

# ***On New Realities***

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*"Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule... Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision"*  
*Edward Said.*

How are the complexities of identity organized and experienced in the context of a virtual "new world" navigated on the internet? *On New Realities* uses objects and narrative art to tackle the trajectory and experience of people with hybrid identities through the following lenses:

1. Historical perspective - how historical notions of our identities affect how we view ourselves.
2. Postcolonial subjectivity online - Identity formation on the internet when we are unevenly connected globally and disconnected locally.
3. Futuristic perspectives - reimagining a future of belonging.

Through an interactive and immersive web fiction, the user is immersed in an interactive experience, carefully crafted to include the different lenses mentioned above. One can't explore the 'postcolonial' without properly defining and understanding its' historical grounding and analysis. The experience immerses the user in a house hunt with objects carrying narratives that are based on historical understanding and conceptualizing of the 'postcolonial'. To me, and for this project, this means having a specific understanding of the 'postcolonial' historically, digitally, and in its manifestation through fiction.

An example of the manifestation through fiction is the work of Joseph Massad. Massad is a professor of Modern Arab Politics and Intellectual History in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University who has also written extensively about the formation of the Arab identity. His book, *Desiring Arabs*, examines Arab sexuality and how Arabs represented their sexual desires historically through the presence of Orientalism and colonialism. Another scholar whose fictional postcolonial narrative heavily shapes my writing in this project is Tayeb Salih, a Sudanese author and a prominent figure in the postcolonial literary

movement. His novel, *Season of Migration to the North*, explores the complexities of having “Arab-African” roots (Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ). Salih’s literary work is mainly inspired by personal experiences growing up in a Sudanese village, exploring the position of his identity in relation to the Western European world. The last narrative uses Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* which unifies the postcolonial narratives and makes my project less site-specific by focusing on a different hybrid identity. *Behold the Dreamers* is written by a Cameroonian-American novelist known for exploring her own experiences as an immigrant, as well as the experiences of other immigrants pursuing “the American dream” through her novels. This novel zooms into the experience of two families in New York during the 2008 financial crisis with one of the families being Cameroonian and working for the other wealthy American family (Mbue). Together, these novels contrast perfectly with each other as they all explore similar complexities through completely different narratives and in completely different areas.

My entire capstone project is grounded in the work of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said. Edward Said, one of the most prominent figures in the field of postcolonial studies, extensively writes about culture and imperialism, orientalism and his personal experience navigating his identity as a postcolonial subject. Said’s articulation of the notions behind colonialism and orientalism heavily impact the way I describe and position myself in relation to the world, particularly his *Reflections on Exile*, since the idea of exile, in whatever form, is a common theme for the postcolonial experience.

While these scholars explore expansive notions of Arab postcolonial studies and its impact on how the subjects view themselves in relation to the world, this does not perfectly align with my own lived experience. Having “grown up on the internet” introduced me to barriers and accessibilities of a different kind. Further, I want my project to explore a holistic view on postcolonial experience in the presence of the internet which by nature is very different from the narratives described above.

Omar Kholeif is a writer, curator, cultural historian and artist producing work at the “intersection of emerging technologies with narratives of colonialism, ethnicity and race” (Kholeif, Biography). Kholeif’s work grounds my project because of its focus on the aesthetics of digital cultures through an extended focus on marginalized histories. Kholeif is Egyptian-born but describes his experience as “always being an immigrant wherever I lived”. Taking inspiration from his work, my interactive narrative draws on the idea he describes in his ongoing *Code-Switchers: The Art of Being Invisible* project as the performance of “shifting acts, tones and behaviors my whole life” (Kholeif, Code-Switchers). Kholeif’s work explores that gap - just as my project will. His book, *I Was Raised on The Internet*, is presented with a major exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and collects theories, essays, and manifestos exploring art, including art produced by postcolonial subjects, that continuously engage with digital technologies (Kholeif, *I was raised on the internet*). This is particularly relevant to my project because it not only discusses how the internet is explored as an artistic medium but also explores specific narratives of marginalized histories through art and the internet; both are core components of my capstone.

Another Scholar that articulates the postcolonial experience digitally is Tarek El-Ariss, a James Wright Professor at Dartmouth College interested in exploring new media and cyberculture through literary theory, digital humanities, and gender and sexuality studies. His book, *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age*, theorizes and investigates Arab modernity in the digital age by exploring and questioning concepts of nation, power, community, the author and the novel and how they are “hacked and recoded through new modes of confrontation, circulation, and dissent” (El-Ariss). While the entire book is a pillar for my project, I interviewed Professor El-Ariss to get an in-depth understanding of some topics and how they can be applied to my narrative.

This conversation heavily shaped the way I theorize the postcolonial experience digitally. He discusses how the idea of a postcolonial “subject” and forming communities online manifest

very differently. This was particularly important since most of the literature I was reading covers identity and belonging without the internet and social media as a major factor which meant that I had to sometimes reconfigure the literature I was consuming. The virtual world is not unreal, the virtual world just insists on a different reality that still produces communities, just differently. This also manifests in how “news receiving culture” is now carried out completely digitally. Instead of counting on journals to receive news, we now use Twitter to not only receive news but also directly interact with it. This conceptualizes the idea that social media is a storytelling medium - a literary performance in which people create an audience and communicate thoughts. Further, since my project explores postcolonial identities through the internet - an invention of the colonizer, this calls for an understanding of our intergenerational relationship to technology, to each other and documentation. This means that we need to have a very specific understanding of “decolonial” in relation to the internet, the idea that these communities have appropriated the internet and it is equally theirs.

These notions are articulated in my installation by the crafted Twitter piece exploring the notions of postcolonial identities online. The Twitter accounts have carefully curated personas that engage with each other along with tweets that act as the primary source of portraying information and communicating the divide and difference between historical stories and the one I’m telling. By crafting and displaying a Twitter feed with comments, the nature of Twitter as a storytelling platform allows me to tackle the idea of memory and the inherited role of storytelling. To expand, I engage the idea that we are made up of each other's stories and what that means when we are so easily exposed to other people's stories and memories through social media. This furthers the conversation to how we measure the success of this social media “performer” when we have the option to easily retweet and provide no deeper engagement. The Tweets are arranged in a way that allows for the user to interact and move them to reveal a statement conceptualizing the tweets.

This extends to the idea of reimagining a future of belonging, a quest which led me to the idea of Futurism, and in my case, Gulf Futurism. This concept is developed by Sophia Al-Maria, a Qatari-American artist, writer, and filmmaker. Gulf Futurism is defined as an artistic and social movement in the post-oil Persian Gulf, and concerns aspects that preoccupy the region including dominant class, world-building and pop culture all in relation to fast technology (“Back to the Futurist”). In an interview with WIRED magazine, Al-Maria stated that “The Gulf is such an extreme place of disconnection that the only thing to do was send videos of other people or animals doing things that you wish you could” (Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy). Additionally, her book, *The girl who fell to Earth: a memoir* covers the notions of navigating reality and identity through her personal experiences growing up in between American and Gulf Arab cultures. Al-Maria’s work inspires mine because it gives me an example of writing that allows for reimagining a dystopian future, maybe even one of belonging (Al-Maria).

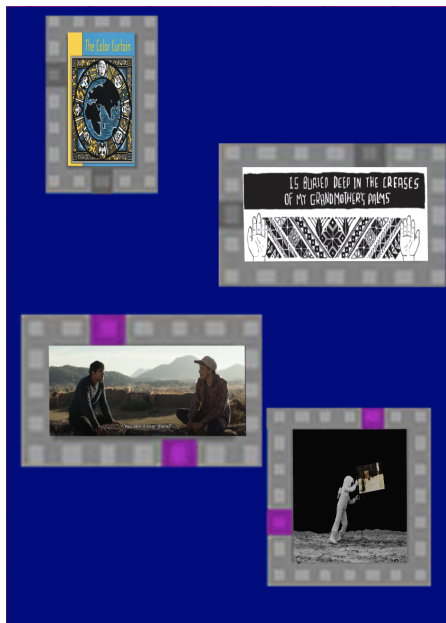
An object that brings a personal trajectory to these narratives is the journal that utilizes a text-based medium, videos and (different forms of) art in an interactive manner. The journal personalizes the narrative and starts questioning the need to find an unproblematic identity, questions the fluid concept of a home and memory. The narrative is heavily informed and written from my personal experiences along with the personal experiences of people around me that struggle with belonging. The journal uses a clip from the Palestinian Netflix movie, *When I Saw You*, covering the story of a family in a refugee camp in Jordan post the 1967 events in Palestine. The clip further plays into the questioning of the idea of a home and invites the user to interact and evaluate the concept of “finding a home”. The writing in the journal is also inspired and informed by Sama Alshaibi’s personal essay and art *Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora*, which tackles the same ideas I mentioned through a similar personal lens (Alshaibi).



The next part of the journal uses the song “Yalla Tnam, يالله تنام” by Fairuz, an incredibly famous Arab/Lebanese singer whose music was a staple in most Levant households. Along with her brothers, she wrote and produced many nationalistic and political songs - multiple of which discussed identity, belonging and longing for a home during many of the Levant wars. The particular song I included is one my parents (as well as many others from that region) used to sing to me to sleep. The title translates to “Let’s sleep” and subtly covers longing for a homeland in the lyrics through her description of fruits, plants and mundane experiences in her homeland. The lyrics translate to:

*Oh Lord ! Help Rima (replaced with the child's name) Sleep  
Oh Lord ! Help Rima Sleep , May she become sleepy  
May she grow loving to pray and to fast  
Oh God Make her healthier each day  
May she go to sleep and I will cook a delicious pigeon  
Go pigeon bird , don't believe what I am saying, I just say it so that Rima will sleep  
Rima , Rima , beautiful rose of the prairies, you have shining blond hair  
The one who loves you shall kiss, and the one who hates you will go away  
Oh merchants of grapes and of jujube , tell my mother and my father  
the gypsies have kidnapped me from below the tent of "Majdaliyyeh"  
I will take you on a little trip, to place where there are prunes under the apricot tree  
and each time the wind blows , I will pick an apricot for Rima  
Hey Lina , lend us you kettle and you bowl  
So that we wash the clothes of Rima, and hang them up on the jasmine tree*

I wanted to include this song since it is a very nostalgic childhood song to me and framed my ideas of home and belonging growing up. Additionally, while the writing in my project is meant to invite the users to think about their own connection to belonging and identity, I wanted parts of the experience to also cater to people who grew up in a similar circumstance as mine and hence, instill a universal sense of belonging and solidarity in them that I have not seen any new media project do.



Questioning the need to hold onto memories, I present a series of inspiring multimedia artworks to build a timeline of how these emotions, notions and memories inform and influence the work of people with hybrid identities. This also leads to exploring different narratives of reimagining a future of belonging. The work I used include:

- *The Color Curtain*, a book written by the African-American author Richard Wright on his impressions and conversations with writers and intellectuals at the postcolonial Asian-African Conference (Wright).
- A still from Leila Abdelrazaq's graphic novel *Baddawi* that follows the life of a young boy living in a refugee camp in Lebanon ("*Baddawi*").



- A still from Alexis Gambis's *Son of Monarchs*, a movie about a Mexican biologist living in New York's journey returning to his hometown (*Son of Monarchs*).
- An edited image using Larissa Sansour's film, *A Space Exodus*, an adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's *Space Odyssey* in the Middle Eastern political context and an art piece from Nasr Abdel Aziz Aleyan, a Palestinian artist that uses cultural symbols in his work (Larissa Sansour).

Since I was consuming (and hence gathering) more media from a specific region of the world focused on a loss of identity I related to while still looking to leave a certain degree of ambiguity in what identity the user is exploring in my project, I modified some of the images and removed some words or flags to fit my project.

After spending the bulk of my interactive media education building technical skills whilst echoing the idea that the medium is the message, using a digital medium to tell the story and explore my project seems fitting as I explore new realities created as a result of interconnected communities and exposure on the internet. Further, I am interested in examining how different digital tools can elevate the art of storytelling. Lance Weiler, a storyteller and emerging media artist at Columbia University, is an inspiration in the way he combines art and technology to tell stories. He extensively works with "the future of storytelling, emerging technology's impact on entertainment, those formerly known as the audience, purposeful storytelling, humanizing data and social impact" (Weiler). Therefore, the experience I created takes great inspiration from his interactive storytelling projects and the way they immerse the audience in a different reality created and mediated by technology to narrate a story that provokes conversation. His work also portrays a balance in interactivity, narrative and message delivery.

Home as a mobile entity or idea forms a crucial base for my project. From the struggle of conceptualizing an identity to navigating the loss of a home and potentially finding one digitally on the internet, my project balances delivering a personal narrative while still inviting the user to

reflect on their personal journey of belonging. This heavily influenced my design decisions both on the website itself as well as the physical installation.

For the website, the mainly muted colors and simplistic style perpetuates the idea of having a comfortable environment while accentuating and emphasizing the content of the project. With the poetic nature of the writing, having simple interactions and designs allow for the engagement with the content and writing without being distracting and taking away from it. Since the journal discusses a more personal narrative of identity and belonging, it is placed on the main page so that it is the first thing the user stumbles upon and thus frames the rest of their experience. The content is quite personal and heavy and therefore, the interactions are made to be intuitive and clear such as clicking the underlined word to move to the next page. My Twitter piece is more interactive and experimental since it discusses identities and communities in the new virtual world. I've also included the scrambling of one word to reveal another using symbols/ASCII which further highlights the digital aspect of this section.

As for the physical installation, I wanted to create a space that looks home-like and feels comfortable to experience my project in since it is vulnerable. As my project challenges the idea of a homeland and identity, I also wanted the user to be immersed in a "home-like" environment to ground the experience even further. Given my allocated space, I used noise canceling headphones and space design to match the website and still give a comfortable, individual experience for the users.

Initially, I wanted to conceptualize the Palestinian identity. I wanted to write a narrative or a story about the journey to belonging in something not related to a physical homeland. However, in the first couple iterations of my ideas and through expanding the scope of my research, I have realized that finding a sense of belonging and identity is rather a universal experience. Therefore, through critical reflection, I have shifted my process to writing something more general but still related to my personal journey. This included the removal of any explicit mentioning of a certain country, region, gender or identifying factor which was challenging given

the fact that I also wanted to produce something personal. This unconsciously made me shift from writing a story to writing a narrative that is more poetic that gives me the space to be personal yet still universal as I used statements about feelings and experiences that could be felt by anyone at whatever scale. This was further proved in the user-testing process as well as presenting the project to the community. It provoked people to come speak to me about what they felt and their personal experiences with belonging but also ask about my identity and why I chose to make this. It was also very insightful to see how different people relate to different parts of the project. For example, people with a similar upbringing as mine related to the song while people unable to return to their countries related to the parts exploring longing for a homeland.

To advance this project and for future steps, I'd further consider the personal and vulnerable nature of the project in the way it is physically experienced. I've discussed how I modified the space I was given but reflecting on this post-exhibition, I would've wanted a more segregated space for my project to be experienced. Further, the experience starts off as a house hunt, with the two objects relatively hidden. The idea behind that is to increase the interactivity of the project and add to the narrative of needing to find the objects in the house. However, after seeing how people interact with my project during the exhibition, I would've made the objects easier to find and would've made the fact that there are two objects to interact with more obvious. My project is also very theoretically packed and while it stands alone and does not need theory to understand it, having some theoretical context will heavily compliment the experience. Therefore, in the future, I would consider adding relevant theory in the form of a booklet or QR code to supplement the project.

Developing this project meant that I had to think critically about my identity and how it informed my experiences. It also meant that I had to actively find common ground in people's universal stories of belonging and the role of the internet in that. To me, this project created a sense of universal identity in its users, one that transcends labels and political opinions, one that manifests on different scales to different people but I hope offers critical reflection to anyone

experiencing it on their sense of self, sense of home, sense of the internet and sense of belonging.

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