identities as learners. I was aware that my identity as a learner of English is very different than my identity as a creative writing teacher.

Matsuda (2016) talks about how being an NNEST writing teacher is a balancing act between being a language teacher and writing teacher. I agree with his description of teacher identity as “multifaceted and dynamic” (p. 242). I think it is an accurate way to describe identity, especially for non-native language teachers, who assume different identities as they navigate their way through teaching a second language and negotiate their position as experts of this language. On the one hand, they are learners of the second language, and on the other, they must present themselves as specialists in teaching it.

Cheung (2016) defines teacher identity in a similar way to Matsuda. She says that “Besides multifaceted, my writing teacher identity is multidimensional; it includes situated identity, professional identity, and personal identity” (p. 249). She mentions the “local context” in terms of her reference to her situated identity and points out that her situated identity is being formed by her local context and is constantly affected by local conditions. Her professional identity is connected to her being a good writing teacher, while her personal identity is about her life away from the classroom.

In my personal experience, assuming the role of teacher brings about my English proficient identity, especially after getting my MFA and becoming more confident about my own writing. I might still feel less proficient than native speakers; however, teaching writing is still a skill that not all native speakers of a language necessarily master by default.

I agree with Yazan, B., & Lindahl, K. (2020) in their view that “teaching practice is inevitably a continual identity work,” and that “Teachers negotiate and enact identities as they make instructional decisions, execute these decisions, interact with students and colleagues, and reflect on teaching practice.” (p. 15).

In my experience as an ESL teacher, I found that being an NNEST teacher has helped me connect with ESL learners when I ask them to write about their personal experiences as something they are familiar with and can be intimate with. In this regard, coming from a teacher who is a non-native English speaker makes it more acceptable to them and makes them more willing to take part in using a language other than their own native language to express and share their feelings (especially in poetry).

Chapter 7: Reconnecting with My Roots

I claim that I can wipe your tears and squeeze them back into the *Tigris*, because they belong to you, the same cells, the same fibers, the same salt that make up your currents. Now I only see you in pictures, still, lifeless like a breath caught midway after exhalation.

From my poem titled “Like a Mid-Breath Sigh”

7.1 My mother, my rock

My attempt at exploring the themes of archaeology, nostalgia, and memory, and even war brought me back to my mother. I realized that she is the essence of these notions, and I thought of what it means to have a connection with my past through her. I also realized that in living away from my mother, I have been living in a state of emotional distance or emotional displacement, as well as the physical distance. Maybe this is the real source of my uprootedness.

I talk to my mother, who lives in Dubai, almost every day. While writing my thesis, I realized that we have talked about all these themes in our long-distance conversations. We have reminisced on the country we once knew, the lives we left behind. From time to time, we would send each other photos of some Iraqi artifacts, as we both follow the Iraqi Museum Facebook page and send each other photos of some old neighborhoods. We also inevitably remember the wars and exchange news about the current state of the country. It is as if, somehow, through our conversations, we are keeping the memory of the country alive.

I have always thought of my mother as my rock. The person I turn to whenever I feel down or in distress. Since my childhood, I have always looked up to her. She was, and still is, a strong woman. She managed the maintenance of archaeological projects in Baghdad; sometimes she drove a pickup truck to work when it was needed, handled hundreds of workers and was loved and respected by all during that time of her career.

I share her love of the old ruins and artifacts of Iraq. A big part of my dissatisfaction with being in Canada is because I had to live away from my mother. It is something that has created a big wound in my heart. Sometimes, I would wake up and ask myself why I wasted all these years away from her.

Two years ago, I had the chance to share her love of Italy – thankfully, we managed to do that before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In June, 2019, just one day after the end of the last class in my first-year master's degree at UBC, (incidentally, the poetic inquiry class which changed the path of my thesis and steered me into the current direction), I flew to Italy to meet her. She had been going to Italy every year since she had moved to Dubai, about twenty years ago. However, her love story with Italy started when we were still living in Iraq, in the eighties, when she took a mobile exhibition of Iraq's artifacts on a tour to various cities in Italy. She spent about three months there and fell in love with the outdoor museum that makes up Rome, the beautiful architecture of Florence, and the magic of Venice. It was not surprising that when I met her in Italy, these were the places we went to. They were all magical to me.

It sounds strange to say that my trip to Italy brought me closer to my mother; yet it did. Our love for the past, manifested there; in our appreciation of a simple ruin at the corner of the street, in the underground outdated bathroom of a café, which one must descend to by a spiral staircase and then press on a foot pedal to get the water running in the faucets. We shared the adventure of exploring the Vatican and admiring the spectacular paintings. We walked the narrow cobblestone streets of Rome, where we took turns pulling each other away whenever a car tried to squeeze itself in the same narrow alley in which we walked. I realized that I would never have enjoyed this trip alone. It is through the ever-lasting wonder and joy in my mothers' eyes, even after all these multiple visits to Italy, that my experience was complete.

7.2 Revelations from my journey

In Rome, I was amazed by everything any tourist would be amazed by, but I was especially enchanted by the doors. They had a certain mystery about them. Each door was telling me a story of how the piece of wood was chosen, designed, engraved, painted, and installed. No two were the same. Each one had its own character and personality. I became obsessed with them. We took a tour with a guide on a cycle rikshaw and passed by what must have been close to fifty doors. I took pictures of almost all of them, as much as the rikshaw ride allowed me to. I realized that I have always been interested in doors and have always paid attention to them. Maybe the doors of Rome reminded me of our family house door in Baghdad.

Our house door in Baghdad was made of solid brown wood in the shape and color of a milk chocolate bar. The door at the old Al Mustanseriya school, where my mother was the head of maintenance, was huge, like the door of a fortress. I think that my fascination with doors comes from my conviction that they are the one thing in a structure that holds the entryway into what lies on the other side. It has the power of revealing (or withholding) the secrets of the structure it guards.

Windows, too, can reveal what is inside, but this is their limitation; they do not hold the mystery. They give it away; while doors give the impression that they are the guardians of what is inside. They keep us curious about what lies on the other side of them. They are the secret keepers. However, what struck me the most while writing about these doors is that in a way, they tie into the three themes of my thesis. They can be seen as the transition from house to home, from past to present, from war to peace, from one language to the other and vice versa.

I chose three photos from the large collection of photos I took of various doors in Rome and decided to write three haikus: one for each door. First, I wrote an ekphrastic poem, and then turned it into three different haikus to further disrupt the syntax. My goal was to generate new ideas and imagery.

The following is the original poem:

You are the Entryway

You are old but still enduring

Color shimmering in the sun

You are history

In your hinges,

people's fate hinges

You are the entryway

The letting in of demons and angels

Of cries and giggles

I knock, you let me in

Inside, you stand watchful

With your arms wide open

Your handles handle centuries

Of friends and foes



Figure 7.1: Photo of a door in Rome – 1

No one hinges
Along this entryway but I,
This shimmering keeper.



Figure 7.2: Photo of a door in Rome – 2

Behind these handles
History is an old guard
With watchful centuries.



Figure 7.3: Photo of a door in Rome – 3

Over the enduring sun
I knock, your arms are open
With secret giggles.

Writing constraint: turning my own ekphrastic poem into haikus.

The three haikus are definitely much more effective to capture the “spirit” of these doors, as I felt they did, than the ekphrastic poem because I actually wrote the first poem just to provide the raw material for the other three poems. I think the haikus worked better because they packed a lot of emotion within them and also because the small “shape” they are written in somehow resembles a sign on a door.

In another experiment, I tried to turn one of the above paragraphs of the thesis into a poem, using another tool called Text Mixer, which is similar to the Cut-Up Machine, but a bit different in the way it handles the text.

The following is the resulting poem:

They do not hold,

these doors

they give it away

while

doors give

what in a way,

their limitation

from

house

to home

from

house

to presson, their limitation

that they

do

not hold

their limitation

that is inside

They are the

impression

the mystery

They do

not hold most of what lies

that

in a way

the guardians

They are their limitation

they

are

the transition

Limitation is

inside the mystery

They

do not hold

them

They

are their

limitation

In a way,

these doors give

it

away.

Writing constraint: processing my own text from the thesis into the Text Mixer.

As can be seen, the resulting poem is fragmented and made up of repetitive words. I think it reflects the theme of uprootedness in the thesis with a concreteness typical of poetry.



Figure 7.4: Photo of me and my mother in Rome

The following poem is an ekphrastic poem, based on the photo:

In Rome

We stood there, in front of history, beside history, inside of history

A ground that was stepped on by civilizations before.

We stood there, in the warmth of the sun,

Oblivious to Gucci and Bvlgari,

Aware only of each other and history.

Writing constraint: ekphrastic poem based on a photo of me and my mother.

I used this photo of me and my mother, which was taken of us the first day of my arrival in Rome, as a constraint. What resulted is a poem that captured the mood, using cues from the things that appear in the background.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Using poetic inquiry as a method has been a very effective and creative endeavor in exploring the self and has helped me delve into my memories and engage with my world and experiences. It has also been a challenging way to dig deep into my emotions and bring about new ways to look at reality.

Looking at my present, I realize that by becoming an ESL teacher in Canada, and somehow by working my way through the past, I can claim that I have regained my sense of place. It is true that I am still physically away from home and from my familiar surroundings; however, through examining my shifted identity and new reality, I realize that I can think of the past but still make the present moment relevant. In coming to terms with this notion, I can embrace nostalgia and welcome any chance of remembering the country I left behind.

Breaking down the structure of the language in this thesis also helped in making me open to the possibility of reinventing myself. Reflecting on the disruptive syntax led me to new places and created a new present for me. I started the journey with a sense of displacement, both physical and emotional. I can say that by exploring my feelings of displacement and connecting with my past (the good and bad memories alike), I feel less emotionally displaced. Rather, I feel that I can take whatever place I am attached to with me wherever I go.

The mix of narrative and poetry worked well in complementing each other to reflect the state of displacement and uprootedness I was trying to explore. Disrupting the language through the use of iterative devices produced some surprising texts and effective poems for each of the themes I explored. Sometimes, the chaotic, fragmented poems were just the right mood for what I felt during my journey of exploration.

I acknowledge that poetic inquiry is rather a personal endeavor; but writing about the past, especially when it involves displacement, brings about the shared experience of individuals. It creates a universal common ground whereby people can voice their emotions through telling their stories.

The lived experience and the narratives created out of that experience may be something that my fellow teachers can engage in as a possibility for further study. I believe that delving deep into the self and remembering the past in a creative way is helpful for both teachers and learners, whether they were displaced or not.

I think it would be especially useful for refugees, who have no doubt been through tough times and have been displaced and uprooted from their countries – but also new immigrants – to try to write about their past lives to reconstruct their present. The stories they tell about themselves will not only keep the memory of their beloved countries of origin alive but would help them make sense of their new realities. Poetry is a great tool for mining emotions that are usually pushed deep down people's psyche.

I used to tell my students about my background, and how I worked my way up in English to become a teacher. My hope was to encourage them to do their best; to inspire them to believe in themselves, to believe that they, too, can improve their English to this professional level. In reflecting on this, I realize that I was, unconsciously, creating a new reality and a new present for myself, whereby I can be re-placed instead of displaced.

The questions that I have explored in this thesis have helped me navigate the complex journey of reconstructing my life away from my homeland and making sense of the multiple displacements I experienced through keeping the past alive and exploring my emotions. Writing

poetry is one of the various routes to achieve healing and come to terms with uprootedness, or at least help in understanding it. This journey of poetic explorations also made me realize that I do not have to leave the past in order to live in the present.

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