

# “Articulating Homeland: A Sensuous and Political Journey”

by Nadine Saliba

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“I said: Where are you taking me?”

He said: Toward the beginning, where you were born.” (Mahmoud Darwish)

The union that begat me was a marriage made across borders. My Syrian mother, Georgette, crossed national borders into Lebanon to wed my father Nahil, a history teacher whom she never tired of teasingly reminding that Lebanon used to be part of Greater Syria before the colonial powers of the time, France and [the not so] Great

Britain, divided the Arab world after the first World War.

Upon getting married, my parents lived in the seaport city of Tripoli, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Tripoli is endearingly referred to as al-Faihaa, the Fragrant One. It got its nickname from the orange and lemon orchards surrounding it, whose blossoms soak its neighborhoods during the blooming season with a splendid smell.

I was born to a city with a rich but burdensome history. Tripoli was one of the victims of the new borders imposed by conquering powers. Cutting it off from the Syrian interior, the colonial map-makers wrenched it from its natural environment and annexed it to Lebanon. Once a thriving economic, commercial and cultural center, it was systematically marginalized and turned into the poorest city in the Mediterranean basin.

This is the place I was born to but separated from by war.

I was a child when my father, fearing sectarian strife after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, decided to leave Tripoli and move back to his village in al-Koura, an area famous for its large swaths of uninterrupted olive groves.

I did not know then that the olive trees that populated my childhood and adolescent years with their seasons and rituals bore my visceral and spiritual connection to Palestine even before the Palestinian struggle entered my political consciousness.

It did not take me long after arriving in San Antonio to realize that I left one borderland for another. After all, the city bears in the Alamo the marker of a border imposed by conquering powers. Place is emotion and every geography in my atlas has been a source of pain. How closely does today's bleeding border re-

semble yesterday's. “The US-Mexico border is an open wound,” wrote Gloria Anzaldua, “where the third world grates against the first and bleeds.”

Just like the olive trees in my village took me to Palestine, Palestine brought me to San Antonio, whispering its pre-colonial

name in my ear, Yanaguana. I claim San Antonio as home because it is the Palestine of my “new world.” Because Palestine is a metaphor for a settler colonial world where a project of erasure against indigenous peoples and cultures has been underway by the “bulldozers of history” since 1492, as Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish said.

Chance brought me to this city but she was waiting for me. Revealing herself, she said, I'm not a stranger to you, you know me, you will recognize me, I bear scars of your history on my body.

And yet, that place “where you were born” doesn't leave you. It tugs at your soul like a child clinging to her mother's dress. And perhaps like most immigrants, we try to recreate home any way we can. In my family, we've attempted to grow a piece of it in our garden where, if you come visit us in the spring, you will be inundated by the scents of jasmine, damascene roses and of course, those orange blossoms.

The scent of jasmine in our backyard puts me in the garden of my father's cousin on a hot summer night. Relatives and neighbors are visiting. Mom is there too, smoking. There must've been no other children because I'm sitting on the marble steps, in my floral dress that mama made for me, with one pretentious leg resting over the other as my clog barely hangs off my toes.

Almond blossoms, on the other hand, take me to the street outside our house, too narrow for pedestrians to be safe when a car whizzes by. It's a chilly early morning on a spring day. I am waiting for my daily ride to school but, today, I can smell the fragrance of almond blossoms in the priest's garden. It doesn't last long at all, may be a week or two. I've never smelled something so beautiful since.



Photo: Nadine's mother, Georgette and Nadine with her father, Nahil.



*Bio:* Nadine was born and raised in Lebanon and immigrated to San Antonio in 1993. She has a B.A. from University of Texas at San Antonio and an MA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, both in Political Science. Nadine read this story at the Book Launch of *Las Nalgas de JLo* on April 28 at Esperanza.