

***Out of Baghdad!:* Negotiating Loss, Longing, and Belonging in Aida Nadeem's Work of the Iraqi Musical Avant-Garde**

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Abstract

In 2005, composer and vocalist Aida Nadeem produced the album *Out of Baghdad!*, a conglomeration of traditional Iraqi instrumentation, audio collection, and experimental vocalization. Nadeem's work is often described as rejecting the restrictions of Western ideas of modernity by utilizing traditional elements in a more contemporary framework. Produced in the aftermath of the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq, Nadeem's work is the central focus of this paper. This paper is an intimate ethnography in which the author utilizes interviews with close family members who grew up in Iraq to contextualize and ground Nadeem's compositions, providing a foundation for analysis of Nadeem's music within the context of the Iraqi diaspora. This allows for a more fruitful analysis of how Nadeem's work utilizes symbols central to life in Baghdad, such as date palms and the sounds of a copper market, to mark her work as indisputably Iraqi, turning those symbols on their head to create something which can fit into the designation of *tali'a* (الطليعة), rather than the simplified "Arab avant-garde." The author begins by outlining the term "Arab avant-garde," including a discussion of the systematic exclusion of the "Arab" designation in better-known avant-garde circles. The author then succinctly describes the contemporary political history of Iraq to highlight the importance of that which is Iraqi in the avant-garde. This framework provides the basis for Nadeem's background and, in turn, the analysis of three of Nadeem's compositions from her 2005 album, *Out of Baghdad!*

Keywords: Arab avant-garde, dislocation, Iraqi diaspora, Aida Nadeem, ethnography, electronic music

For many years, I denied myself the possibility that I would ever see Iraq. As a member of its diasporic community, I would often think about Iraq as a sort of fictional place, one which only existed in the memories of those who came before me. While I listened diligently to the stories of my family members who had emigrated from Iraq, it always felt stubbornly intangible to my own existence thousands of miles away. Although we followed many of the same traditions, I could not deny that my "Iraqi-ness"—if you can qualify such a thing—did not seem the same as theirs. Iraq, I had concluded, was not a place I would ever intimately know.

Seven years ago, when I first began my undergraduate studies, I started to familiarize myself with diasporic theory and contemporary discourse surrounding the experiences of first-generation Arabs. Scholars like Rachel Beckles Willson, Anne K. Rasmussen, and Edward Said brought these ideas in close conversation with my own experiences, lending definition to

a complex internal palaver. This scholarship helped me to confront that which previously felt inaccessible. It was refreshing to see my experience discussed in academic conversations (at least to a degree).

Later in college, while researching thesis topics, I was introduced to the work of Aida Nadeem. A so-called “avant-garde” Iraqi musician exiled from her home in 1991, Nadeem’s compositions famously stand out as contemporary marvels in a hotbed of discussion around “authenticity” (Dickinson 2013, 13). Nadeem’s work rejects the restrictions of Western ideas about modernity by utilizing traditional elements in a more contemporary framework (Dickinson 2013, 14). Her music offers an opportunity to step beyond the tired debates of tradition versus modernity, engaging with current themes such as resistance and the representation of minority groups in the diaspora.

Academic considerations aside, I connected with Nadeem’s music in an unexpectedly intimate manner. Even as I could not translate her words and access the meaning and language of her compositions, it seemed that there was still a connection I *could* place, accompanied by the yearning to learn more about myself as an Iraqi-American. This was a yearning that I often suppressed because of my father’s grief and his difficulty in recollecting his own sense of loss. In the effort to understand my own sense of self, it seemed I had found what I was looking for in Nadeem’s music—an opportunity to begin exploring the complexity of having a sense of belonging to a place I have never physically known and yet, is essential to who I am: Iraq.

Upon reflection, I do not find it especially surprising that I was fascinated by Nadeem’s work, given her own positionality in the Iraqi diaspora. The fusion of traditional Iraqi instrumentation and Arab and Western techniques in Nadeem’s compositions made it an undeniable point of entry for analyzing what it means to listen *to* and *in* the diaspora. At the time, and through her work, I found what Boym refers to as a “shared longing without belonging” for a place we both know of but cannot access, albeit due to vastly different circumstances (Boy 2001, 252).

In 2022, my family and I began making plans to visit the country they had left so many years before. These plans entailed long conversations laden with fearful anticipation of what their return would bring, to the point that my stepmother, Samaher, requested several times that we not move forward. Despite the long conversations—or perhaps because of them—we departed for Iraq in March 2024 as a large group including my father, stepmother, older sister, three younger brothers, a cousin, and myself. The experiences we had in the weeks that followed are critical to defining the second stage of my research of the Iraqi diaspora.

Since this trip to Iraq, I feel that my positionality in the diaspora has become richer, enhanced by a renewed desire to understand how loss, longing, and belonging are all connected in the Iraqi diaspora. I am returning to my work in a world that feels monumentally different from the one in which my project was first conceived, now that I have traveled to the place that my family, in all the generations that came before my own, called home.

In this essay, I will continue my analysis of the Arab avant-garde, and how destruction has imposed a pre-/post-war relationship separating those who live in diaspora from those who live in Iraq. I expand on my original findings to investigate a new question: how has emergence from destruction complicated the relationships between sound, loss, and memory? And how can a shared nostalgia for imagined community ultimately break down the binary between a pre-/post-war Iraq? These questions are weighty, and certainly ambitious ones to tackle. In

what follows, I will begin with outlining the term “Arab avant-garde,” including a discussion of the systematic exclusion of the “Arab” designation in better-known avant-garde circles. I will then succinctly describe the contemporary political history of Iraq to highlight the importance of that which is Iraqi in the avant-garde. This framework will provide the basis for Nadeem’s background and, in turn, the analysis of several of Nadeem’s compositions from her 2005 album, *Out of Baghdad!*

Literature Review

In scholarly writings about music in the Arab world, the issue of tradition versus modernity, and the upholding of this binary, continues to be of great importance (Adileh 2011; Racy 2003; Touma 1996). In her introduction to *The Arab Avant-Garde: Music, Politics, Modernity*, Kay Dickinson seeks to move past this debate through her examination of the Arab avant-garde. Already groundbreaking in its scope, this book carves out a space for scholars to continue research in these newer explorations of genre and style, proposing alternatives to the dominant narrative of what Arab music is and should be (Currey 2002; Dickinson 2013; El-Shawan 1984; Rasmussen 1996).

For Dickinson, the plethora of under-recognized artists, whose works make important strides in dismantling orientalist and colonialist thought within the Arab avant-garde, need to be acknowledged and become part of a larger and more inclusive discussion about what Arab music is (Dickinson 2013; Said 1978). It is within this constellation that the works of Arab musicians and composers in the diaspora should be analyzed. Rachel Beckles Willson (2019), Michael Khoury (2013), and Caroline Rooney (2013) are some of the scholars whose works have centered on Arab artists who have been denied a physical relationship to their home (see Boym 2016). My work on Aida Nadeem—an Iraqi exiled in Europe—seeks to engage with the relatively small body of existent writing on contemporary music produced in the Arab diaspora (Asmar 2013; Burkhalter 2013; Kendall 1997; Peterson 2013; Harbert 2013; Sell 2010; Silverstein 2013).

Engaging with works produced by members of the Iraqi diaspora involves a constant reimagining and renegotiation of what is at stake for people in the community, through exploring different notions of memory, migration, and subjectivity (Jones-Gailani 2020). Aida Nadeem’s circumstances of exile call for a particular lens of diasporic understanding. Svetlana Boym’s book *The Future of Nostalgia* is critical to building foundations for such an examination. Boym discusses the specifics of this diasporic intimacy and its relation to the production of art, arguing that the collective nostalgia includes both a “restoration of the past” and a recognition of ever-present imperfections and misalignments with how those living in diaspora conceive of the world (Boym 2016).

Methodology and Positionality in Relation to the Project

I conceive of my research as an intimate ethnography, given my relationship to the subject matter, as well as to the interlocutors who helped me in my research. An intimate ethnography, as defined by Alisse Waterston in “Intimate Ethnography and the Anthropological Imagination,” is a “multifaceted dialectic” that pieces together multiple positionalities in order

to engage in a critical inquiry of the world (Waterston 2019, 10). By utilizing interviews with my father, stepmother, and close friends of the family, I intend to “[render] a more complete story of reality than is available in more narrowly focused studies” and present a more “integrated body of knowledge” (Waterston 2019, 8-9). Initially, I believed it would be possible to fruitfully analyze Nadeem’s work on my own, solely relying on the support of prior academic scholarship. From early on, however, it became apparent that the input and assistance of individuals who had spent periods of their life living in Baghdad would bring a much-needed dimension of intimacy and clarity to the buds of ideas I was toying with. Similar to Waterston’s approach in her own intimate ethnography, the majority of those I interviewed are important and close figures in my own life; as such, constructing this project as an intimate ethnography allowed me to bring together the dualities of my positioning as a daughter of an Iraqi and as an ethnomusicologist in the making. Many of the conversations I had during the interview process provided me with access to ideas and concepts which I never would have found on my own, and which enhanced the overarching themes of the project. Now, having been to Iraq, I find my earlier research complicated and augmented by new realities and experiences, a fact which both excites and daunts me.

While I have spent the entirety of my life living in the United States, many of my experiences have been defined by my Iraqi heritage. My father, at twenty years old, left Baghdad to study engineering first in England, and then in the United States. In our first interview, my father remarked that, despite having lived in Iraq for less than a third of his life, he still “feel[s] fully, fully Iraqi, living in a Western culture”—a sentence which has stayed with me, especially as I continue to consider the confluence of Iraqi and American values in my own upbringing. I would be remiss not to discuss my own inward-facing motivations for conducting these interviews. While they certainly furthered the development of my project’s argument, they also provided a space for me to grapple with my family’s history, and to consider the generational differences that have informed my outlook on life. In my own way, I was able to utilize music as a vehicle for navigating memory and seeing how place has “shaped what is remembered and why” (Jones-Gailani 2020, 6).

After consulting historical scholarship to establish a deeper understanding of Iraq’s social and political history, as well as the development of avant-garde arts in the Middle East, I then conducted a series of interviews with my father, Zaki, my stepmother, Samaher, and a family friend, Ala Faik. These interviews took place over the course of one week at my family’s home in Michigan in March 2022. I found the interviews to be a site for learning and a critical source to draw from in my analysis of Nadeem’s music. Their views complicated and affirmed that which I had learned in academic spaces, and I was forced to confront the dissonance that is inherent to an ethnomusicologist’s work.

I was able to interview Aida Nadeem in the final stages of my writing process. Our conversations provided clarifications of my analysis and findings. Nadeem considers herself “an activist, rather than an artist with a career,” explaining that she was happy to discuss how she “express[es her] identity and points of view about situations through music and art.” At that point, it became clear to me that the focus of this work is understanding the response of those in the diaspora to the music of the diaspora. I came to the understanding that Nadeem’s input—though wonderfully informative to the rest of my work—was not the centerpiece of my project but, rather, another way in which to understand my father’s and my own experiences.

The Significance of “Arab” in the Arab Avant-Garde

In the article “Resisting the Question, ‘What is an Avant-Garde?’,” Mike Sell, a scholar of the avant-garde, poses the significant question: what are the storylines we use to tell the tale of the avant-garde, to situate its gestures of rebellion and resistance meaningfully across time and place as a methodology for revealing gaps in the existing literature written on the avant-garde? (Sell 2010, 759). As in the case of literature, it is challenging to construct a historical analysis of a musical avant-garde, as the avant-garde has historically been resistant to the academic institution. Perhaps more significant is the Eurocentrism that has dominated the study of the avant-garde (after all, the Orient, as Said has taught us, has always been a “backward” place where not to look forward) and how this dominance has informed our understanding of center and periphery in music and beyond.

The writing of Kay Dickinson on the roots of the term “avant-garde” is critical to this project’s argument, particularly her exploration of how the term can be reclaimed and refurbished outside of its current Eurocentric associations. In regions outside of the Western world, modern music has “fundamentally defined itself through an expression of tonality beyond the typical Western scales” (Dickinson 2013, 3). This definition of “modern” rests on the idea that only the West can represent musical progress, and that the exploitation of that which comes from the East can only be considered as an embellishment and be extracted as raw material. Dickinson wades through a body of literature on the avant-garde which briefly mentions but rarely expands on the influences drawn from Arab music. She eventually concludes that the definition of avant-garde (as it pertains to Arab music) has been made more complicated through its relationship to Europe and, in turn, imperialism and colonialism.

Drawing from Dickinson, this project utilizes a working definition of avant-garde as (1) formulated by artists working outside of Eurocentric models; (2) anchored in a contemporary analysis of Iraq and its relationship to the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S.; and (3) a designation that also exists outside of the realm of art. Owing to the dearth of scholarship on the Arab avant-garde, Dickinson’s work proves especially useful in this project.

As Dickinson writes, the period from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century may be credited with the “birth of a clearly enunciated avant-garde sensibility about the world;” a sensibility that, in the Arab world, was entangled with the *nahda* (Renaissance) movement (Dickinson 2013, 6). The *nahda*, defined by its inextricability from the Arab and Islamic past, utilized select ideas and techniques from the Western world and reconfigured them to “forge a unique anticolonial regionalism” (Dickinson 2013, 7). Dickinson’s argument is critical for illustrating how philosophers, artists, scholars, and others have critically engaged with the proposed Western ideas, rejecting that which perpetuates damaging binaries, and making them work for their own motivations and desires. In the case of Iraq, the choice to work within the label of avant-garde is reflective of a complicated and nuanced relationship existing inside and outside Iraq—a decision which offers an opportunity to reconfigure embedded power dynamics (Dickinson 2013, 7). Caution, however, should be heeded when exploring what is “Arab” in the Arab avant-garde, particularly when “Arab” expresses a cultural and intellectual movement in such a vast and diverse geo-cultural region commonly described as the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa). Because the focus of this project is an Iraqi artist and the Iraqi diaspora, a look at the contemporary history of Iraq may help to better contextualize Aida Nadeem’s music.

On the Limits of Language

In “The Arab Avant-Garde: Experiments in North African Art and Literature,” Andrea Flores Khalil sets out to explore the avant-garde tendencies of North African art and literature. Khalil posits that the historical movements of the European avant-garde—such as surrealism, Dadaism, and futurism—and their associated parameters and goals cannot be used to define the work of modern artistic movements in North Africa. Khalil also argues, however, that the term “avant-garde” is still fitting for the work produced in the region, as it indicates an experimental approach that utilizes the “idioms of the Other to formulate a new representation of their culture of origin” and which ultimately works to “dissipat[e] the identity that had been defined by the ‘East-West’ opposition” (Khalil 2003, xiv, xxi).

Khalil ultimately argues that what defines Arab avant-garde literature is largely centered around language, and its critical use as a tool of opposition to Western cultural hegemony. Because a number of avant-garde authors in North Africa write in French or English, Khalil argues that they “speak like a foreigner in [their] own country, [they incorporate] the outside, the geopolitical Other (Britain, France, the West) into the language of the postcolonial nation (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco)” (Khalil 2003, xx). In this context, language functions as a tool to break down the “intrusion of [Western] modernity ... through reinvention, not a forgetting of the cultural effects brought about by historical conflict and struggle” (Khalil 2003, 133). As such, Khalil’s definition of the Arab avant-garde emphasizes language, the medium used by its artists—that is, Arabic (Khalil 2003, xiv).

The Arabic term for avant-garde movements is *ṭalī‘a* (الطليعة). In the Hans-Wehr Arabic-English dictionary, this term references “front row,” “foremost rank,” “vanguard,” or “avant-garde,” deriving from the verb *ṭala-a*, which can be translated as “to rise,” or “to ascend.” Exploring the relationship between *ṭalī‘a* and “avant-garde” reveals some of the problematic nuances one finds when an indigenous term is contextualized in reference to a Eurocentric movement. In “Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde,” Susan Buck-Morss deconstructs the semantic relationship of the terms “vanguard” and “avant-garde” asking “why is it that the two terms have been bottled together over the course of time?” In what follows I ask: why is it that the Hans-Wehr dictionary definition of the Arabic term for new arts movements includes “vanguard” and “avant-garde” as related terminology? How might the term “*ṭalī‘a* (الطليعة)” be understood within these parameters?

In my research, it was challenging to locate scholarship that focused exclusively on avant-garde music produced in Iraq, and even more so within the diaspora. More general searches geared towards the historical movements of the avant-garde were helpful in revealing how “within the framework of occupation ... modern works [cannot] be examined with the context of an art historical tradition attentive to styles and aesthetics” given that “art in Iraq has served periodically (or systematically) as a propaganda apparatus” (Shabout 2006, 4-5). My conversations with family friend Faik, who is quite knowledgeable in Iraqi theater, provided me with a background on contemporary productions. Even so, it seemed there was a great deal to unpack with regards to understanding avant-garde art produced in more recent years. This is likely due to the assumed political nature of contemporary art produced in Iraq or by Iraqis.

Given that my own project is focused on music, I found it helpful to take the cues from Kahlil when thinking about the Iraqi vernacular. In *The Spoken Arabic of Baghdad*, Joseph Richard McCarthy and Faraj Raffouli create a “systematic exposition of the morphology and syntax of the spoken Arabic of Baghdad accompanied by copious exercises” (xxix). McCarthy and Faraj expound on the particulars of Iraqi Arabic, emphasizing the nuances of how Baghdadis speak the language. Of course, it should be acknowledged that the book was written in 1964, and as such likely features outdated information; however, the authors take great care to emphasize that “the spoken Arabic of Baghdad has been, and is, a living and changing language” (McCarthy and Raffouli 1964, xxvii).

To better understand the sonorous implications of the Iraqi vernacular, I turned to conversations with native Baghdadis. In my interviews with my father, Zaki, and my stepmother, Samaher, I was able to ask questions about the specifics of language, spurred by their repeated claims of Nadeem’s music as sounding “unmistakably Iraqi.” These conversations were challenging, as it was difficult to find appropriate terminology to describe the sounds I was hearing but not comprehending. When I asked for clarification on how the shaping of the words informed the specificity of the sound (based on my reading of McCarthy and Raffouli I theorized that the vocalization of vowels were the central identifiers of the Iraqi dialect), Zaki described the different accents of the country. When asked for a deeper explanation of why he identified Nadeem’s accent to sound just so, he responded, somewhat pointedly, “sometimes I only hear one word and know that this guy is Iraqi. One word. I don’t know why it’s so dominant.” At one point, Samaher mused that the sound of the vowel was much clearer than that of Egyptian, Jordanian, or Syrian Arabic, and sounded out a few examples which allowed me to discern the differences between these vernaculars.

A Sketch of the Contemporary History of Iraq

In his book *Iraq: From Sumer to Saddam*, Geoff Simons provides a survey on the history of the country, with a focus on British and U.S. involvement, and how that has affected the region socially, politically, and geographically. Simons outlines several reasons for British interest, but ultimately most significant is Simons’ argument on oil, the presence of which “would give the lands of the region scope for independence but also advertise to the Europeans—and later the Americans—their need to retain control of the region” (Simons 2004, 150). Consequently, the “predatory designs of powerful Western nations in a shrinking and energy-hungry world” have defined, and continue to define, much of Iraq’s recent history (ibid., 150).

The importance of relations with Britain and the United States cannot be overemphasized, as they are key to the indoctrination of the beliefs of the former Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. Hussein formally came into power in 1979 and over the years, primarily as a result of the Iran-Iraq War and the later invasion of Kuwait, Hussein’s regime left the country in a position of weakness. The American response was nothing short of devastating (Simons 2004, 243). In 1990, four days into the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq. To this day, debate surrounds the ethics of these sanctions, as “what they were meant to accomplish is unclear” and the consequences are multitudinous (Clawson 1993, 2). The following year, Operation Desert Storm was put into action, in which an international allied force of thirty-two nations launched an air war with Iraq’s military and civil infrastructure. The six-week campaign ultimately culminated in the expulsion of Iraqi

forces from Kuwait by the end of the following February, leaving behind massive destruction in its wake (Alnasrawi 2001, 209). In the years that followed, post-war studies brought to light the fact that “in addition to purely military targets, the bombing revealed that ... some targets were attacked to destroy or damage valuable facilities which Iraqi could not replace or repair without foreign assistance ... targets were selected to do great harm to Iraq’s ability to support itself as an industrial society” (Alnasrawi 2001, 210). In essence, the damage imposed on Iraq by the United States “threaten[ed] to send the country back to the Stone Age” (Hassan 2022, 1).

Over the course of the next decade, Iraqis felt the burden of the sanctions with increasing severity. In March 2003, President Bush sent United States military forces to attack Baghdad, under the specious pretense that Saddam Hussein was either in possession of or in the process of building weapons of mass destruction. Despite the devastating impact of the United States’ actions, the “immediate reward of a massive oil grab, of a scale not witnessed since the days of colonialism” led the United States government to justify the assault of unparalleled aggression (Research Unit for Political Economy 15). In 2005, Hussein was located and arrested, and later executed in December 2006. Although troops were eventually withdrawn from the region in 2011, thus declaring an end to the war nearly a decade after it began, the country and its people continue to suffer and bear the brunt of a deliberate policy of cultural annihilation (Baker and Ismael in Hassan 2022).

Aida Nadeem: Background

Having briefly sketched a contemporary history of Iraq and of the term avant-garde, I now turn to the work of Aida Nadeem, starting with her relationship to recent Iraqi history. Nadeem was exiled to Denmark in 1991, directly coinciding with the Kuwait invasion led by Saddam Hussein. During this time, economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq by the UN Security Council, rendering it a place virtually unbearable to live in. In recent years, a growing body of criticism has surfaced in response to the tactics of the economic sanctions; almost ten years after they began, council members spoke out against the ethics of such tactics (Kondoch 2022, 2). At the beginning of the UN sanctions regime, affluent Iraqis began to leave the region in large numbers. These are the people who make up most of the diaspora, though Iraqis of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds left because of their own political reasons. At this time, in fact, large numbers of young Iraqis had begun to revolt against the regime, placing themselves in positions of considerable danger. In my interview with Aida Nadeem, she clarified that her reasons for leaving were politically motivated.

Before her exile to Denmark,² Nadeem spent her entire life in Baghdad. Born in 1965, she became active in music and dance at a young age. She later studied at the Baghdad Academy of Music and Ballet, where she specialized in bassoon. In our interview, Nadeem recalled her years there as incredibly formative, allowing her to “enrich [her] intellectuality.” After concluding her studies, Nadeem joined the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra in 1986, and began making a name for herself (Aida Nadeem, personal interview, May 5, 2022).

There are strong Iraqi and Western foundations in her work, which also includes computer-programmed elements and the utilization of Indian and Persian instrumentation (Dickinson 2013, 13). Nadeem’s solo work achieved global recognition after her relocation to Denmark.

It was there that she began studying at the Royal Danish Academy of Music. With a discography comprising five complete albums,^[3] Nadeem has played an important role in the contemporary Arab music scene.

Analysis of *Out of Baghdad!*

When I first analyzed *Out of Baghdad!*, I did my best to scour every resource I could imagine in an unsuccessful attempt to locate translations or transcriptions of Nadeem's music. Finding nothing, I asked Zaki if he would be willing to provide a rough translation of the lyrics for several of Nadeem's compositions, so that I could begin making headway in my own analysis. Having grown up in Baghdad himself, and as a native speaker of the Iraqi vernacular, I trusted him to provide an accurate transcription of the Arabic lyrics and their English translations. He and Samaher (another native speaker) listened to a few songs from the album. However, when they called me to discuss their findings, I felt a certain disappointment in their voices. Zaki, speaking as if he were breaking extremely upsetting news, confessed that they had not been able to translate much more than a few words! My initial response, as Zaki had assumed it would be, was one of distress. Quickly, however, my panic morphed into confusion; how could a native speaker of the Iraqi vernacular understand *nearly nothing* of what Aida Nadeem had sung?

After listening closely to the songs "Khadri (خبري)" and "Baghdad (بغداد)," Zaki concluded that Nadeem was vocalizing words in a way that "intentionally would not let you guess what she's saying." When I pressed him to expand on this, he mused on how "she intentionally twist[s] and deform[s] the words for her artistic purposes. It is not common to this degree ... but typically it's well understood, because when [singers] do this, it is only for a few words of the song." This technique my father described was something that he was familiar with, noting its presence in the works of several Arab musicians he grew up listening to, such as Salima Murad and Nazem al Ghazali. As a non-Arabic speaker, I had not been able to pick this up.

Thus, while I had hoped to conduct a lyrical analysis of Nadeem's songs, now I had something much more abstract to work with: the *absence* of that which is understood, that which is comprehensible, and, at least to a certain degree, the meaning of the words and the message of a song.

A few days later, however, Zaki surprised me with a new development: after sitting down with four other native speakers of the Iraqi vernacular, they were able to discern more than a few full sentences from two songs: "Khadri" and "Baghdad." He shared with me that the work had been painstaking, and that by no means did they feel that the interpretations of her lyrics could be done in a casual listening setting. He was also careful to emphasize that there were likely errors present in the translations the group had been able to produce. This development complicated things somewhat, but I was optimistic about my argument: with the peculiarity of her vocal technique and poetic message, I now had a wealth of material to work with. This is to say, the *absence* of that which is comprehensible turned into *presence*; the deformation of words created multiple listening *possibilities*.

"Baghdad," the first song from *Out of Baghdad!*, serves as the first entry point of analysis for this project. In this song, Nadeem carves a new sound space for herself by accompanying her sung lyrics with violin, Indian and Persian drumming, and computer-generated beats.

بغداد "Baghdad / [4]"

Who has the right to dislocate me

Who has the right to dislocate them

Don't sell the people, dislocating them,
dislocating me

Let the cities flow in them

Flow in me

And the people pass, flow in them, flow in me

In a land where peace dies

And the palms

In every memory

We die each moment

They decided your verdict

O'Baghdad

A land of ash smell

O'Baghdad

حق يامن تغزي بهم

تغريبي اي هي هي هي

لا تبيع الناس تغري بكم تغري بي

خلي المداين تحري بكم

تجري بي

وتمر الناس تجري بكم تجري بي

الى بلد مات فيها السلام

والنخلات

في كل ذكرى

تموت فيها كل لحظه

ارسلو الحكم عليك

يا بغداد

يا بلد شم الرماد

يا بغداد

At first glance, the piece reads as irrefutably political. Nadeem references Baghdad's former, and historically significant, title as "the City of Peace," but states with finality that the name can no longer be claimed (Marozzi 2014). She asks, "Who has the right to dislocate them?" calling attention to the forced migration of Baghdadis in the wake of war and economic disaster. Her words are not damning for those who have been displaced, but instead provide the means to express intimate longing and despair over their loss.

Later interviews with Zaki and Samaher allowed me to further contextualize the meaning I was searching for in this song, and deepen my understanding of Nadeem's words. Zaki, after listening to "Baghdad," shared that it "sounds like a cry, of somebody who is really deeply hurt, who sees that Iraq has been destroyed." As the title song of the album, it sets the tone for the ensuing experience—one defined by the pain of longing, and the ache of remembering. From here, there are three points I will explore in greater depth: Nadeem's reference of the date palms in the translated lyrics, the title of the piece, and the sound of her wailing.

The central image communicated by the lyrics of the piece is that of a dying—or, as Nadeem herself suggests, dead—palm tree. As "one of the oldest cultivated fruit trees" that was "well known in Babylon, Iraq, in 4000 B.C.," the date palm is inscribed with centuries of meaning and history (Khierallah 2015, 98). During the Sumerian era, the date palm was used to "provide food and wood for making tools, furniture, and baskets," and was celebrated as a symbol for their "strength and majesty" (Khierallah 2015, 98). The date palm would eventually become Iraq's greatest export in the contemporary era, and the second greatest source for revenue after petroleum. However, between the years 1980 and 2000, the population of date palms dropped from 32 million to 12 million as a result of military destruction in the region. In the song, when Nadeem sings about dying palm trees, the subtext is that everything Iraqi has died—a sentiment embedded with extreme pain because, as Zaki told me, "[Iraqis] think that the tree will never die."

During our plane ride to Iraq two years later, I was glued to the window. Even after almost a day of travel, I was rapt and eager to capture my first glimpse of the country. For a long time, all I could see were hazy, undefined outlines of the landscape. But when we began our descent and I was able to discern parts of the city below, the first thing I noticed were the palm trees. As I viewed them from the plane, I recalled the emotion conjured in my father even through just his memory of the trees.

When elaborating on the subject of dates during our original interviews, Zaki became animated in a way I had only seen before when he recalled the sweeter details of his adolescence—moments which were rare. It seemed that the memory of the dates had materialized in him a

particular brand of nostalgia, one rooted in the sensation of recalling a routine which you have resigned yourself to the understanding that you will never return to. I was struck by the significance of the date as a symbol of beauty that was understood by native Iraqis to be, in his words, the “most sacred thing.” Furthermore, the date palm is referenced as a holy plant in the Quran. Dates, as a product of the date palm, are a symbol of abundance and have various uses, including the easement of labor pain (Nazri 2016; Sheikh 2015). With the historical and social context of this symbol, the song’s depiction of dying palms becomes an expression of grief and mourning.

Even the very title of the piece, “Baghdad,” reinforces the specificity of what Nadeem longs for. In the chapter titled “Archaeology of Metropolis,” Svetlana Boym writes about the connection between physical structures in urban spaces to the shared nostalgia of imagined communities, such as for those found in a diaspora. Boym argues that physical markers, like cobblestones and courtyards, can be imbued with the “elusive ... ghosts of memory” (Boym 2001, 76). For Nadeem, the proclamation of Baghdad’s name should be a powerful point of recollection. However, in the case of Baghdad, it seems that a large part of remembering the city is stymied by its recent physical restructuring. There is fear of returning, a fear of feeling that “this is not [their] city, not [their] area, that something has changed,” Samaher explained. In Nadeem’s song, the date palm—a symbol of Baghdadi identity, and of the city itself—acknowledges this physical loss. Even as the physical space has changed and the markers have been displaced, finding such symbols of memory and nostalgia are critical for former city-dwellers living in the diaspora.

Another defining feature of the song, as identified by Zaki, is the wailing quality of Nadeem’s vocalizations. As a non-speaker of Arabic, my analysis of the song pre-translation had been limited to the instrumentation and the tone of Nadeem’s voice; even without the words, I had taken note of the sorrowful quality of her singing. Zaki’s repeated mention of the “wailing” buttressed my desire to explore it further. Intriguingly, Nadeem’s wailing technique, which expresses despair, further clouds the comprehensibility her words. These moments are a cross-section of intergenerational understanding, between my understanding of the lyrics (as someone who cannot speak Arabic) and Zaki’s understanding of the lyrics (as a native speaker of Arabic). For Zaki, the wailing also amplified the other elements; as he listened, he expressed that the crying imitated in Nadeem’s vocalizations conjured a scene of a “mother crying at her son’s grave—but in this case, it’s not her son, it’s her city and country.”^[5]

Perhaps one of the most striking facets of Nadeem’s musical resistance is the reference to the destruction of Baghdad enacted in Hussein’s regime, such as in the case of the date palms. In my first interview with Zaki and Samaher, I asked them how they thought the influence of governmental control informed their modes of listening and their choices of music. They described their experiences of listening to music through radio and television, and how “in Saddam’s regime, every singer was supposed to sing at least one song for Saddam. Otherwise, they could not be famous.” The choice not to dedicate a song to Saddam Hussein was an act of resistance in the Iraqi musical sphere, and Zaki cited several artists who left the country in fear of their lives when they did not comply. Zaki’s and Samaher’s reflections were colored with a certain disgust towards the regime for the way that musicians were forced to compromise their work for the safety of their own lives, and sadness for those who made deep sacrifices for their art. Some artists, such as Fouad Salem, composed songs after leaving Iraq as a way to criticize the regime and mourn the way that the fear had infiltrated and changed their close relationships.

The destruction of Hussein's regime is something that I could not fully comprehend until I set foot in Iraq myself. Although growing up I had heard pieces of the story, I found it entirely different to witness its aftermath with my own eyes. On the third day of our trip, we began to drive south to visit Karbala and Najaf. As we exited Baghdad, I was struck by endless groves clearly emptied of their palm trees. The next day, on a visit to Babylon, the site's guide pointed out stones of the ancient city's buildings carved with Hussein's signature. The destruction of his regime is not only carried through the memories of the Iraqis, but also in the ecological landscape and infrastructure of the cities they inhabit.

Even as Nadeem expresses words imbued with deep poetic sadness and longing, she achieves a balance by coupling these words with happier memories of the Baghdad that she once knew. In my interview with Faik, he exclaimed that the instrumental accompaniment of "Baghdad" reminded him of a copper market in the city, where one could "hear music" simply by walking amongst the vendors. He explained that the market was home to many craftworkers producing dishes and decorations made from copper, and when people would walk through, they would "hit the copper with whatever they [were] holding on a certain rhythm, and in combination, you hear[d] something beautiful." Faik's joy in his recollection of the market, however, quickly faded as he explained it has "almost disappeared in Iraq" and is "not the same thing anymore." Nadeem's act of sonic defiance in reference to the destruction is effectively juxtaposed with the fragile beauty and memory of the copper market—a juxtaposition that allows Nadeem to reorient towards what she associates with home, while protesting against that which ultimately took it away from her. For those that I interviewed, the sonic references in "Baghdad" conjured memories and images of their previous sense of home. For myself, the song "evoked ... feelings for a land of which [I] have no firsthand knowledge," which allows me to take part in a particular "sonic diaspora" (Henriques 2008, 28).

In my interviews, it became increasingly apparent how critical it was to understand the differences between memories that are passed on and memories that are formed by the person who experienced them firsthand. When I asked Zaki what it was like to remember Iraq, he expounded on the pain of missing so many different things: the culture, the food, the buildings, and the rivers, amongst others. But the idea of attempting to return to all of these things still gave him pause. He explained, "if I go there and it's different from how it was in my mind, because it's so dramatically different and so dramatically worse, I think that will emotionally disturb me. I don't want to see it."

The penultimate song of *Out of Baghdad!*, "Manfa (منفى)," is by far the most experimental of those explored in this project. The piece unfolds slowly, beginning with field recordings of people conversing, mingled with the tinkling of metallic materials jangling against one another. Synthesized pops and echoes twist and waver amongst the development of a drum beat and the entrance of an oud. The digital backing fuddles the soundscape, conjuring a sense of displacement in the listener. Singing the lines "Escape from the East / fly to the West / feeling strangers (اهرب من الشرق / طر الى الغرب / نشعر غرباء)," Nadeem references her own feelings of dispossession. Here, Nadeem's influences converge to produce a profound display of her longing—especially, as she explained in our interview, since the piece is intended to sound almost never-ending, given its "DJ-like" quality. Notably, Samaher and Zaki shared during their brief listening that "the words [were] very clear," making the composition more accessible for Arabic speakers, despite its unfamiliar sound world. Nadeem pointed out that the combination of these different elements is a nod to her "first sounds being in Baghdad ...

where [her] identity began,” while also acknowledging how displacement changed her musical style. This piece, which relocates Nadeem to her current home in Europe, speaks to the necessity of transnational community building, as well as to the importance of establishing roots in a new place for those living in political exile.

While “Manfa” is certainly more experimental in terms of its use of digital elements, that is not to say the other compositions are devoid of similar phenomena. “Risala” is defined by its use of a synthesizer which “pierce[s] the landscape” (Dickinson 2013, 8). In “Yumma (يومة),” digital distortion of Nadeem’s vocalizations contrast to the earlier “twisting” found in “Baghdad,” and repeated synth phrasings uphold this break in traditional instrumentation. Notably, “Yumma” also utilizes a drum-kit akin to that which might be found in electronic dance music. The electronic elements of *Out of Baghdad!* are the first of Nadeem’s ventures with such tools, which she described as emblematic of the “contradiction in [her] life at the time,” where she was trying to “give birth to something new” all while her country, city, and memories were burning.

Of course, to claim that these markers of experimentation are what push Nadeem’s music into the designation of *ṭalī’a* (الطليعة) would be somewhat reductive. While the electronic elements utilized in the aforementioned pieces bring dimension and flavor to the discography and my analysis of it, it is Nadeem’s way of engaging with memory that ultimately distinguishes her work and pushes it into the realm of *ṭalī’a* (الطليعة). This approach exists at multiple levels throughout her discography, in the wailing vocalizations, her enunciation, and the sonic references of the cityscape. Through playing with the idea of comprehensibility in much of her work, Nadeem leads listeners to associate the meaning of her pieces with other markers of identity, such as the utilization of a specific accent or instrumentation. She understands that “engaging with one’s cultural roots does not mean being walled off by tradition,” which allows for Western influences to emerge in conjunction with the “deep imprints of [her] trainings” (Lidskog 2016, 23; Dickinson 2013, 17). Here, “music not only functions to express and maintain pre-existing identities, it also provides resources for contesting and negotiating identities and constructing new ones”—recalling the very debate of qualifying Nadeem’s art as *ṭalī’a* (الطليعة), rather than avant-garde (Lidskog 2016, 25).

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have sought to illuminate that which makes the compositions of Aida Nadeem so vital as a locus for examining Iraqi music produced in the diaspora and, in turn, the experiences of loss, longing, and belonging of Iraqis in the diaspora. There is a lack of scholarship about such music, which highlights the danger of forgetting Iraqi culture and stories. For first-generation Iraqi immigrants, engaging with Nadeem’s music has the potential to “offer an opening” for those who are “haunted by the loss of a home and are ... nostalgic for a past” (Agnew 2005, 187). A shared sentiment experienced by those in the Iraqi diaspora is that “although many have settled into great lives ... they don’t feel that they belong,” and finding an outlet for those “struggles in the world ... through music” allows them to reconnect, and hopefully push forward (Aida Nadeem, personal interview, March 5, 2022). The themes of loss and memory are perhaps the most pervasive of those I have explored in this project. In my writing, they define the “culturally constructed landscape of memory, the metaphoric

terrain that shapes the distance and effort required to remember affectively charged and socially defined events” (Antze 2016, 11).

In the days after my interview with Aida Nadeem, as I reflected on what she had told me, I found myself awed by the complexity of these themes, especially as I observed their recurrence embodied in multiple individuals living in the diaspora. Our conversation occurred at a time where I had come to consider myself so intimately acquainted with her compositions that I almost did not know what to do with what she had told me. What surprised me was how she had changed from the musician I heard in *Out of Baghdad!*, moving from proclamations of anger to acceptance of “giv[ing] up the idea of belonging to anywhere,” even beyond Iraq. When I asked Nadeem what it is like to engage with *Out of Baghdad!* today, she mused that she would not have created it in the present time, as it was so entirely frozen in the situation and how she was affected by it then. Music, for Nadeem, “has to change ... it has to change because we are changing.” It is almost symbolic of Nadeem’s self-described relationship with her music and instrument, which she describes as “[her] road mate ... there with [her] all the time, and sometimes [they] quarrel with each other, and sometimes [they] are leaning in towards each other with love.” Most striking were the parallels I found between her and my father, in their shared acceptance of how the Baghdad that they once knew no longer exists in the same way, and their desire to find joy in something different.

After having traveled to Iraq with my family, who constitute the majority of my interlocutors for this project, my relationship to Nadeem’s music has been renewed and made more robust. When I first engaged with her work, I found it to be an opening for engaging in a cross-generational understanding of the destruction of Iraq. Just as Nadeem is able to “embrace that nostalgia or longing” in herself, I was given an opportunity to grapple with my family’s history, in spite of systemic destruction, denial, and a physical distance that I was not sure I would ever have the privilege of traversing (Hassan 2022). What our journey to Iraq offered me was the ability to deepen my understanding of living in a diaspora—both as I conversed with my family members about their experience, as well as through the negotiation of my own emotional entanglements and attachment to Iraq. For those Iraqis who are in the “uncomfortable position of being outsiders in new societies” or for whom “painful feelings of great sadness, loss, and nostalgia dominate,” Nadeem offers a way to “show resistance in one way or another ... to maintain [one’s] heritage” (Hassan 2022, 20; Aida Nadeem, personal interview, May 5, 2022).

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^[1] In my attempt to avoid the conflation of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Islamic identities — as the common use of the terms “‘Middle East’ ‘correspond[s] to no stable reality that exists” and the “‘Muslim World’ reduces a diverse group of disparate believers into a single object” — it is critical to acknowledge the problematic overlap of terms in this section (Said 331; Ahmed 109). In my discussion, I understand Arab identity as denoting those who speak Arabic and, as such, goes beyond the Arab world, including Arabs in the diaspora.

^[2] The definition of exile has expanded to involve “escape (self-banishment) by individuals who feared punishment, injury, and loss of life because of their political ... views” (Naficy 1998, 51).

^[3] *Arabian Underground* in 1998, *Arabtronica* in 2002, *Out of Baghdad!* in 2005, *eyond Destruction* in 2010, and *Geçerken* in 2016.

^[4] The transcription and translation of the lyrics were created through the combined efforts of my father, my stepmother, and two family friends—all native speakers of Iraqi Arabic.

^[5] For more on the devastation of Baghdad, particularly in reference to its musical and social life, see Hassan 2022.