5. (Re-)Framing the Egyptian Belly Dancer in *Letters from Cairo*

Proceeding from the memoir of Tamim Ansary to *Letters from Cairo* by Pauline Kaldas means a decisive shift in geographic and stylistic terms. Whereas Ansary already in his title hints at a country struck by war and terrorism, Kaldas sends her dispatches from Egypt, a country that, until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, counted as one of the more peaceful places in the Arab world. Tourists from all over the world spend their vacations here and especially students from the U.S. often spend one or more semesters at the American University in Cairo. Egypt lies at the heart of the Arab world with its ancient history and pharaonic past as the cradle of manhood. These images, however, have also contributed largely to Egypt representing a metaphor of the Orient at large, as conveyed by the early European travelers who explored the Nile and the pyramids. One of the most prominent Orientalist stereotypes, the one of the belly dancer, originated here. Up to the present, this stereotype dominates the public image of Egypt around the world. The insights into Egyptian life which Pauline Kaldas provides in her epistolary memoir, however, do not fit into this framework.

5.1 Scholarly Agency (V_1)

Author and Structure of *Letters from Cairo*

Pauline Kaldas was born in 1961 in Cairo where she spent the early years of her childhood. In 1969, the family immigrated to the United States. Kaldas explicitly relates this decision to the aftermath of the 1967 War and Egypt's defeat, which made many Egyptians look for a new place to live and raise their children (Kaldas, *Letters from Cairo* 3).[1] Today, she works as an Assistant Professor of English and

1 All further references are to the same edition, abbreviated by *LC*.

Creative Writing in Virginia (Kaldas, Home page). In this position, she has contributed immensely to the development of Arab American Studies as an academic discipline.[2] Kaldas carried out two trips to her homeland. The first one took place from 1990 to 1993 and the second one in 2002 (*LC* 5).[3] This second trip was motivated by the fact that her husband, who is a scholar in African American Studies, accepted a Fulbright scholarship to teach American Literature for one semester at Cairo University (*LC* 8). *Letters from Cairo* is an epistolary memoir recording the family's experience during its residency in the Middle East.[4]

As the title of the book indicates, Kaldas's memoir differs in many ways from the more traditional form of the memoir employed by Ansary. Kaldas presents her autobiographical reflection as an epistolary account. This format has traditionally been regarded as a bourgeois type of life writing which originated in France (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 113). Especially in the 19th century, travel memoirs often took the shape of epistolary writing. Kaldas's narrative combines both aspects. Her reflection on her visit to Egypt does have traces of a travel narrative, yet, she integrates biographical information from a much wider time frame. *Letters from Cairo* can thus be referred to as a "return narrative"[5] (Kindinger).

2 Kaldas was involved in editing some of the major collections in Arab American Studies, such as *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994), *Post-Gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999) and *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004).

3 Kaldas's oldest daughter was born during her first stay in Egypt, which is particularly relevant for her motivation to return to the country and write a memoir (*LC* 5).

4 Personal information on Pauline Kaldas can also be found on her homepage. The design of her web presence differs considerably from Ansary's. It is much more artistic and contains personal poems and pictures about Kaldas and her family. In addition, a short biography is provided as well as detailed publication information. These two sections appear much more like the personal information found on department websites of universities. There are no strong marketing efforts concerning Kaldas's books despite the quotation of editorial reviews. Also, there is a link to a blog that is rather infrequently updated (Home page). Altogether, Kaldas's web presence corresponds to her public perception as a scholar and writer but lacks obvious links to realms outside the literary sphere. Kaldas consequently is not perceived as a public persona.

5 Return narratives do not constitute an established subgenre of life writing, yet. The format combines modes of traditional travel writing with the theme of postcolonial return to the homeland or to the land of the family's origin. As Evangelia Kindinger in her analysis of Greek American return narratives points out, "return" does not necessarily have to include an actual trip based on geographic movement, but can also represent the "journey paradigm" represented by second-generation immigrants in the form of mental travel (Wong 149). This clearly distinguishes the format from conventional travel writing.

Kaldas does not stick to any traditional epistolary format, though. Her work rather reflects a large potpourri of different memory pieces, blended together in a mixture of different autobiographical formats. At the heart of the book one finds six letters to friends and relatives written during the time of her family's stay in Egypt. In addition, the book contains e-mails from her and her children, as well as drawings from her children (see 42-44) and recipes from Egypt (*LC* 140). A detailed table of illustrations navigates the reader to the different graphical elements (*LC* xi). The memoir thus reads like a diary with different memory bits and pieces put together like a mosaic. As Kaldas herself states in the opening pages about the format: "Perhaps it was also a way of bearing witness, of recording our experiences and observations at that particular time. […] It is the collage of our journey" (*LC* 6).

The structure of the book reflects this diary-like format. All the material included contains a date and the order is chronological. The first chapter called "Journeys" (*LC* 3) provides a biographical introduction, followed by several journal entries from January 2002 and two shorter reflections on Kaldas's immigration to the U.S. Kaldas in this section explains her major motivation for going to Egypt for a second time. As she depicts, she wanted her daughters to learn about "the country of their origin not through stories and pictures, but through the reality of being physically there" (*LC* 5-6). The structure of the remaining chapters reflects this importance of (re-)location embedded in the diary structure. Every chapter bears the title of a particular month of their stay in Cairo. The subheadings indicate the various materials included in the chapters, such as "Journal Entries" (*LC* 24) or "E-Mails" (40). In addition, Kaldas inserts so-called "Reflections" each month, which are written under a specific theme, such as "A Sense of Place" (*LC* 27) or "Immigration and Return" (*LC* 64). As these subtitles suggest, location and the shifting of places are structural elements in the book. This reveals a parallel to Ansary's memoir. Kaldas, however, uses the different subheadings to direct the reader to distinct stylistic shifts. Her reflections clearly stand out in this respect since they are written in very clear and often critical prose. The language and their noticeable thematic focus set them apart from other material collected in the memoir. Moreover, Kaldas includes several "Snapshots," usually in the form of short poems (*LC* 38).

As this mixture of different structural elements suggests, there is no dominant issue frame to be identified at first sight. Since the subheadings point to formats rather than content, no obvious thematic focus can be noticed to the exception of travel and place-shifting. The kinds of documents collected in the book overall evoke the expectation of a very personal and almost intimate account of the author in which personal and family matters outweigh historical or political elaborations. Still, this very personal framing of the memoir from the beginning strongly highlights Kaldas's authenticity. All the documents she includes serve as testimonies that she is not merely recalling past events but providing actual records of her past. Kaldas with this move prevents the reader from perceiving of the memoir as semi-

fictional reconstruction of her life. This high degree of personal authenticity is not only linked to the format Kaldas has chosen. In addition, she supports her authorial credibility by punctuating her Arab American identity.

Arab American Authenticity

In line with many other Arab American authors of the contemporary period, Pauline Kaldas sees her writing and her identity as deeply intertwined. "In a sense, by virtue of my immigrant experience," she explains, "I was handed my subject matter [...]. Arab-American literature is an expression of the world and of experience through the eyes of someone for whom Arab-American identity is a primary lens" (Kaldas, "Quote"). In fact, this bicultural ethnic lens plays an important role in her memoir. It underlines her authority to bring back images and experiences from Egypt which differ significantly from the ones the average reader is familiar with from watching the news or Hollywood movies.

I'm home with that urge to bend and kiss the ground – but perhaps more distant this time. I feel more American at this point in my life than I have before. We adapt despite our will. It is Yasmine and Celine who have pulled me into American in a way I could never have accomplished myself. At some point we must claim things as our own. At the age of forty, I have claimed America as home and the loss of homeland is less painful.[6] (*LC* 9)

With these words, Kaldas describes the family's arrival in Cairo. The passage illustrates a very emotional, yet, also contradictory bond to Cairo. While using the word "home" to refer to Cairo, Kaldas at the same time explicitly stresses her American identity. The way in which she describes this dual concept of belonging and the process of involuntarily adopting a culture, however, do not point to an identity conflict at first. This is reiterated in another scene at Roanoke airport. A female security guard asks her politely in Arabic to step behind a curtain for inspection, so she can maintain her privacy. Kaldas recalls her thoughts at that moment in the following passage:

And I smiled to embrace our connection, realizing that we are everywhere, and that Arab American is not a fragmented identity but one that is whole and that we create. It is an identity that becomes transformed through immigration in this new place where the need for unity is greater than the issues that divide us. […] We bring our distinctive features with us to the United States, yet the similarities of language and cultural origin pull us toward each other to

6 Journal entries in Kaldas's book are always printed in italics to separate them from the remainder of the text.

create an Arab American identity, enabling us to acknowledge that we belong together. (*LC* 9)

These lines reveal that multi-ethnicity to Kaldas at the beginning of her narrative clearly does not place a burden on her but a gift. It involves a constant cultural transformation but also the inevitable necessity of bonding with others who share the same background. The repeated use of the pronoun "we" here strikingly underlines that Kaldas considers herself as part of the collective of Arabs living in the United States, thus suggesting a certain degree of homogeneity uniting this group based on the common immigrant experience.

Despite Kaldas's obvious affiliation with this collective of Arab Americans, however, to her the gift of mixed ethnic identity is very much based on her self-identification as an American. Kaldas describes the year of her family's immigration to the U.S. almost as a second "birth date" (*LC* 15). This seeming wholeness, though, starts to be disturbed very soon after she and her family settle in Cairo where she constantly gets confronted with questions about her ethnic self-understanding. She remembers the words of her cousin Usama who at one point asked her: "What are you? You're not Egyptian. You're not American" (*LC* 14). As it turns out, despite her initial praise of ethnic hybridity, this very feeling of (n)either/(n)or identity starts turning into a severe identity struggle (Majaj, "Boundaries" 82). As she admits, she has strong difficulties adjusting in Egypt and lacks a "sense of belonging." All of a sudden, her American identity becomes almost too American for her. "People know I'm Egyptian, but they sense that something isn't quite right by the way I speak and move. So I feel far more American here than I do in the States. I'm beginning to think I can only belong on a plane between both countries, suspended in flight" (*LC* 23).

As these words illustrate, Kaldas's seeming identity stability starts erupting when she is confronted with the outside view of herself. Although, initially, she seems to be proud of her ability to have adapted and become American, it becomes clear that her hope of going through a smiliarly smooth process in Egypt gets disappointed. Different from her own view of herself, to the outside, her habits do not correspond to what Egyptians would consider Egyptian. Kaldas emphasizes internalized cultural habits as outside markers by explaining that it is not only the use of language which separates her from native Egyptians but also her movement and general appearance. Kaldas then adopts this view when looking at her children. As she notices how much her American identity has really come to dominate her entire life, her children display the same predisposition. When observing her children during the first weeks in Egypt, she at one point notices "how American they are" (*LC* 26). It is this Americanness that continues to separate her from her immediate social environment in Egypt. Somehow, she cannot attain the same feeling of belonging which she is used to from her life in the U.S. This struggle also makes her

reflect on her first extended stay in Egypt in 1990 when she taught at the American University in Cairo. She realizes that her memory might have glorified the process of cultural adaptation while her American identity also dominated at the time. She was treated as a "foreigner," as she admits, and the fact that she did appear quite "'westernized'" also led to a certain lack of respect on the part of the Egyptians (*LC* 32-33).

These reflections demonstrate that Kaldas, even against her will, is rather at home on the American side of the hyphen than on the Egyptian one. This also forces her to constantly change positions when looking at herself and at her Egyptian surroundings. Soon, she finds herself in a position of cultural oscillation which she already knows from her life in America. She describes herself as a "cultural and linguistic translator" who constantly has to negotiate between two worlds (*LC* 35). In the U.S., as she explains, the worldview is dominated by familiar Orientalist images. "Does everyone own a camel? What's it like over there? Say something in Arabic," she remembers Americans asking her (*LC* 35). Kaldas consequently feels that she has no other option than to accep this role. She quotes Lisa Suhair Majaj who once wrote that "this negotiation of cultures results in a form of split vision: even as we turn one eye to our American context, the other eye is always turned toward the Middle East" (*LC* 37). At times, this immanent role of a cultural interpreter and translator makes her feel "at ease in my mixed identity," as she states (*LC* 52). At other times, Kaldas struggles with her lack of definite cultural location.

With this thorough description of her split identity, Kaldas from the beginning emphasizes her unique position and the special agency underlying the writing of her memoir. Due to her American Egyptian identity, she presents herself as being forced to always look at two worlds from two different positions, no matter whether she physically finds herself in America or in Egypt. While sometimes struggling with this impulse, this forced multi-positionality also substantiates her agency. She thus clearly evokes the expectation on the part of the reader that she is able to provide insights into both worlds, which are hard to obtain otherwise. Indirectly, this points to her ability to challenge mediated stereotypes such as the one of Egyptians as camel owners. Kaldas does not meet this malaise from an overly critical perspective, however. Rather, she demonstrates that there is an urge to learn about other cultures which drives people from both worlds to ask questions based on whatever they know or seem to know. Due to her mixed identity, she has the privilege, but also the burden, of filling respective cultural knowledge gaps. The fact that especially American readers can relate to her and trust in her ability to convey this knowledge is underlined by her dominant American self, as she constantly reiterates. This ensures her the necessary credibility and authority of an Egyptian American writer who nevertheless shares the American perspective to a high degree. These factors underlining her authorial agency in turn provide the necessary preliminaries for her to impact her readers from the very start of her narrative.

Kaldas's intensive identification with and appreciation of American identity continues to increase in the course of the memoir. The reader is always reminded of the double perspectives he is presented with, yet, also assured that the Egyptian side does not take over. The author increasingly longs to settle in a stable life in America, thus thinking more and more about her life in the U.S. (*LC* 83). She feels most comfortable when spending time among American expatriates in Cairo. Still, there is an invicible line separating her from non-Arab Americans. "Is this my Americanness: the heavy breath of balancing rocks?" she rhetorically asks, thus emphasizing the burden of her constant oscillation between two identities (*LC* 107). Somewhere inside, however, she is convinced that the life she wants to live cannot take place anywhere else than in America. This is highlighted when she describes her efforts to convince relatives to move to the U.S. As she realizes, this urge might also be rooted in rather selfish reasons. "Perhaps I want my cousin to come only to affirm my own sense of rightness in being in America . […] At times, I feel whole, secure, solid; at other times, the ground cracks under my feet" (*LC* 129).

The theme of split identity is introduced at the beginning of Kaldas's account and continues to span through the entire narrative. It is exactly the uncomfortable feeling she shares about being caught in the position of the cultural interpreter which highlights the immense responsibility linked to this role. The awareness of this responsibility punctuates her authority as an autobiographer to produce a credible and authentic account of her life experience. In addition, she always ensures that this authenticity to a large part relies on her voluntary affiliation as an American. These strategic moves to underline her authorial agency get complemented by the authentic fragments of diary entries and other material. These come to represent very personal pieces of a puzzle that forms a powerful pool of cultural knowledge. The intentionality behind this reassurance of multi-cultural authority gains striking confirmation when Kaldas reveals her thoughts on the importance of credibility and truth in the chapter "June Reflection: Authenticity and Influence" (*LC* 131):

> As an immigrant who came here as a child, I am part of what Rubén Rumbaut called the 'one-and-a-half' generation (quoted in Firmat 1994, 4). Emigrating as children, this generation is situated between those who emigrate as adults and those who are born in America. The question of authenticity is one that plagues many of us who cannot define ourselves with a single term. (*LC* 131)

Kaldas in this passage approaches the key dilemma of her identity struggle in a very theoretical manner. When quoting Rumbaut's concept of the "one-and-a-half generation," she even provides the respective source as one would in a scholarly paper. This style stands in sharp contrast to the very personal memory fragments in the form of e-mails and drawings which otherwise dominate the book. The struggle experienced by the respective immigrant generation, however, is not only rooted in

personal feelings of loss and disorientation, as she explains in these lines. Rather, her concern about "authenticity" highlights that cultural self-identification is immanently connected to the cultural definition applied by others. Linked to this is the act of communication, of mediating a torn identity that escapes simple explanations or disambiguation. This process of authenticity granted by the cultural *other* is thus complicated by the *self*-questioning of authenticity of the ones who compare themselves to earlier immigrant generations who adhered to their ethnic roots.

This evocation of authenticity and cultural credibility points to the author's concern for authorial agency in a larger context. Kaldas not only shares her doubts about her own cultural affiliation, she also shares her worries about representing this struggle on behalf of a cultural collective and in her life writing. Authenticity and truthful narration therefore clearly mark important guidelines for the production of her autobiography. Despite sharing the reader's longing to read truth rather than fiction in her life account, Kaldas also pinpoints the negative sides of authenticity as the ultimate aim of the writer. "However, the issue of authenticity can often stagnate the potential of artistic influence, which must ultimately lead to innovation rather than imitation," she warns (*LC* 133). Kaldas obviously does not want to become the victim of authenticity if understood as a constraint rather than a benefit. Still, as a writer, she does not clearly align herself with other artists whose main purpose might be innovation. Her strong concerns about the issue of authenticity therefore emphasize her efforts to position herself as an author who seeks the innovation of established cultural images based on authentic memory writing.

Innovation and her rather theoretical approach to the topic of authenticity also allude to another source of Kaldas's authorial agency. In addition to being a cultural insider in the worlds of the U.S. and Egypt, she also is a member of the academic world. It is her scholarly occupation that allows her to spend time in Egypt in the first place. Scholarship, however, is more than a mere profession in her life. It constitutes a major trait of her identity and also turns into another core pillar of her efforts to underline her authorial authenticity.

Scholarly Agency

One of the very first aspects the reader learns about Kaldas and her husband T.J. is that both work as university professors. The fact that T.J. even gains a prestigious scholarship to teach in Egypt for one academic year underlines this exposed intellectual status (LC 3).[7] Academic life therefore becomes the second core pillar of Kaldas's agency. It provides the ultimate ground for her efforts to change the public

7 Although the general readership might not be familiar with the benefits linked to specific academic fellowships, Kaldas makes no secret of the prestigious status associated to a Fulbright scholarship.

image of the Arab based on the well-reflected, authentic, and knowledgable life account of a scholar.

"International Schools" (*LC* 31), "The American University in Cairo" (*LC* 32), and "Cairo University" (*LC* 33) – these are some of the sub-headings found in Kaldas's early chapters. These headings automatically take the reader not only to Egypt as the other world but specifically to the academic realm in which she situates herself and her family. Her academic identity that Kaldas stresses from the very beginning of the life narrative is again linked to a constant shifting of perspectives. In this case, it is not the oscillation between two different ethnic identities. Rather, the fluctuation takes place with respect to two different levels of narration. One is the actual description of her experience, the other is the simultaneous analysis of this experience. The latter is rooted in her position as a scholar and intellectual who approaches every aspect in life with a high degree of abstraction and theoretical insight. An example of this entanglement of multi-ethnicity and scholarship is provided in one of the numerous examples Kaldas recalls from her teaching experience. "While teaching about colonialism, I stumbled over my pronouns: we […] they […] us […] them. I existed on both sides of the divide: the colonizer and the colonized. […] In this case, I learned to embrace my shifting pronouns; it was the only way to articulate the complexity of my own position" (*LC* 33).

This passage stresses Kaldas's authority to indeed speak from the perspective of both sides of the hyphen. In addition, this reflection exposes the intellectual angle from which Kaldas analyzes and describes her situation. The opposition between "we," "us," and "them," as well as the explicit reference to "the colonizer and the colonized," clearly reveal her knowledge of postcolonial theory to the reader. This degree of abstraction and the analytical distance linked to it clearly separate these lines from the level of mere personal storytelling. In fact, the "complexity" of multi-ethnic identity which Kaldas here explicity refers to also serves as proof of the complexity of her own thinking and thus of her intellectual capabilities. How important this intellectual identity is for her self-definition, Kaldas underlines when describing the academic surroundings in Egypt. "For me, AUC[8] is the place where I have felt most at home. East and West confront each other both in the curriculum and in the lives of the students and faculty. I felt closest to my students there whose lives also encompassed Arab and Western culture. Their education, class position, and travel experiences had placed them inside and between both cultures" (*LC* 33). This observation opens up the world of the academy as a microcosm of intellectual growth and multi-cultural encounter. The emotional undertone and Kaldas's emphasis on feeling "most at home" at the university demonstrate that she not only values the academy as place of intellectual advancement but as social institution where people share her mixed cultural background. Overall, this depiction grants

8 AUC is the abbreviation of the American University in Cairo.

the university a somewhat idealistic position with the ability to smoothe the cultural confrontation between "East" and "West" which causes so much conflict outside the academic realm and in the personal life of those representing both sides.

Despite her admiration of the university as place of identity reconciliation, Kaldas is well aware that the academic worlds of "East" and "West" differ considerably. In order to expose these differences, Kaldas provides a detailed sketch of the academic landscape in Egypt and compares it to the American one. Cairo University, where she and her husband teach, is presented as a large school with more than 100,000 students, low fees, and admission practices based on strict test score results. Kaldas immediately contrasts this to AUC, where she previously taught. Here, "Western influences" are much more dominant than at Cairo University, she notes, before stressing the university's role as place of political activism and social movement (*LC* 33-34). The American-run AUC, in contrast, is not described by her as the center of intellectual excellence but as the epitome of academic profit-making. This notion gains a satirical twist in her recollection of her first visit to the AUC campus. "But the first time I step on campus with its manicured lawns, tennis courts, and courtyards with fountains, I wonder if I'm still in America. The students in European clothes, young women wearing miniskirts, young men on a fashion runway in their jeans. I puzzled at how they got through the city streets dressed like that" (*LC* 110).

Kaldas with this very literal description of the AUC campus as a symbol of American materialism invites the non-academic reader to enter the academic world of Egypt.[9] The pictures she is presented with do not at all correspond to the ones of belly-dancing harem girls and veiled women. Yet, the critical undertone of Kaldas's depiction as well as her direct comparison of AUC to the rest of the city also immediately draw attention to the fact that this academic world is not the real Egypt. Although Kaldas highly identifies with this world, she is nevertheless aware that it constitutes an artificial realm within the Middle East. The seeming cultural unity and the lack of multi-ethnic conflict at AUC therefore are in no way representative of life in Egypt at large. Kaldas's interaction with other Egyptians, however, prevents her from giving in to the illusion that this imaginary state of hybridity is real. She thus recalls a conversation with another Egyptian asking her about her workplace. When she tells the lady that she teaches at AUC, the woman simply replies: "You're not really living in Egypt" (*LC* 110). This negative perception of the academy as somewhat fake world with its heavy emphasis on capitalist materialism also

9 Kaldas's detailed depictions of the academic environment and campus life indeed carry traces of the traditional campus novel, which emerged during the 1950s in Britain and by now has mostly disappeared entirely (Padley 74-5). Just like its fictional counterpart, her academic life writing opens up a world to the readership that is unfamiliar to those outside the ivory tower.

reminds the reader or the fact that these basics of American culture are not praised everywhere. In addition, the notion of value as defined in materialist terms from the perspective of the *West* also affects the status of Kaldas as a scholar in broader terms. "Where was I, participating in this space of Western images, gaining respect because I had lived in America?" she asks herself and the reader after describing the scene at AUC (*LC* 110).

Obviously, Kaldas's academic identity is marked by a similar degree of ambivalence as her multi-ethnic identity negotiation. On the one hand, she admits that the academy is the place where she feels most at home. On the other hand, she knows that the American University in Cairo is much more a miniature reservation of America than it is of Cairo, where American standards by far outweigh any Egyptian influence. The dilemma for Kaldas remains that she feels drawn to the American perspective despite the criticism and doubts she is facing. This also causes her to look at the Egyptian education system in more or less derogatory terms. When she mentions the education of her children in Cairo, she describes their school as "supposedly American run" (*LC* 22). The limitation of "supposedly," however, reveals her doubts that American education standards are in fact applied. As she admits, she therefore does not think her children learn a lot in the school (*LC* 22). This comment additionally stresses the strong belief of Kaldas in the value of education. The way in which she applies American education standards to the evaluation of Egyptian schools, though, also exposes her outsider status and the supposed cultural superiority connected to her American upbringing and her status as an American scholar.

By explicitly connecting her Arab American identity with her role as an intellectual, Kaldas again reveals her concern for authorial authenticity and credibility. Even though the mixed reaction by other Egyptians puts the academic world in a somewhat ambivalent light, the overall emphasis on the university setting and her ability to analyze her own situation from a detached theoretical perspective highlight her efforts to appear credible in the eyes of the reader. With this distinct "positionality," Kaldas purposely evokes the image of the intellectual who "can speak truth to power" (Shereen 109). Personal storytelling based on this academic agency in memoir thus turns into "honest scholarship" which blurs the line between fact and fiction (Marrouchi, "Counternarratives" 237). This honesty, however, is not merely based on "anti-Westernism," as is most often claimed as core strategy of the postcolonial scholar (Marrouchi, *Edward Said* 215). Rather, the postcolonial scholar as autobiographical writer here uses scholarly authority to present alternative images of the postcolonial other undermined by personal experience and substantiated by more abstract theoretical reflections. Autobiography in this sense becomes an "intellectual adventure" (Shereen 109). Kaldas thus functions as a prototype of the intellectual envisioned by Said who urged the scholar to "act in the interest of truth and justice and fairness and honesty" (Said, "Scholars, Media"

306). At the same time, this intellectual role is complemented by a larger social purpose. Kaldas therefore also takes on the function of a "political intellectual" by mirroring, analyzing, and possibly subverting stereotypes about the East (Marrouchi, "Counternarratives" 239). Overall, this model corresponds to the ultimate potential of the exilic intellectual envisioned by Said:

> I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation […]. Intellectuals can […] be divided into insiders and outsiders […]. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted […]. Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. (qtd. in Dabashi 6)

These words provide a summary of the analysis Kaldas undertakes of her own status. In her case, the outsider status fully unfolds while physically finding herself in "dislocation" in Egypt. By sharing her personal and scholarly insights about this state with the reader, she manifests her agency of "unsettling others." This notion of unsettling can be read as a synonym of reframing since it exactly describes the process of altering the mental maps of cultural outsiders. This reframing requires agency. In addition to cultural agency, professional agency strengthens the ability to make a cognitive impact on the reader. In the case of Ansary, this potential strongly relied on his journalistic persona. In the case of *Letters from Cairo*, the scholarly profession of Kaldas serves the same end. Her explicit efforts to reinforce her status as an intellectual in the eye of the reader thus serve as a powerful confirmation of the key role scholarly agency plays for the construction of autobiographical authority at large (Willard-Traub, "Scholarly Autobiography" 188). This finding also testifies to the lasting importance, authenticity and credibility play for the construction of the autobiographical self (Marrouchi, "Counternarratives" 231). Eventually, this strategy sets the stage for reframing the dominant stereotype of Egypt as home of the half-naked belly dancer.

5.2 REFRAMING THE EGYPTIAN BELLY DANCER (V_2 AND V_3)

The Literature Frame

Based on her authority as an Arab American scholar, Kaldas sets out to provide her personal picture of Egypt. Her medium is her memoir in which she establishes a series of issue frames to create alternative cognitive patterns for the reader to look at Arab and Arab American identity. To Kaldas, however, the detailed engagement with specific issues can only happen if the importance of mediation at large is accounted for. The act of writing thus takes precedence over anything that follows from it. "For me the writing comes first and the subject matter comes second," she explains in a biographical statement ("Quote"). In the frame analysis of *Letters from Cairo*, this conviction indeed is devoted much attention. As it turns out, literary production comes to form a dominant issue frame in itself.

Kaldas from the opening pages of her memoir onwards not only positions herself and her husband as scholars but as literary scholars (*LC* 3). Writing and the detailed engagement with literature thus play an important role in their lives. The very format of her memoir highlights her knowledge in this field by combining different literary genres and narrative techniques. This diversity of her literary production might point to a very artistic conception of writing on her part which stands alongside her scholarly style. Yet, literature to her only liminally constitutes an act of free creative invention since much of it is predetermined by one's personal history, as she explains. "But once born, so much is imprinted on us," she reveals in one of her early journal entries upon observing her daughters deal with the cultural transition to Egyptian life (*LC* 12). These words uncover the very encompassing but at the same time distinct metaphorical meaning Kaldas ascribes to writing as medium of personal expression. To her, the human being as a whole represents a text containing all the stories and experiences irreversibly carved into one's memory. This also points to the performative understanding of autobiographical production shared by Kaldas, since life writing in this sense cannot be separated from living one's life according to particular predefined trajectories.

This significance of the human being as text and as living document of partly unavoidable events gains special prominence in the context of history – both in terms of personal and political history. A powerful scene in this respect is provided in Kaldas's depiction of the family's arrival in Cairo. Right after getting off the plane, Kaldas feels the immediate and at the same time confusing impulse to kneel down and touch the ground. As she then reveals, the reflection on this impulse reminds her of the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Here, one of the main characters also fills a snuffbox with dirt from Afghanistan before leaving his homeland. A similar scene, Kaldas recalls from *Beirut Fragments*, a book that she

taught her college students. *Beirut Fragments* is a "memoir of the Lebanese Civil War," she explains. It provides a medium to teach her students about the loss of homeland and the urge to stay (*LC* 35).

These early references to important Arab American literary works from the contemporary period demonstrate how deeply interwoven Kaldas's life, thinking, and self-identification are with the realm of literature. Furthermore, the fact that she mostly refers to other literary works in the context of teaching foregrounds the didactic power she attributes to literary writing. Especially with respect to the aspect of migration and ethnic identity negotiation, literature seems to provide a tool to make her students look at life through a different lens. It is particularly striking that Kaldas with *Beirut Fragments* specifically mentions another *memoir* to exemplify the power of literature. Since this memoir with its focus on migration and loss shows close thematic overlaps with Kaldas's life story, the reference comes to represent a metaphor of her own autobiographical endeavor.

This didactical purpose behind teaching life and immigrant identity through the lens of literature becomes even more visible in another scene Kaldas remembers from her teaching career in the U.S., a moment when she referred to the essay collection *Becoming American*, written by a series of immigrant women in the U.S. In this book, she observes the following pattern of immigration and homeland:

> [T]he struggle for identity is often marked by a return to homeland. These writers describe their visits to their homelands as the turning point in understanding their identity in the new world. […] For several of the authors in *Becoming American*, the return to their homelands allows them to retrieve a part of themselves, making them feel whole and connected across time and distance with others. They achieve their American identity only after they have returned to their origins, finding their place within the community that propelled them into the world. (*LC* 65)

Clearly, this reflection on the complicated struggles of multi-ethnic identity negotiation and the importance of homeland mirror Kaldas's personal experience while at the same time underlining her scholarly agency. Despite sharing literary knowledge on the topic of ethnicity, Kaldas's elaboration on *Becoming American* again comes to serve as a form of self-analysis of the autobiographical work which she is about to produce. She here depicts the homecoming of immigrants to their country of origin as a real turning point in their lives. By shedding light on the impact of this experience for her students and for her readership, Kaldas also writes the story of her present life. As the protagonist of her own life narrative, she is one of those returning to their homeland. At the moment of writing, however, she is the one already reflecting on this transformational experience. The reader therefore is made aware of the significance the return to one's homeland has for Kaldas's life and for the narration of her life story in the memoir. Literature here becomes a

means of expression as well as the subject of literary analysis for the author. It is thus transformed from a mere topic to an interpretive lens through which the reader follows Kaldas's story.

The potential of literature to facilitate the changing of perspectives continues to be highlighted throughout the account, with particular emphasis on the author's experience in the college classroom. "When I teach immigrant literature in the United States," she explains, "the focus is on the lives of those who immigrate […]. Returning to Egypt, I saw the other side of the mirror: the effect immigration has on those who stay" (*LC* 65). Although Kaldas is well familiar with literary narratives of migration, the different context in which she teaches the seemingly familiar works causes her to look at the experience of migration from a different perspective. She describes this as a special challenge her husband also faces when teaching American and African American culture and literature in Egypt where students are unfamiliar with American society. This "challenges him to read the literature he teaches from a different perspective," she explains (*LC* 112).

The double significance of location in a geographical and metaphorical sense becomes especially obvious in another one of her reflections entitled "Understanding Where We Are." Kaldas here illustrates how she employs literature as a tool to make her American students change their ethnocentric position. She thus aims to widen her "students' vision of the world by introducing them to a variety of literature – African American, multicultural, immigrant, African, or Arab" (*LC* 112). In Egypt, Kaldas is trying to achieve the same effect by means of literary reading and interpretation to make her students "see the world through other lenses," as she writes (*LC* 112). The chapter title "Where We Are" again emphasizes the intertwinement of physical location, interpretative positioning, and identity. The location from which one looks at the world and the location from which the world looks at oneself are both connected to the question of "Who" one is, as Kaldas demonstrates. Narration thus always depends on positionality. This trajectory is impeded in the case of migrants who have lost their original geographical and interpretative position and are thus forced to see the world from a different angle. The return to the homecountry then complicates the simultaneous taking of multiple perspectives. The literary examples that Kaldas provides, while at the same time creating another illustration of this process in her own life account, invite the reader to adopt literary narrative as the key to changing perspectives.

Kaldas, however, does not limit the definition of narrative or storytelling to immigrant literature as such. Rather, non-written stories and the narratives of everyday life have a similar meaning for her. This expanded significance of narration becomes particularly visible in her observations of life in Egypt. Here, she puts the ordinary rather than the special into the center of attention. Be it the cook, a mail deliverer, or even a cab driver, Kaldas carefully scrutinizes the people in her surroundings and shares her impressions of how they manage life (*LC* 80). In this

context, she recalls the words of her husband in a letter to her friends. "T.J. always says: 'Everyone has a story.' This is certainly true in Egypt. At times I switch my gaze and turn to look at us from the outside […] and if I were a stranger, I would wonder what our story was and how we would tell it" (*LC* 81). In another instance, she further highlights the overall significance of literature for one's horizon: "It is the stories and poems of others that make our world larger, that stretch our vision so we can see beyond our own experiences" (*LC* 112). Kaldas in these lines further explores the meaning and function of narrative for biography. As the words of her husband underline, every life is based on stories which are worth telling. This is ver much in line with the contemporary concept of identity as narrative performance. Kaldas as a literary scholar obviously is aware of this theoretical conception of life narration and shares her views on it with her audience. This more abstract exploration of autobiographical writing is complemented by her insights into positionality. Narrative, as she makes clear, is not the product of recalling objective facts. The perception of the life of others and one's own life entirely depend on the perspective from which one looks at it.[10]

Very unobtrusively, Kaldas in these instances teaches the reader to leave his/her ethnocentric viewpoint by promising that in result, both the creation of narrative as well as its reading broaden one's knowledge in unprecedented ways. This also refers to the political and activist impact of literature. Her thoughts on this issue are triggered by the political events taking place in Egypt, such as student protests at the university (*LC* 101). When talking about her experiences with teaching political literature, she highlights her efforts to fight the resignated attitude of some of her students who think of themselves "as individuals who could not counter the actions of stronger nations" (*LC* 112). Kaldas here clearly advocates a postcolonial stance when it comes to the transformative function of literature in the social and political realm. This adds another dimension to the theoretical level on which she deals with the potential of literature. Not only do literary writing and reading facilitate the shifting of perspectives, they also actively interfer with the politics of one's time.

The function of narrative as an analytical and activist tool, however, is not limited to literature, neither is it bound to time. "Art, whether literary, visual, or performative, is the way we decipher our world. As recipients and creators of art, we are in constant motion, shifting our perspective of the world and our position in it," Kaldas writes (*LC* 113). She then links her own insights into the words of Edwidge

10 Kaldas's lasting occupation with the question of positionality is also reflected in her book *Time between Places*, published in 2010. The book comprises a collection of fictional short stories about Egyptian protagonists who either live in Egypt or immigrated to the U.S. Although *Time between Places* is a work of fiction, Kaldas here nevertheless focuses on autobiographical content.

Danticat in the essay "AHA"[11] whom she paraphrases by saying "our shadows can travel so we can be in two places at once" (*LC* 113). Kaldas with this literary reference expands her insights into writing and literature to art in general. What is particularly emphasized with respect to Danticat's finding thus quoted is the importance of the time dimension. Whereas being in more than one place is not exceptional for human beings in a dynamic world reigned by transnational movement, being there "at once" and not in sequence requires the metaphor of the shadow. This image of the traveling shadow also comes to represent a metaphor of Kaldas's approach to life writing in general. Writing about the past thus has the capacity to impact the present. At the same time, the present makes one look at the past from a different perspective. This voluntary and involuntary blending of past and present lies at the heart of modern life writing theory. Kaldas as literary scholar transmits these theoretical findings by means of writing her own story. The importance of narrative tense for the telling of life stories here again occurs in the context of Kaldas's daughters. As she points out, Celine even two years after their return to the U.S. continues to tell stories from Egypt "in the present tense" (*LC* 154). When the parents remind their daughter of the mistake by insisting that this happened "in the past," Celine reacts with indifference. Kaldas concludes, "the past and the present: she collapses them and places them in front of her in a seamless pattern" (*LC* 154).

With the exploration of time as important device in narration, Kaldas complements her comprehensive depiction of the role of literature in life and life writing. The "seamless pattern" that is "placed" in front of her daughter thus functions as a metaphor of Kaldas's memoir as a whole. Not only does she share thoughts on the significance of writing with the reader, she also reveals her very own writing process. In writing her "story" in the form of memoir, she at the same time introduces her readers to the very process of the memoir's production. This multi-dimensional engagement with literature is extended by her integration of theoretical knowledge from the fields of Literary and Postcolonial Studies. She does not, however, convey this information in a textbook format. Instead, she makes this knowledge easy to absorb by packaging literary theory in small parcels of anecdotes and references to other works of literature and art.

These different narrative and theoretical elements together create a cognitive frame which allows the reader to look at the narrative from the perspective of literary production. As Kaldas reiterates, the frame of literature allows one to see the world at large in a different light. This ultimately also impacts the image Americans have of Arabs and Arab Americans. Based on the detailed depiction of migration

11 AHA stands for African-Haitian-American. The abbreviation thus stands for a "doubly-hyphenated identity," which, in contrast to other models, does not focus on fragmentation but endorses inclusiveness and the value of multiple interpretive lenses deriving from an immigrant background (Mardorossian 46).

provided within this literature issue frame, the reader is given the opportunity to share the experience in the process of reading in order to understand the Egyptian, the Egyptian American, and also him-/herself differently. This high complexity linked to the didactic potential of literature at once eliminates the stereotype of Arab culture as poor in terms of cultural production. The aspect of Arab culture in a more nuanced sense, however, forms another issue frame.

The Culture Frame

When explaining the differences between teaching in America and teaching in Egypt, Kaldas observes how her husband meets the challenge of mediating a culture to students who are not at all familiar with American society. "To see a new culture," she concludes, "requires that you position yourself in a different place" (*LC* 112). Kaldas and her family do so in a physical and mental sense by traveling to Egypt. The memoir documents this place shift not only in the form of memory reconstruction but by assembling various cultural testimonies. *"I wonder if we smile because we're still very much an oral culture, because words are what bind us,"* Kaldas at one point notices (*LC* 58). This hint at the different modes of storytelling as part of a cultural legacy points to the overall meaning of culture as interpretative frame. Kaldas collects various elements of cultural production in her memoir and again combines them with theoretical elaborations. The total of these particles builds a cultural frame around the memoir, which not only teaches the reader about culture on an abstract meta-textual level but also functions as cultural artifact.

Kaldas literally allows her reader to "see a new culture" by equipping her memoir with very illustrative depictions of life in Cairo. She describes the noise in the streets, the sounding voices, parked cars on the side walk, chaotic traffic and the constant mingling of the inhabitants of an overcrowded city. "Human interaction is constant here beginning the moment we step out of the building," she summarizes (*LC* 19). Keeping physical distance in a culture like this appears to be extremely difficult and different from her usual habits (*LC* 20). This sense of personal closeness and intimate human interaction is not only bound to physical space. Rather, it points to an overarching understanding of human relationships as it differentiates between life in Egypt from the one in the U.S. Kaldas emphasizes this with an anecdote in one of her journal entries. She describes how the family used to go to a pastry shop in Garden City during their first stay in Cairo. When visiting the shop again during their second visit, the man remembers the family at once, even though their last visit dates back many years. Yet, to Kaldas, this heavy emphasis on individual human relationships is symptomatic of Egyptian culture at large. *"Here, if you go to the same store, you establish a relationship; a bond is formed and its*

strength holds. But in the U.S., I can go to the supermarket everyday and my presence will remain irrelevant," she explains (*LC* 24).

These reflections on everyday cultural experience and human encounter allow the reader to get a very vivid picture of Egyptian culture. The switching between different formats of narration, especially the short journal entries, furthermore allows the reader to take part in Kaldas's own cultural exploration. The author in this context predominantly draws on her multicultural authenticity by directly comparing Egypt and the U.S. The differences she encounters between both cultures with respect to patterns of human interaction become even more visible in retrospective. When she returns to the U.S. and moves to the South, she transfers the cultural dualism of "East" and "West" to the domestic cultural North/South divide in America. For people in the South, she notices, "human interaction was much more valued than efficiency and speed" (*LC* 155). This personal experience is again supplemented with her scholarly insights. "When I try to draw distinctions between Arab and Western cultures for my students," she acknowledges, "I explain how Western culture focuses on the individual while Arab culture focuses on the community […]" (*LC* 64). Again, this example emphasizes how Kaldas uses both her multiethnic as well as her professional status as a scholar to convey cultural knowledge on two levels – the personal and the more abstract theoretical level. In both cases, she draws on the method of binary juxtaposition to illustrate cultural differences.

Despite close human interaction as defining characteristic of Egyptian culture, Kaldas also explores language and cultural habitus as significant cultural elements. Again, she first depicts her personal experience to make her point. When previously teaching at AUC, the use of English alongside Arabic was common, she explains. The mere use of Arabic and the lack of English-language speakers at Cairo University, in contrast, cause a dilemma for her which make her shift identities. *"I've been told before that when I speak Arabic, I transform, become a different person*," she recalls the observation by others (*LC* 58). The transformative nature of language switching, however, is not the only dynamic element of culture that Kaldas recognizes. In addition, Kaldas recognizes a behavioral element as fundamental to cultural identity which seems visible to others but can hardly be defined by distinct cultural markers. As she learns, cultural habitus is something that changes with its surroundings. In the context of her interaction with other American expatriates, she thus observes that "twenty-five years in America allow my Egyptianness to be overlooked" (*LC* 107).

The given examples provide snapshots of the diverse cultural experience Kaldas has in Egypt. All of them are marked by a high degree of self-reflection. While looking at the culture of Egypt, Kaldas also looks at herself through the eyes of others. This multi-dimensional approach to cultural analysis underlines the complex image Kaldas designs of culture as a concept. This image does not at all correspond to the common notion of Middle Eastern culture as shaped by belly-dancing harem

girls and shisha-smoking sheikhs. In contrast to this popular notion of culture as based on cultural representation, Kaldas provides an almost sociological reading of the concept by enumerating different elements that together make up a conglomerate called culture. This understanding of culture is very much in line with the anthropological definition of cultural identity, comprising elements such as cultural behavior, language, and self-identification (Barker, *Cultural Studies* 476). In fact, this definition of culture as cluster of different fragments reflects the potpourri format of the memoir itself. Furthermore, it points to the very complexity of cultural identity which cannot be reduced to single stereotypes. This demonstration of the complexity of Arab culture, though, would remain incomplete if it left out the most stereotypical features of Arab identity – among them are dance and food.

As in the case of all other cultural features in her account, Kaldas chooses to deal with the prominent issue of food not by writing *about* it but by inscribing it into her work. The author therefore includes several Egyptian recipes throughout the memoir. In contrast to food memoirs which rely heavily on the textual intertwinement of recipes and storytelling, the recipes in Kaldas's memoir do not dominate. Rather, they are integrated whenever a respective journal entry or reflection points to a particular culinary event, such as the visit of the family to a special restaurant. The recipes themselves all have a very personal and at the same time cultural meaning since they mostly represent traditional Egyptian dishes (*LC* 46). These detailed insights into Egpytian cuisine allow the reader to easily grasp this important part of Egyptian culture. Kaldas in these instances again functions as a cultural interpreter by explaining the different ingredients and the places where to get them in America. Cooking therefore is not presented as a mere leisure activity. Rather, Kaldas highlights the meaning of cooking as form of art which requires cultural skills that she obviously lacks, as she admits. When mentioning the example of kosharee, a mix of lentils with rice and pasta, she describes the unique blending of ingredients and the taste as a "secret" which outsiders cannot fully grasp (*LC* 73). This emphasizes the important and almost mystical status cooking enjoys in Egypt. Food as a simplified cultural marker of Orientalism thus comes to symbolize a much more complex element of Egyptian culture. By offering the reader authentic recipes, Kaldas continues her mixed method of providing personal, theoretical, and practical information about Egypt. Just like her more theoretical depictions on culture serve the function of facilitating understanding for the reader, the recipes provide a practical "how to" key to reading Arab cuisine in a larger context.

A similar symbolic function within the cultural issue frame can be attributed to the drawings of her daughters which Kaldas includes. Despite some self-portraits of the girls, the paintings represent different cultural scenes, such as visits to famous sites at the pyramids, cultural events the family attends, and people they meet. From a simplified analytical standpoint of postcolonialism, some of these drawings could indeed be interpreted as Orientalist. For example, there is a drawing by Celine

Kaldas depicting a belly dancer in light dress, wearing heavy make-up and dark hair (*LC* 138).[12] What immediately resolves this Orientalist bias is the unadulterated immediacy of the experience speaking through the painting. Just like Kaldas records her daily impressions in the written form of the journal, her children express themselves by means of drawing. The obvious naiveté of the drawings rules out any kind of intentional Orientalist distortion. At the same time, this unfiltered recording of daily cultural experience steers attention to the fact that the given scenes indeed *are* part of the Eyptian cultural landscape. This plain empirical finding sometimes seems to be forgotten by scholars criticizing any image of belly dancers and oil sheikhs as Orientalist. Kaldas interferes in this ideological battle exactly by not participating in any normative judgements but by presenting the images of memory in a visual format. She thus leaves the reader with his/her own interpretations.

Image 7: Belly Dancers in the Past and Present

Source: On the left, "The Belly Dancer," drawn by Celine Kaldas (*LC* 138), on the right "La bella Otero," disguised as a belly dancer, Paris 1901 ("Oriental Dancing").

Kaldas in the context of her cultural exploration of Egypt also recalls artistic performances in Egypt. She remembers the names of famous Egyptian singers who used to count as "heroes of Arab culture" (*LC* 132). Since the days of her child-

12 The English term "belly dance" is a misnomer resulting from the translation of the descriptive French term "danse du ventre." The Arabic term raks al sharki literally means Oriental dance (Rasmussen 177). Belly dance by now has become an umbrella term for different variants of Oriental dance involving belly dance components. In contrast to the derogatory treatment of belly dancers as symbols of Orientalism, belly dancing traditionally counted as an admired art in the Middle East. It was performed by women who also displayed other artistic skills such as singing and poetry writing (van Nieuwkerk 136).

hood, however, Arab art has undergone a transition, she observes. This has resulted in a cultural blending which gives expression to the larger confrontation between the two worlds. "Today, Egyptian musicians […] utilize the beat of Western music," she explains, "combining a duality of sound to create songs that can speak to a generation that struggles with the influence of Western culture" (*LC* 132). This cultural fusion can also be noticed with respect to the consumers of Egyptian art. Kaldas recalls the audience at the concert to have consisted of "Egyptians and non-Egyptians." What she values most about the cultural event is the "opportunity for a sharing of culture that offers the possibility of learning and influence" (*LC* 132). She puts this credo into practice by explaining the historical origins of the dervish dance and its spiritual roots to the reader. Despite the sharing of this rich cultural knowledge, though, Kaldas is aware of her own cultural distance to Egypt. "I cannot judge the authenticity of the performance we watched," she admits when reflecting on the event (*LC* 133). This leads her to further reflect on the importance of authenticity in the context of cultural representation:

> I wonder what happens when dervish dancing and music are performed in the United States? In what way does the performance transform? Does it become less authentic? The same question must be asked when Western music travels to other countries. What happens when an art form like jazz, which is deeply rooted in the political, historical, and cultural experiences of African Americans, gets transported to other locations? (*LC* 133)

Just like the dervishes lift themselves to a higher level of consciousness during their spiritual dance performances, these thoughts place the topic of culture on a more abstract level of reading. Different from the average American spectator, Kaldas does know about the cultural heritage of the dervishes. Yet, she knows that the performers are viewed from a different perspective when performing in a different cultural setting. The performance itself might not change in the first place, but its evaluation from the cultural outsider probably does.[13] This, as she speculates, might then also alter the art itself. These reflections reveal the complexity underlying performed culture and its susceptibility to outside influences. Kaldas's own inability to determine the authenticity of the dance puts additional emphasis on this complexity. She demonstrates that it requires more than cultural knowledge to fully grasp the meaning of cultural performances. By directly relating this example to the larger trajectories of culture as traveling, Kaldas adds another theoretical level to her personal storytelling. She transfers the dervish performance to the American context of jazz music and thus forces the reader to question the meaning behind

13 Postcolonial dance scholars have interpreted the adoption of foreign movement elements by *Oriental* dancers as form of auto-exoticization (Maira 321). The formerly colonized are said to reproduce their own image through the perspective of the colonizer.

popular cultural symbols and their origin. Furthermore, the example of art and its transplantation to a different location here also functions as a metaphor of Kaldas's own process of multi-cultural identity transformation. Just like her life in the U.S. has transformed her, her stay in Egypt alters her personality once more. This process of transformation also applies to the narrative that records this identity negotiation if it is read in different cultural settings.

These multi-layered elaborations on culture ranging from everyday-cultural habits in Egypt to cultural performances point to the larger structural meaning of the issue. Kaldas's understanding of culture as a concept is highly sophisticated and self-reflexive. By sharing her thoughts and experiences on culture and its tranformation, she forces her audience to read Arab society and the prominent image of the belly dancer through a much more complicated cognitive lens. Her method of employing the familiar binary of *East* and *West*, of Egyptian and American culture, facilitates this thought process. The reader can thus integrate his/her own cultural experience while simultaneously being urged to question familiar thought patterns and ethnocentric criteria of cultural interpretation. A similar mechanism can be identified in case of the race frame.

The Race Frame

I'm making circles again, moving towards destinations that become points of departure, holding two homes till it seems my only place of comfort is in transit. Moving through airports for the last two days: Roanoke, Detroit, Amsterdam, Cairo – I'm reminded of how large the world is, of the variety of those who live in it, of how in the creation of these airports and the ability to cross borders, we encapsulate it – how much of the world is held in a single airport. […] Then my glance turns inward: we're an Egyptian-looking family speaking English, and I know the man is wondering who we are. (*LC* 8)

Just like culture is determined by different criteria that together form an important part of identity, ethnicity combines many different formative elements. Especially visual markers[14] have always been important for the definition of ethnicity, which explains the close and often involuntary relationship of the concept to race. Even though race has a very negative connotation, it nevertheless remains part of the daily practice of defining oneself and defining others, especially in predominantly "Western societies" (Barker, *Sage Dictionary* 170). As the above journal entry by Pauline Kaldas points out, the complex entanglement of ethnicity and race from the view of the outsider becomes another major frame through which she makes her audience share her experiences.

14 In addition, Barker and Galasinski list a series of other typical "[m]arkers of ethnicity," such as "*Personal reference*," "*Spatial reference*" (126), and "*Temporal reference*" (127).

The first information the reader gets about Kaldas's husband T.J. Anderson III in the opening sentence of the memoir is that he is an "African American poet and scholar" (*LC* 3). At the beginning, this statement might appear as a mere detail, just like Kaldas a few lines later describes her Arab American origin. Yet, this supposed detail of ethnic identity gains immense prominence for the family's stay in Egypt and for the reflection on this stay in the memoir. As it turns out, the fact that T.J. not only is *African* American but looks *Arab* American makes an important difference to his integration in Cairo. "T.J. discovered that his brown skin and African American features allowed him to blend in easily," Kaldas reports. "Egyptians told him that he had classic Egyptian features and insisted that his ancestry must be Egyptian" (*LC* 5). T.J.'s Egyptian-like complexion appears so obvious that he actually has trouble to convince others he is *not* Egyptian. This point is highlighted in his university environment. When Kaldas describes his first teaching experiences in the Middle East, the confusion about his racial background dominates the scene. His first task in the classroom thus becomes "proving his American identity," she explains (*LC* 21). "No one here believes he is not Egyptian, not only because he is African American with a similar complexion, but also because many Egyptians assume that all Americans are white and blond," she then adds (*LC* 21).

These very explicit statements on ethnic identity in connection with racial appearance seem quite awkward at first. Kaldas uses terms like "brown skin," "African American features," and "complexion" without hesitance. Since race and skin color meanwhile count as the products of social construction, one might as well judge Kaldas's statements as racist. This particularly applies to her emphasis on her husband's racial appearance. After all, it is not his language – he does not speak Arabic – or his habits that are categorized as Egyptian. Rather, the confusion of his ethnic identity, which nevertheless facilitates his cultural integration, is merely based on racial complexion. What makes the reader separate these explanations from the ones of a racist Orientalist taking a tour to Cairo is Kaldas's authorial agency as multi-ethnic Arab American herself. In addition, Kaldas does not theorize in these passages; she does not start out with abstract explanations as to which role race and ethnic appearance play in society. Rather, the importance of race for social acceptance which Kaldas stresses is solely based on the personal observation she makes concerning her husband. In light of her own struggle to feel at home in Egypt, one can even notice a slight feeling of envy between the lines since T.J. eventually faces no outside challenges when adjusting to Egyptian life. His familiar racial appearance causes natural trust in his work environment. Without actively taking part in a process of intercultural negotiation, this appearance "made it easier for students to respond to him, and it also encouraged them to rethink their images of America," Kaldas explains (*LC* 34).

What the author here calls "images" are in fact outright stereotypes of Egyptians toward America, such as the belief that Americans are mostly "white and blond."

Blondness as the extreme opposite of dark hair and skin color turns out to be a more comprehensive social ideal in the eyes of Egyptians, as Kaldas soon learns. One day, her housekeeper asks her why she does not dye her hair blond because, supposedly, "that is what everyone in America does" (*LC* 34). But not only is America known as the home of white and blond people, it is furthermore perceived as the country which does not tolerate any other skin color. Kaldas also hints at these "images of America" when referring to her husband's students. Obviously, these images are not at all favorable for the American ear, and they are quite widespread in Egyptian society. The family learns about this negative look at America in several everyday-encounters in Cairo. In one of her journal entries, Kaldas remembers a scene in a pastry store "*The new man in Tseppas who helped us said America was a racist country with no morals. And another man said everyone with black hair is not suspect in America. Mustafa [old pastry man] must have died before 9/11, his vision of America is still intact*" (*LC* 24).

As this incident reveals, the image of America among Egyptians does not at all correspond to the ideal of the multicultural melting pot in which everyone is welcome to contribute the uniqueness of his/her own ethnic background in order to form something new. Instead, America is seen as a severely racist country. By alluding to the impact of 9/11 in this context, Kaldas also illustrates how a major key event can suddenly alter or even destroy former images of a country and its people. Even the "vision" of America as open and plural society can thus quickly turn into a myth and be replaced by notions of hatred and racism. Kaldas in another passage makes this changed role of race in American society very elaborate:

> The image of America as a land of wealth and opportunity has been shattered for many here. The longing to go to America has been replaced by an anger that comes from feeling betrayed. Arab Americans have faced discrimination in the United States for a long time, but those in the Middle East are often unaware of it. Now, after 9/11, they have heard of the random attacks against Arab Americans, and they feel that there is no place for them in this new land. Their belief in those American ideals has turned into bitterness. (*LC* 36)

This passage emphasizes the impact of mediated key events on the global image of the United States. Race here plays an elevated role, as Kaldas explains. She identifies 9/11 as the major turning point that gave way to an unprecedented intensity of racism in the U.S. and also as the event which made this racism publicly visible around the world. Particularly in the Middle East where the U.S. still counted as attractive country for many prospective immigrants, despite certain political hostilities, the open racism against Arab Americans has put an end to any glorifications. The fact that euphoria and admiration on the part of Egyptians have thus been transformed into "bitterness" underlines the emotional significance of Kaldas's observations. Clearly, Egyptians are not depicted by her as the ones who have always seen

the U.S. as enemy. Rather, their high degree of frustration is only possible because they previously cherished the core value of racial equality which Americans themselves lifke to identify with. Despite the cracks the racist aftermath of 9/11 has caused for the image of America as favorite place of settlement for many Arabs, it has not fully forfeited its attractiveness. Immigration thus continues to be a prominent issue, even in Kaldas's extended circle of family and friends. Several of the families she meets in Egypt think about moving to the U.S. for work purposes, as she learns. Others decided to emigrate to Canada, such as her relative Rami and his family. "He was the only one tho could talk of racism, teaching me the word in Arabic," Kaldas remembers (*LC* 62).

Her stay in Egypt obviously brings about further learning experiences that endow the word racism with further meaning. The constant confrontation with the issue of race from the part of other Egyptians makes her elaborate on the topic in broader political, historical, and theoretical terms. Kaldas witnesses the protests regarding the Palestine conflict in high schools and universities in April 2002. The uproar is also related to racial reservations on the part of the Egyptian protesters and their hostility toward foreigners from the *West*. As Kaldas notes, T.J. still manages to escape the conflict-laden atmosphere and is allowed to pass through the gates of the university without difficulty because he is again identified as Egyptian based on his appearance (*LC* 37). Palestine, for Kaldas, only marks one example that shows how torn world society is between racial, cultural, and ethnic divisions. "Today, a wall still exists between the Greek and Turkish sides of Cyprus and Israel is building a wall along the West Bank. Such walls have marked our history," Kaldas reflects, "creating divisions that limit our vision" (*LC* 131). Often, these divisions evolve around the question of how "blood, location, and language become signifiers of identity," she gloomily ponders (*LC* 131). American history provides the prime example. Here, the "distinction between blacks and whites" was essential to slavery, the author analyzes, which in turn was the basis of inferior treatment (*LC* 132). Similar conditions in the present affect the definition of Native Americans who have to prove their "Indian blood" in order to be recognized. "It seems we might divide ourselves into oblivion," Kaldas wearily concludes.

The way in which the author deals with the issue of racism again proves her commitment to functioning as a cultural interpreter. Based on the multiple vignettes she presents on racial appearance and racial stereotypes, she draws a larger bow to the overall social, political, and historical conditions surrounding racism and ethnic-political conflict on a global scale. The style eventually equals a historical inquiry more than a memoir. By specifically elaborating on the history of racism in the U.S., Kaldas immediately transfers her racial experiences from Egypt to the American context. The image of "walls" separating countries and peoples in various parts of the world, as well as the emphasis on dividing lines in a larger sense, are major tools of Kaldas's didactic technique. Based on her cultural authority, she points to

the significance of these binaries while at the same time challenging them. By making her American readers look at their own country's history as evidence of racist practice, she sets the groundwork for a change of thinking.

Besides encouraging her readers to reflect on the internalized binary between black and white, between self and other, Kaldas also provides more concrete starting points for overbearing these binaries. She does so by employing the example and voice of her daughter Yasmine who "rejects the label some put on her," as Kaldas explains (*LC* 132). When others tell Yasmine that she is "half African American and half Egyptian," she reacts with fierce disagreement. "How can you be half anything?" Kaldas quotes the response of her daughter (*LC* 132). "She claims an identity made of two wholes so that she can be all Egyptian and all African American at the same time," she then adds. This insistence on wholeness within a state of division is even more explicitly emphasized in a poem by Yasmine entitled "Who I Am":

> Dark faces, black hair are my relatives
> with a whole bunch of Oklahoma in between.
> Some beating drums
> Some Pharaohs
> and some American cheese
> are who I am. (*LC* 147)

This poem wraps up the issue frame of race in Kaldas's narrative. Not only does she make her reader interpret Arab and Arab American identity from a different and less clear-cut racial perspective, she also designs an alternative image of identity that incorporates difference without causing conflict. Kaldas presents this somewhat idealistic solution in the naïve poem of her child. Exactly because it is a child speaking here, and not Kaldas herself, such otherwise racist descriptions as "Dark faces" and "black hair" can appear alongside the phrase "some American cheese" without raising suspicions of racism. For the reader now looking through the racial cognitive frame that Kaldas creates, these supposedly naïve words model an identity which is anything but trivial. It stands for a renewed concept of race that allows individuals who combine multiple ethnicities to follow the example of "Who I Am" and define themselves instead of constantly being defined by others. Unfortunately, however, there are other hurdles to overcome in order to eventually redefine the image of the Arab in the larger public discourse. As often in life, this obstacle involves the issue of money.

The Economy Frame

Borders and walls not only divide ethnic groups and cultures, they also create fissures between different socio-economic groups. This phenomenon is global, yet, the faces of poverty and wealth look different in every country. Pauline Kaldas begins to concentrate on economic circumstances in Egypt at an early point in the memoir. In the course of her account, this focus forms one of the most visible and stable frames of her life narrative. Here, cultural, ethnic, and social differences culminate and result in class conflict.

The quilt format of Kaldas's narrative allows for the integration of many everyday-experiences without adhering to a strict thematic order. It is through these snapshots of supposedly unimportant details that the reader learns most about the world of Egypt through the mediative distance. One of these details is connected to the story around a family dinner in a large hotel in Cairo. Upon entering, the Kaldas family members have to go through metal detectors. Heightened security measures, however, are only one result of the larger social divide which Kaldas becomes aware of pretty quickly. "*The discrepancy between rich and poor, with the rich marked by Western modernism, has become even more striking*," she writes (*LC* 10). The Marriott as an emblem of this "Western modernism" comes to represent the microcosm of class division, as she explains in another instance. "However, the only ones who can afford this restaurant are the foreigners and the upper class, two groups of people who are perhaps quite similar. The upper class who frequent the Marriott are marked by their access to the West […]" (*LC* 29). It is this upper and partly also middle class which "help to sustain the Western businesses that are quickly claiming their territory in Egypt," Kaldas furthermore explains (*LC* 29).

These detailed elaborations on the relation between everyday impressions and larger economic trajectories focus the attention of the reader on the issue of economics early on in the narrative. Kaldas illustrates the economic and class situation in Egypt from the perspective of a cultural insider of both worlds east and west of the Nile. The very fact that she is able to make these observations in privileged places such as an upscale hotel automatically identifies her as a member of the very upper class she writes about. This shifts her focus to her own living conditions. With her husband being a Fulbright fellow, the family is provided with a spacious apartment and several servants to clean the home and take care of other needs (*LC* 12). This reminds Kaldas of her middle-class childhood in Cairo. The family also had servants and other luxurious privileges. This possibility of hiring personnel, however, has changed dramatically since her childhood. In present-day Egypt, she observes, only the very wealthy can afford to have servants. "Even the language has changed. The word 'servant, which was used when I was a child, is now considered somewhat derogatory and instead the word 'worker' has taken its place," she

acknowledges (*LC* 84-85). Kaldas reads this change of vocabulary as an indicator of a larger social division and an economic shift. "Class dictinctions often seem marked by those who provide the services and those who can pay for them. This creates a country of entrepreneurs who, regardless of whether they can read or write, find ways to tap into the marketplace" (*LC* 85).

Such detailed reflections on class especially dominate the chapter "April Reflections: Making Ends Meet" which is almost entirely devoted to the analysis of economic circumstances in Cairo. The fact that the family still has servants while staying in Cairo emphasizes Kaldas's own privileged status which reaches back to her childhood. This becomes even more obvious since the possibility of average Egyptians to have servants has become considerably smaller. Kaldas's comparative wealth therefore not only separates her from the majority of other Egyptians but also from extended family members. When describing the living conditions of her uncles and aunts in Egypt, Kaldas employs almost textbook-like economic criteria. Their living environment "*can best be described as a working-class neighborhood. Here, it is rare to see anyone dressed in stylish Western clothing*," she reveals (*LC* 55). Kaldas, however, knows that her privileged status is not the result of her own economic rise in Egyptian society but the unintended product of the fortunate circumstance of living in the very place where "Western clothing" is everyday apparel. "Arriving in Egypt, we became wealthy," Kaldas sarcastically identifies the moment of conversion from an American middle-class family to the upper class in Cairo who can undertake fancy dinner outings regularly (*LC* 109).

This fairly humorous take on her privileged status comes to be overshadowed by the economic reality Kaldas encounters outside the walls of luxurious hotels. Here, extreme poverty can be observed in the streets and at popular tourist getaways. The author again provides very vivid illustrations of these scenes. In "Snapshot 5," Kaldas presents a short poem describing a young man selling T-shirts in front of the Sphinx. "T-shirts, two for ten pounds, my mother make them last night," she quotes his broken English (*LC* 87). Even in one of the sections where Kaldas provides traditional recipes, the economic context enters the picture. When describing the preparation of ful, a traditional breakfast dish in Egypt, Kaldas highlights the social context of the meal. "Ful provides basic nourishment for the poor in Egypt," she describes, "many of whom can afford little else to feed their families" (*LC* 94). Exactly those who "can afford little" or hardly anything, Kaldas sees begging in the streets of Cairo. Especially children follow the obvious stranger, motivated by the hope to get some money. It is exactly this inescapable and immediate confrontation of rich and poor, of two separate worlds that clash, which seems to worsen the material poverty even more. This becomes strikingly evident in a scene Kaldas recalls from her home at AUC. When the plumber came to repair something, he brought his little son. The child would not move anymore after see-

ing the interior. "Through his eyes, the apartment, magic carpets to ride, bouncing on clouds. We had created the moment of his poverty," Kaldas admits (*LC* 109).

These further instances in which Kaldas deals with poverty, wealth, and class differences bear testimony to the increasing importance the issue plays in the narrative. What drives her depiction is not the separated illumination of rich and poor living conditions but the friction that emerges at the intersection of both. Not only does poverty exist due to the lack or shortage of money. The feeling and the awareness[15] of poverty are reinforced when confronted with the opposite extreme, namely, unattainable wealth and abundance. The story of the plumber's son powerfully illustrates this logic. As Kaldas's reaction to the boy reveals, she is deeply aware that the mere view of their wealth awakens a sense of poverty in him which did not exist before. This feeling of estrangement in light of so many material goods is furthermore accentuated by the Orientalist reference Kaldas makes to "magic carpets." Both, the magic carpet and the view of Kaldas as being extremely wealthy are creations of fantasy. Still, the visual depiction of wealth deepens the gap to poverty. This example makes the reader aware of how the material abundance that counts as average for Americans, is looked upon from a different perspective. Furthermore, this personal confrontation with poverty contributes significantly to Kaldas's questioning of her own class identity. She is reminded that much of the wealth she is able to enjoy is merely a result of the fact that her parents once decided to live in the *West*. Upon realizing this, she asks: *"Where would I have been if I had stayed?*" (*LC* 111). The preposition "where" in this question is a rhetorical one because it refers to class position and Kaldas knows well that the possibilities to achieve her current socio-economic status would have been very limited in Egypt.

This increasing attention to economic circumstances and class difference does not prevent Kaldas and others to take advantage of the monetary privileges Egypt has to offer. Instances of this privileged life are provided when Kaldas reports on her visits to major grocery stores in Cairo. She gives a very detailed depiction of what she finds in these shops. "The store shelves are loaded with Western products from soaps and shampoos to coffee makers and computers," she describes (*LC* 20). Even gummy bears and Harry Potter books are available for her daughters. She devotes an entire subchapter entitled "Western Products" to the issue of material goods and explains that "American products" started being available in the 1980s (*LC* 30). The label "Western Products" here not only refers to soap and toys from America. Rather, the overall market picture Kaldas depicts hardly leaves any category untouched – from "Western" wardrobe to "Western-based education," anything seems to be handily available in the *Eastern* marketplace (*LC* 32). Even

15 The story serves as a confirmation of Spivak's presumption that only contrast creates consciousness. This specifically applies to subaltern consciousness in the case of postcolonial literature (Huddart 133).

America's most popular export model, i.e., the fast food industry, has successfully established itself in Egypt, as Kaldas acknowledges. Chains, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds, and Pizza Hut are competing for upper-class Egyptian customers (*LC* 29). "These fast-food chains have become locations of status and money, buoys on the streets of Cairo that mark class differences reflecting an acceptance of American products," she explains. This heavy influence of *Western* capitalism also causes amazement on the part of American friends visiting Kaldas. When seeing the flood of familiar fast food signs, one of them exclaims: "I can't believe how Western everything is" (*LC* 50).

In contrast to her American friends, Kaldas witnesses this ongoing process of *Westernization* with mixed feelings. Having grown up in the country of burgers and fried chicken, she also knows about the downsides of large-span capitalism. Some of the shortcomings connected to this are of a very practical nature in that the abundance of *Western* products hurts the domestic industry. Kaldas reports on a law that was passed to restrict the import of foreign goods (*LC* 20). This measure, however, seems to have little effect, she explains, because foreign products continue to be favored by those who can afford it. Kaldas then provides a thorough description of these economic trajectories:

> Western products are perceived to be superior to anything made in Egypt and of course they're very expensive. The cost of living has gone way up, making the poor even poorer while the middle class scrambles even more to make ends meet. Yet, there is still a strong upper class. The upscale restaurants and hotels are crowded with Egyptians, wearing the latest styles and flashing their mobile phones like jewelry. (*LC* 21)

This influence of "Western products" is not limited to the aspect of class formation and interior market conditions. Furthermore, the economic penetration of the *West* is inherently intertwined with politics. The growth of Egypt as a fastfood nation plays a particular role in this context. "There are those who argue that these restaurants are the hand of American imperialism," Kaldas delineates the different fronts for the reader (*LC* 30). The concept of imperialism thereby opens up another theoreotical layer of Kaldas's economic analysis. The topic also concerns her as a teacher in the classroom. Here, the political implications of the term, however, do not seem to fall on fruitful ground. Kaldas recalls explaining the concept of imperialism to her American students at AUC. She urged them to not buy American products because this hurts the Egyptian economy. Their answer was not one that she favored: "Why should we buy inferior products?" they replied (*LC* 31).

To Kaldas's own disappointment, she does not really have a convincing answer to this. Despite her awareness of the negative consequences the West's interference with the Egyptian economy, her American identity also makes her share the students' view in many ways. The judgement of the Egyptian economy as being "infe-

rior," as they put it, therefore also shimmers through in Kaldas's own behavior. This becomes strikingly evident in her elaborations on the Egyptian school system. When trying to pay the monthly tuition fee for her daughter, Kaldas is constantly asked to pay a different amount whenever she shows up at the school. Most of the times, she is asked to pay more than originally advised. When interjecting, the secretary behind the counter simply states that paying less would be "fine" as well (*LC* 22). This lack of a consistent and transparent tuition fee system, one that does not differentiate between *Western* and *Eastern* school parents, tempts Kaldas to use the example of schools to provide a generalized summary of the Egyptian economy:

> The Egyptian economy may be as mysterious to explain as how the pyramids were built. […] I guess, it all goes along with having to give a tip to the man who slices your cheese and luncheon meat at the supermarket, and the salesperson who shows you merchandise in a shop, as well as the one who wraps your pastries, and of course the one who mysteriously appears from behind the Queen's Pyramid in Giza to give you a tour. (*LC* 22)

This generalized depiction of the Egyptian economy as based on randomness and bribery obviously is not a positive one. The derogatory manner in which she describes the situation is fostered by Kaldas's allusion to the pyramids. The pyramids have become the most prominent symbols of Orientalism throughout the centuries. Kaldas even reinforces the economic component of this Orientalist image that relies on the stereotypes of the rich oil sheikh and the somewhat oblique and hard-to-be-trusted camel trader. Kaldas in another instance even provides a modern version of this character when explaining how taxi drivers estimate the "economic capabilities" of their customers before suggesting a price for their service. "In Egypt's economy, everything is negotiable," she states and links this to the emergence of a large informal sector (*LC* 85).

Obviously, the derogatory undertone in these lines makes it difficult to distinguish Kaldas from other Orientalists. She certainly is convinced that her familiarity with the U.S. economic system entitles her to make judgements about the inferiority of the Egyptian practice of trading. The sarcasm she employs highlights this sense of Western superiority. The American reader might thus be tempted to find confirmation for any pre-existing Orientalist stereotypes in Kaldas's words. Her non-American students at Cairo University, however, prevent her and the reader to fall into this Orientalist pitfall. They do so by holding the mirror to the face and flaws of the U.S. economy. When explaining the issue of homelessness in America to her students, Kaldas meets puzzled faces. "America is so rich," she recalls the reaction of her students. "How could anyone be homeless," they ask themselves while thinking of America as the country where people "live like people in Dallas, right?" (*LC* 28). Kaldas becomes aware that the circumstances she is describing destroy the vision of America as "the golden land" (*LC* 28). Even more importantly,

the students' reaction reminds her that the image she herself has of America is more of a vision than reality. She and her American readers are aware that the former economic treasures of America have mostly turned into visionary stereotypes. The homeless people Kaldas is talking about do exist and so does poverty in the U.S. The outrage of the Egyptian students when learning about these economic conditions leaves the reader no option to uphold the image of America as the Land of Plenty. In this respect, the U.S. cannot claim any superiority over Egypt. In fact, as Kaldas notes later in the book, homelessness is a problem which reveals deeper social shortcomings which the U.S. has no reason to be proud of. In a collective culture like Egypt, homelessness is prevented by the support of close-knit families who feel a high degree of responsibility toward their relatives. "So although there is poverty in Egypt, the focus on community and family rather than on the individual makes it rare to find someone who lives in isolation," she explains (*LC* 86).

Kaldas with her thorough insights into the Egyptian economy and its links to other social realms sets up another issue frame through which her audience can interpret Arab identity apart from pre-existing stereotypes. As a multi-ethnic interpreter, she is able to look at the class systems in Egypt and in the U.S. by contributing further knowledge on the causes and effects of wealth and poverty. Her method again heavily relies on binary contrasting which enables her to directly confront the American readership with common stereotypes of Egypt. At times, Kaldas in these instances in fact confirms certain Orientalist stereotypes due to the dominance of her American identity affiliation. In other cases, she distances herself from U.S. imperialism and hyper-materialism by pointing to its moral and social flaws. In both cases, the comparative model which Kaldas employs by drawing on the binary of *East* and *West* allows the *Western* reader to immediately identify with the economic problems thus depicted. Moreover, the mirror that Kaldas designs forces the reader to rethink the image of the rich oil sheik or the poor Arab begger. These stereotypes are overturned by Kaldas's image of the "New Middle East"[16] which stands in total contrast to the Old Middle East as backward and uncivilized. In fact, the U.S. are ultimately characterized as uncivilized when it comes to preventing individuals from drowning in poverty. Kaldas therefore arrives at a model which does not place monetary wealth at the top of the hierarchy of human needs for achieving a good life. "Despite our wealth, we are so isolated in the United States. As hard as it is, it's good to have left America for a while, to turn our heads and look from a different direction," she explains her own learning process (*LC* 82).

16 The term "New Middle East" was introduced to the world in June 2006 in Tel Aviv by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (who was credited by the Western media for coining the term) in replacement of the older and more imposing term 'Greater Middle East'" (Nazemroaya).

Although the U.S. within this economic issue frame slowly loses the status as economic hegemon, the legacy of imperialist practice remains highly visible. The very fact that *Western* and *Eastern* origin still marks the ultimate quality criteria for consumer goods is the most obvious characteristic of this lasting cultural and economic influence. Kaldas's constant reference to these criteria sustains the enduring division of two economic and cultural spheres. The long-term effect of this materialist bias is proven by Kaldas's personal vision of a successful and enjoyable life. "I've acquired the desire for the American dream and want that piece of land with a house and yard, to set down a claim and draw a boundary around what I can call my own," she explains toward the very end of the memoir (*LC* 150). The economic frame through which she analyzes Egypt and the U.S. therefore does not prevent her from giving in to the materialist impulse of the *West*, as she consciously acknowledges. Although Kaldas at this point is more than aware that the "American dream," including its promise of wealth, is just as much a fable as the Egyptian camel trader, she nevertheless adheres to it. Learning and mediating alternative perspectives of interpretation is thus not the same as actually changing one's perspective, as this example demonstrates. This lesson particularly holds true when approaching the issue of politics.

The Political Frame

> Finally, here's something I don't think that we have learned, and that is what makes people become suicide bombers. The preconceptions we have, which is that it's a long process of people becoming brainwashed and then finally at the end of that process, when they become fervent fanatics, they become willing to become suicide bombers, turns out not to be right. In many cases, the distance between what we would consider to be a normal Westerner and somebody who's willing to blow themselves and their children up in an airplane is a matter of weeks, and we don't fully understand that. We don't understand the mechanism of that. (Chertoff et al.)

This excerpt from NPR's special on the 9/11 anniversary in September 2011 points to the lasting lack of knowledge in the *West* concerning the roots of terrorism in the *East*. It is this lack of knowledge that creates the fear and distrust toward the Middle East. The journey of Kaldas and her family is overshadowed by the climax of this fear. Her husband has accepted the Fulbright scholarship shortly before 9/11. All of a sudden, the "positive journey" turns into the culmination of the "uncertain," Kaldas remembers her feelings (*LC* 8). Friends and ultimately Kaldas herself start questioning their decision to go to Egypt due to the fear of terrorism. They nevertheless decide to leave for Egypt in January 2002. Traveling with them is the media footage that frames the image of the Arab around the world. This frame also comes

to surround the family's experience in Cairo and eventually of her memoir. Kaldas is thus forced to engage with politics and in this position she also sheds light on the question how people "become suicide bombers."

At the beginning, Kaldas wonders if there is some mysterious power making the family always stay in the Middle East at the height of political unrest. Their first visit in 1990 was overshadowed by the Gulf War. Now, 9/11 has transformed the political world forever (*LC* 34-35). Despite the dominance of this event, Kaldas seems to hope that the flight over the Atlantic allows the family to escape the WOT somehow. It quickly turns out, though, that the international terrorist threat continues to haunt her. Everywhere she goes, whatever she does, terrorism follows her.

Everyone wants to talk about America and 9/11. This cab driver told me people are angry at the way the U.S. tries to dictate to other countries. People are fed up, he said, with the way the U.S. handles the Palestinian issues and how it wants everyone to accept America's right to defend itself but won't allow other countries, especially Palestine, to do the same. He argued that in response to the terrorist acts of 9/11, the U.S. destroyed a whole country, but it won't let Palestine do anything. (*LC* 25)

These words uttered by a cab driver in Cairo who takes her to a book fair is Kaldas's first intensive encounter with the effect of the WOT in Egypt. The driver, however, does not leave it at this political outburst. In addition, he provides Kaldas with the larger story of "how terrorism is born," as she recalls (*LC* 25). The story evolves around a young boy whose mother is selling goods on the sidewalk. One day, an officer walks by and simply destroys her goods. The mother is helpless and so is the child. Years later, the officer has been promoted but still keeps roaming the streets, destroying the goods of poor bargainers. At this particular time, however, the boy has grown into manhood and the story ends as follows: "When he saw the chief officer, he picked up a banana cutter and killed him. Because what he saw done to his mother, had stayed with him and opened a vein in his body" (*LC* 25).

This story narrated by the cab driver marks the center of her journey entry on February 8 and at the same time concludes the entry – nothing follows these tragic lines. The reader is left with the powerful image of the young boy growing into a violent killer due to the injustice he formerly experienced. One can only speculate how Kaldas reacted to the story. She does not reveal any feelings in this instance by leaving the story uncommented. Her implicit statement on its meaning is provided by the very fact that she does include this vignette in the memoir. Indeed, it provides an answer to the question the American radio commentators and self-declared terrorist experts raise on the origins of terrorism. It gives a shocking answer, yet, it leaves the evaluation of this answer to the reader. This interpretative silence amplifies the power of the story itself. Obviously, the logic of terrorism is based on revenge for previous injustice committed by the self-declared powerful. Those with-

out power do not have a voice, like the little boy who could only passively witness the events. Later, he forcefully regains agency through violence. Kaldas offers another solution to this violent scenario by giving voice to the Arab cab driver. The scene marks one of the very few exceptions in which Kaldas employs direct speech, apart from the letters and stories written and thus formulated by family members.

Speaking on behalf of America is something which Kaldas is forced to do as her confrontation with the political world after 9/11 increases in Egypt. "*And everywhere people ask me what is America like now after 9/11, and I'm not sure what to say except that there are good people in America – I have one foot on each continent and I can't seem to strike a balance,*" she describes her uneasiness (*LC* 26). Obviously, she is pushed to speak about the collective state of America in a way that she is not able to. Against her will, the mere fact that she is recognized as American forces her to function not only as a cultural and linguistic interpreter, but also as a political one. As she reveals in her chapter "Politics in Translation," she feels completely unprepared for this role because her knowledge of politics is limited. "I do not presume to understand international policy, and, like others, I am limited by what the media chooses to show me" (*LC* 35). This emphasis on expertise and detailed knowledge highlights Kaldas's self-definition as a scholar. As such, she prefers to make statements based on detailed knowledge and profound insight instead of speculating or generalizing without sufficient background. She thus clearly separates herself from the media and other actors participating in public political discourse.

Instead of adopting the role of the pseudo-experts[17] found in the media, Kaldas thus retreats to her role as a personal storyteller and chooses to relate to political events only based on her own experience. One of these major key events is the 1967 War. Although Kaldas was only six years old at the time, she still remembers the sound of the Israeli planes flying over her head and the sad face of her mother when one of her brothers got killed (*LC* 36). Kaldas immediately transfers these memories to the present political situation in which families in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer the same feelings. The same holds true for the ongoing conflict in Palestine, which also leads to student protests at Cairo University and other institutions during the family's stay there. Kaldas in all these cases emphasizes the fact that these are not merely conflicts between Arab countries in the Middle East. These are conflicts in which the United States has been involved over decades and ultimately lost its reputation over a series of violent responses (*LC* 36). Nevertheless, this national image directly touches the lives of individuals. "The fear is that the anger against

17 The media coverage of the WOT has fostered the emergence of many so-called "pseudo-experts" who shape the public debate and frame fear (Debrix 3). Pseudo-experts often present themselves as semi-intellectual figures but actually lack official academic qualifications. Their expert status mostly relies on their repeated media presence (Debrix 46).

U.S. foreign policy will turn into anger against individual Americans," she states (*LC* 37). Kaldas as a consequence senses the "rise of anti-American feelings" when some of her friends from America visit (*LC* 82). She feels relief when they manage to leave safely.

Despite her initial impulse to reject the role of a political translator, Kaldas in these thorough reflections on political events related to the Middle East does much more than simply tell her story. She conveys important background knowledge on the political history of Egypt and its neighboring countries which many of her readers might not be familiar with. These events are marked by violence and military conflict that puts them into the overall context of the WOT frame. By presenting the Egyptian view on U.S. foreign policy as related to these events, Kaldas not only recites television news but provides an alternative pattern of interpretation for her readers. As she learns, the hostility against U.S. policy is not based on blind hatred but on honest disappointment and personal suffering caused by the U.S. There is no oversimplified or reductionist view of U.S. politics on Kaldas's part. Instead, she elevates the emotional and normative level of the given political conflicts in allowing other Egyptians to voice their lack of trust in U.S. policymaking. The most intriguing example of this method is provided by another one of her daughter's letters: "Dear President Bush, I'm an American Egyptian," Yasmine writes. "I'm eight years old. I don't think you're acting well in what's going on with Israel and Palestine" (*LC* 90). These seemingly naïve words uttered by a child express the general opinion and critique Kaldas discovers among the Egyptian population. Just like Yasmine, many of them do not base their evaluations of U.S. politics on sophisticated political analyses but on personal feelings of "right and wrong." Despite the seeming infantility of this approach, it reflects Kaldas's own method of binary contrasting to convey knowledge abou the *Other*.

The role of the political interpreter does not stop with Kaldas's departure from Cairo. "Back in the United States, I am again asked to be a political translator, and I am no more comfortable with the role," she explains (*LC* 37). Next to fulfilling this role as a teacher in the classroom and in daily life, Kaldas continues her political function as a writer. The overall importance of political framing for the identity definition of Arabs and Muslims around the globe has occupied her in various journalistic publications in which she comments on her own experience as Arab living in the U.S. Despite the non-literary genre, Kaldas here never takes the position of a detached journalist, but always frames her writings as life narratives to explain the "politics that reach into our lives" (Kaldas, "Walking"). Her memoir can as well be interpreted as such an act of political translation from public to personal. The political frame drawn by Kaldas is much more diverse than the logic underlying the WOT. The latter remains visible but does not dominate the account. This effect, however, is not only achieved by conveying multi-ethnic knowledge on political events to dissolve American half-knowledge. In addition, Kaldas provides a thor-

ough analysis of how this half-knowledge on the Middle East takes its origin in the global mass media.

The Media Frame

Kaldas from the beginning of her stay in Cairo pays close attention to the media environment surrounding the family in their new home. As she explains, their TV provides about five channels with only one of them broadcasting English and French programs (*LC* 20). In light of the enormous number of TV channels available in the U.S., this poses a clear contrast to the usual information environment Kaldas is used to. She does not see this as a large limitation, though, since the content of the broadcasts still proves enlightening in many ways:

Watching the news here has been an exercise in shifting perspectives. Every newscast, regardless of whether it is in Arabic, French, or English, begins with news of Palestine and Israel, first highlighting Israeli attacks and the number of Palestinians killed. The images of the violence are far more graphic than anything we get in the States. I'm constantly aware of the degree to which the media shapes our understanding of current events as well as our judgements of the actions of other countries. World News also received more coverage here, with special segments on news in Africa and in Asia. (*LC* 20)

This depiction of the media landscape in Egypt again relies on the direct comparison to the U.S. Without explicitly saying so, Kaldas reveals the news bias of the Egyptian media. In highlighting the cruelty done to Palestinians by Israelis, the media stir anti-Israeli sentiment. The pro-Israeli stance of the U.S. media is thus reversed. Kaldas, however, does not openly criticize this contortion. Instead, she draws attention to the overall political conflict frame that dominates the Egyptian news much more than U.S. broadcasting. The dominant role of visual information appears particularly striking to her, whereby the blatant depiction of violence connotes that ethical[18] concerns are much more adhered to in the *Western* media than in

18 Ethics constitutes a separate field of research in Communication Studies which has been on the rise since the 1980s (Christians 19). Especially with respect to visual information, debates constantly arise in academic as well as political and public circles, as to whether existing statutes are being upheld and sufficient. The U.S. press is regulated by the Code of Ethics established by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA). The code contains the following paragraph for the conduct of visual journalists, which is of special relevance for the coverage of war and political conflict: "4. Treat all subjects with respect and dignity. Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects and compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see" ("NPPA Code of Ethics"). In Egypt, a similar code

Egypt. Most intriguingly, Kaldas observes that the media impact both the understanging of current events as well as their normative and emotional evaluation. This focus on the cognitive and the affective impact of news coverage overlaps with the very definition of framing. Kaldas alludes to the effect of this mechanism by pointing out that her "perspective" has shifted and broadened in Egypt since world events play a much more important role than in America.[19] This comment hints at the common critique of American culture as self-isolated from the world which constitutes a dominant argument throughout her memoir.

When adopting the worldview of the Egyptian media, Kaldas increasingly starts using the media as explanatory variable to interpret different elements of Egyptian culture, politics, and history. One of these phenomena is Egyptian immigration to the U.S. At the outset, this process is mostly explained in relation to economic and political factors. This corresponds to the experience of her own family, who looked for better opportunities in the *West* while war and ongoing economic shortages worsened the living conditions in Egypt during the 1970s. Kaldas infers that this led to a large-scale Egyptian "brain drain" (*LC* 3). This explanation of immigration motivations is in line with sociological and cultural findings. What it leaves out, however, is the role the modern mass media have come to play in triggering the wish to escape to countries like the U.S. When reflecting on the impact of the media in her own life and the one of other Egyptians, Kaldas suddenly realizes this link.

> With the advent of television and the increased number of movie theaters, Egyptians began to have access to American shows and movies. What they saw on the screen were people living in large homes with manicured lawns. It must have triggered images of the villas in their own country that had remained out of their grasp. Perhaps they thought that in America they would be more accessible. (*LC* 28)

---

of ethics exists. It states that "the news reporting process should be accurate, objective, fair and impartial" ("Media Landscape: Egypt"). Due to the fact that Egypt finds itself in a political transition phase from formerly authoritative rule, however, the regulatory measures and institutions enforcing the code are practically absent. In addition, there are a large number of government-owned or -controlled media outlets, which means that the parliament remains the only body to interfere in possible violations.

19 This observation is in line with findings derived from international agenda setting studies. As empirical studies have demonstrated, the size of a country, as well as additional key indicators, such as GDP and international economic ties, largely determine the degree to which international coverage outweighs news on domestic events. The smaller a country the more room international coverage gains. Large countries like the U.S. thus mostly concentrate on domestic news (Dearing and Rogers 93).

Kaldas in this passage demonstrates what the image of the *West* looks like in the eye of the Middle East. As she indicates, this certainly impacted the degree to which Arabs were and still are attracted to move to America. She identifies the media as the force filling the gap between the "other" as unknown and the other as personal experience.[20] Since people in Egypt have considerably fewer financial means to travel than Americans, they to an even larger extent rely on the images provided in the media to at least get a virtual impression of the country. As Kaldas furthermore explains, these images continue to be ruled by popular American entertainment shows and soap operas. These formats are responsible for that fact that the image of the U.S., despite its military prowess, is framed as "the place where streets are paved with gold" (*LC* 28). To the American reader, this reveals that Egypt's media landscape is Americanized to a surprising degree. What the American reader knows very well from personal experience, though, is that the image of the Land of Opportunity might be desirable to foreigners but has largely died in reality. Kaldas tries to make people in Egypt aware of this gap between the media framing and reality by reminding them that "life is hard in America" (*LC* 28).

Instead of assigning the responsibility for this distorted image of the U.S. to the Egyptian media alone, Kaldas's own framing analysis takes her to a different conclusion. In her view, it is the U.S. that largely controls its image in global news reporting. This particularly refers to the issues of race and ethnicity. "The influence of American media abroad produces a homogeneous image of the American population, the assumption being that everyone in the United States is white," she observes based on her observations and expectations of other Egyptians (*LC* 34). Just like T.J.'s Egyptian ethnicity is actually a "mistaken identity," as she clarifies, so is the public image of the U.S. a result of false presumptions spread by the media (*LC* 34). Anyone associated with the U.S. thus has to "explain his existence against the stereotypes that had traveled across the ocean" via the global media culture (*LC* 34). Similar to her husband whose only defense against stereotypification is "explanation," Kaldas counters media images by conveying cultural explanations, both in Egypt and the U.S. "Without that knowledge, we are left with stereotypes and 'around the world in eighty seconds' on the news," she insists (*LC* 37).

Kaldas in these lines further explores the causes and effects of global media framing. Above all, she identifies the U.S. media hegemony as the main source of reductionist views of American culture and society. This finding is in line with the

20 Starting in the late 1980s, scholars already collected considerable evidence that the mass media constitute a considerable pull factor in influencing migration (Fawcett 674). They do so in conveying images about other countries and places in a way that appears highly attractive to people who face difficult living conditions in their own home countries (Fawcett 675). With the spread of modern mass media in less developed countries, this effect has been strengthened.

thesis of U.S. media imperialism which states that the export of U.S. entertainment formats as well as the dominance in the global market of news by far exceeds the one of Europe and other parts of the world (K. Schmidt 7; Sreberny 9489).[21] By identifying images of wealth and whiteness as dominant media stereotypes, Kaldas even points to the very issue frames which have been found to dominate the media coverage after 9/11. The entire cluster of these overlapping frames is responsible for the stereotypes surrounding the image of the American in Egypt. In turn, this finding also suggests to the reader that his/her own mediatic images of Egypt and the Arab world as a whole are based on selective windows of interpretation. Again, Kaldas does not judge these trajectories merely on normative grounds by making the U.S. responsible for the emergence of mediated stereotypes. Rather, she identifies the lack of detailed information and background knowledge as major reasons why media stereotypes can dominate the public opinion regarding other countries.

In order to emphasize the important role first-hand experience and knowledge play for the maintenance of previously mediated generalizations, Kaldas recalls a striking scene at a party with other American expatriates. The party is held on the rooftop of one of the AUC apartments, overlooking the entire city. In the distance, the tallest building carries the neon sign "Sport Cola" (*LC* 107). While looking out over the rooftops of Cairo, Barbara, another American friend, says to Kaldas: "Cairo is just like a big village" (*LC* 107). Kaldas is struck by this plain statement. "Jolted back," is how she describes her reaction. "To travel this distance, be here, live, and still see only what you imagined before you came" she shares her thoughts (*LC* 107)? A poem follows the question mark:

> *Rooftops clamoring for space*
> *Night air seeps through a maze*
> *I'm tucked into a refrain of images* (*LC* 107)

Obviously, Kaldas, despite her strong identification as American, still notices the large gap that separates her from other American expatriates. In contrast to her colleague, she is able to see beyond the stereotype of Cairo as the big village. This reference, as her reaction illustrates, ultimately sustains the inherently inferior image of Cairo as diametrical opposite to hyper-modern American cityscapes with flickering lights and skyscrapers. This reductionist frame obviously makes the

21 More than 60% of Western European TV broadcasts between 1998 and 2003 were of American origin. In addition, U.S. entertainment companies dominate more than 80% of overseas movie-box office sales and close to 50% of television programming. This makes media content one of the most successful export goods for the U.S. (K. Schmidt 4). As Katrin Schmidt in her comparative study also reveals, cultural proximity is a key factor for determining to which degree a country is likey to adopt American media formats (9).

foreign eye overlook the details of the scenery which might oppose preconceived notions. The "Sport Cola" sign as emblem of Western capitalism thus indicates Cairo's susceptibility to *Western* capitalism and modernization. The more detailed look at the city hinted at by Kaldas reveals Cairo's identity as part of the world as "global village," where transnational and regional influences become blurred (McLuhan and Fiore 67). Barbara's comment still underlines that even travel and immediate cultural experience sometimes cannot dissolve the long-standing frames of interpretation spread in the global village of mass communication.

Kaldas's lasting interest in the sustainability of global media frames has additionally been underlined by an article she published in the *Roanoke Times* entitled "To Talk Cautiously in the World." Here, she continues her reflection on being confronted with mediated stereotypes. As her report shows, even ten years after 9/11, these images continue to be dominated by political events abroad and by the WOT. Kaldas writes about waking up and hearing that Bin Laden is dead. In the newspaper, she reads about the killing of Gaddhafi's sons and children. "I fold the newspaper and put it in the recycling bin -- my attempt to push the news aside, to remove it from daily life," she infers (Kaldas, "Walking"). Yet, leaving the news behind is hardly possible, as she soon discovers. When she steps out of the house, young boys see her dark skin and yell "Osama bin Laden." Obviously, mediated frames that lastingly define the identity of Arabs cannot be escaped by throwing the news in the trash. Even worse, the news constantly get recycled in the course of current events. "But when an incident occurs that highlights Arabs in the media, people's assumptions shift, and I'm defined in relation to the day's news," Kaldas explains the trajectories of media agenda setting (Kaldas, "Walking").

Just like the preconceived image of her American friend Rebecca cannot be reframed by the immediate exposure to Cairo as more than a "village," so is the political conflict frame a global phenomenon. Kaldas in her memoir as well as in her journalistic writing puts great emphasis on unveiling the logic behind this mechanism. As was the case with the issue frames discussed above, she deals with the impact of the media framing of Arabs on multiple levels of abstraction. Although Kaldas based on her own experiences raises doubts that existing media frames can be replaced easily, her memoir serves as an attempt to achieve this shift of perspectives. Eventually, she thus demonstrates that the lasting image of the Egyptian belly dancer is just another example of the familiar TV Arab.

Reframing the Egyptian Belly Dancer as Didactic Device

I had never heard of America until my parents told me we were moving there. My world was home, family, school, outings to the pyramids, vacations in Alexandria. That was as far as my vision would stretch. Like many children, my understanding of place was bound by what I

could see and where I could go. The plane that took me to America forced me to redraw that map, to recognize immediately and abruptly that the world's boundaries were far greater than what I had experienced. (*LC* 131)

Letters from Cairo closes with a series of reflections on the identity shift that Kaldas has experienced – throughout her past, throughout her stay in Egypt, and throughout the composition of her memoir. Just like the plane taking her to the United States allowed her to cross boundaries and get to know a different world, the trip to her homeland allows her to broaden her horizon. With the writing of her memoir, she allows her readers to join her on this journey. This in turn enables her to shift the perspective of her audience and thus reframe previous images of the Arab and Arab American. For Kaldas herself, this reframing nevertheless takes her back to America – physically and mentally.

Despite Kaldas's learning process to overcome her own stereotypes of Egypt, her life in Cairo does not provide a real alternative for her. Increasingly, the cultural gap which separates her from the life of the Egyptians becomes unbridgeable. In her final journal entries in July 2002, she describes the growing uneasiness of life in Cairo and her longing to go home. Rather minor disturbances like the heat, pollution, and the lasting stomach pain of her children gradually become unbearable. "We've been eager to leave," she describes her excitement and relief shortly before their departure (*LC* 145). Even though she admits that Egypt has provided her with a "home" that she will now trade with her American "home," it becomes clear that the two homes by far do not mean the same to her (*LC* 146). The former represents a mere physical location to her, the latter stands for the place where she actually wants to stay. Learning about this difference has also been part of the process she has gone through, as she notes. Thinking back of the past months, Kaldas realizes how much "this experience has transformed us" (*LC* 146). Part of this transformation was a prolongued one, such as providing her children with a "larger vision of the world." In addition, her husband has successfully managed teaching in a foreign culture and has thus learned to cope with "the shifting perceptions of his identity," as she claims proudly (*LC* 146). In contrast to these rather positive learning experiences of her family members, Kaldas looks at her own unanticipated identity transformation with mixed feelings, as her words convey:

All these years I've been haunted by loss. This return to homeland has finally freed me. Immigrants return to their native land to discover their original identities, to claim a right to their ethnicity, to embrace a homeland of at least a spiritual belonging. But I have come back this time to unexpectedly find myself laying claim to my present life in the United States, and with it the undefined future for myself and the generations to follow. […] My Egyptian identity will dissipate, perhaps only a memory for the generations to come. (*LC* 148)

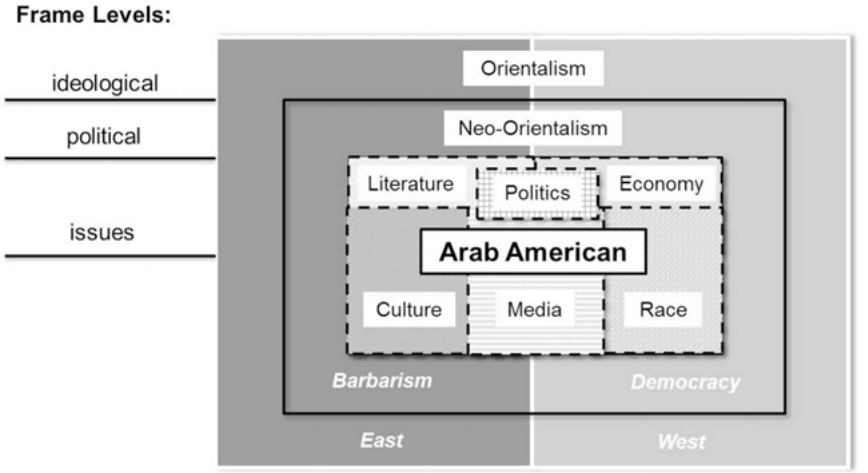
Kaldas here draws a line to the insights derived from the immigrant literature she teaches in the classroom. At an earlier stage of the memoir, this reference to literary depictions of homeland return serves the purpose of foreshadowing the possible result of her own journey to Egypt. At the end of her account, it becomes clear that only part of the promise has been fulfilled. The sense of belonging Kaldas discovers is not bound to her homeland. Instead, the confrontation with Egyptian life has brought her American identity to the forefront of consciousness more than ever before. She realizes that besides all good intentions, she has never really gone anywere outside the U.S. to make a permanent home, she admits. This becomes particularly obvious to her when she compares her two journeys to Egypt. The first trip "allowed me to reclaim a sense of who I was, to own the knowledge of my cultural identity, and to create a unified identity rather than the fragmented one that had been thrust on me by my American experience," she states (*LC* 153). This second trip in 2002 follows up on this experience but in a different way than expected. It thus enabled her "to release the sense of loss that comes with the immigrant experience," Kaldas subsumes (*LC* 153).

As a solution to this loss, Kaldas longs for "wholeness." To her, this state can only be achieved by overcoming the constant oscillation between two worlds, between two homes. "I have learned that at some point you must choose a place to claim as your home, a place to locate yourself even as your shadow travels, even as loss fills your body, and even as nostalgia tugs at your memory" (*LC* 154). These reflections on identity loss and regain powerfully solve the tension that Kaldas builds up at the beginning of the memoir regarding the result of her own identity struggle. Remarkably, the overcoming of loss as healing function here is described as the outcome of her trip, which made her change perspectives in a physical and mental way. The writing of the memoir then also contributes to this end because it similarly relies on perspective shifts and intensive reflection. This fully corresponds to the notion of identity as negotiated and established through the act of narration. In yet another sense, this identity transformation also carries over to the reader of the memoir whom Kaldas enables to look at Egypt and her people through previously unknown frames of interpretation.

The necessary credibility and authorial agency to achieve this effect of reframing is strongly reinforced at the very end of the memoir in the last journal entry. Here, Kaldas again self-identifies with America, leaving behind her Egyptian past. "And I look forward to the intellectual and artistic energy of the United States – that community that I have made myself a part of. I think I can let go of the past, and hold the thread of my present to pull me ahead" (*LC* 165). This unequivocal self-positioning on the American end of the hyphen marks the destination of her identity transformation. For the reader, it highlights Kaldas's strong cultural bond to the U.S., which in turn manifests her role as a cultural agent. Her knowledge on both worlds allows her to install alternative issue frames in the minds of the audience.

When recapitulating the range of issue frames found in Kaldas's memoir, a series of findings emerge that contribute to the expansion of contemporary ethnic and Arab American life writing studies. The following model gives an overview of the frames thus identified.

Graph 6: Frame Model of Letters from Cairo



Kaldas develops a series of issue frames allowing for an alternative interpretative framework of Egyptian and Arab American identity. In contrast to Ansary's narrative, in which history stood out, the network of issue frames developed by Kaldas is more balanced. The most prominent issue frames are the ones of culture, race, and media. The strength of these frames does not necessarily emerge from the length of elaborations on these issues but from the diversity of topics covered. This is particularly striking with respect to the culture frame in which Kaldas provides a redefinition of various powerful cultural markers, e.g., food, everyday habits, internalized behavior and beliefs, and cultural performance. The issue frame of race fulfills a double function. On the one hand, the author's references to the racial implications of her Arab American identity are linked to her lasting efforts to underline her agency as a prerequisite for framing. On the other hand, the broader elaborations on race form an issue frame of itself that makes readers look through the perspective of the often discriminated racial Other. Again, the given issue frames overlap in certain instances. Kaldas's discussion of racial stereotypes in the context of the global media coverage provides an example of this.

The frames of literature and media require particular attention. Similar to Ansary's narrative in which the media frame was closely linked to his profession as a journalist, Kaldas designs a similar issue frame related to her occupation as a liter-

ary scholar. At the core of both frames stands the effort of the authors to reveal the trajectories underlying the production and reception of texts and other media content while at the same time engaging in the task of writing. This self-reflexive mode reveals a high degree of abstraction and highly differs from the framing undertaken by the media themselves. As media analyses document, framing plays an enormous role in the production of almost any media content yet, the self-revelatory practice of introducing the media audience to its own framing techniques is highly unpopular. The given autobiographers take a much more transparent approach to their task of mediation by equipping their readers with the very knowledge they need in order to decode the framing mechanisms underlying their texts.

The juxtaposition of these issue frames reveals the wide range of interpretive options Kaldas creates for her readers to see Arab identity in a new context. When looking at these alternatives alongside the issue frames dominating the popular media coverage, additional particularities must be noted: 1) The religious frame that dominates the media coverage on the Middle East and also forms one of the most important issues in literary representations of the Orient, is not present in *Letter from Cairo*. 2) The same holds true for the issue frame of gender[22] which also forms one of the most prominent frames in the media. The absence of this issue frame in Kaldas's memoir is particularly remarkable given the fact that contemporary criticism on Arab American life writing tends to reduce literary productions by women to this very aspect. Often, it does not seem to matter in these cases whether or not the theme actually occurs as a focus in the respective works. Critics thus seem to have transformed identity politics into a presupposed given by linking the gender and ethnic background of authors to certain themes. 3) Except for race, all issue frames constructed by Kaldas do not fit into the pattern of dominant media frames. This implies that she in fact does establish alternative frames on the issue level that allow the reader to reframe his/her image of the Arab.

With respect to the outer frames, especially on the political and ideological levels, the analysis has revealed that the WOT and other events within the political frame clearly play an important role in Kaldas's memoir. This is especially interesting when read alongside Ansary's autobiography. Whereas Afghanistan

22 Despite the mentioning of the belly dancer at the cultural performance, there are only two more specific references that catch the narrator's attention with respect to gender. One appears in regard to the family's housekeeper Nagah who struggles to support her family economically. This causes Kaldas to think of the collection *Opening the Gates* in which the authors deal with "invisible feminism" as defined by feminist acts who do not count as such in the public (*LC* 86). The other explicit reference to a gender stereotype occurs in the context of a visit to one of the hotels in Cairo frequented by expatriates. Here, Kaldas notices that there are no "veiled women swimming," yet, her own bathing suit as "loose dress" still catches other guests' attention (*LC* 106).

counts as one of the epicenters of the "axis of evil," Egypt has not directly been involved in the WOT. Yet, political events and the issue of terrorism also largely frame the narrative of Kaldas. This is even more striking in light of the time gap between her stay in Cairo in 2002 and the publication of the book in 2007. This cornfirms the long-term impact of media framing as a crucial characteristic that differentiates the phenomenon from other media effects.

When discussing the sustainability of meta-frames, it is even more interesting to look at the impact of Orientalism in Kaldas's narrative. Throughout the memoir, the vocabulary of *East* versus *West* strongly evokes the Orientalist pattern of binary thinking. This is most prominent within the economic issue frame with "Western products" being one of the key concepts here. In addition, Orientalist schemata are confirmed and reproduced by Kaldas's behavior and by several explicit statements she makes about Egyptians. In these instances, she consciously displays a superior attitude based on her *non-Oriental* upbrining in the *West*, which she does not conceal or correct. Although this evocation of the binaries of *East* and *West* is less dominant than in Ansary's memoir, Kaldas with her constant invocation of dual positionality reinforces the binary thinking between Egypt and America by drawing a "distinct cultural line," as she admits toward the end of the book (*LC* 156).

This binary mode of thinking gets underscored when Kaldas determinedly locates herself on the American end of the hyphen, thus completely leaving the *Orient* in her past. In addition to the comparative method Kaldas employs as a didactic tool, this again speaks to the strong impact of Orientalism. As was the case with Ansary, Orientalism in this sense is not employed as instrument of hegemony but as a cognitive construct allowing author and reader to structure information and change perspectives. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Kaldas, just like Ansary, after strongly insisting on her ability to take and teach multiple perspectives, has the need to position herself on only one side of the invisible hyphen. This side happens to be the American one for both authors, which in turn underscores their authenticity and credibility from the American perspective. Kaldas with her complex overlapping frame arrangement consequently does succeed in reframing the Arab/Muslim American in her memoir.

5.3 RECEPTION: THE (RE-)FRAMED EGYPTIAN BELLY DANCER AND HER AUDIENCE (V_4)

Scholars have engaged in life writing throughout the centuries around the world, which is why "academic life writing" by now is even considered to constitute a separate subgenre (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 253). The academy as an institution and the academic profession are seen as focal points of socializa-

tion in shaping the self (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 254). Academic life writing is seen as a record of these trajectories acting on the self and on the academy. Kaldas due to her dominant self-definition as a scholar adds to the canon of academic autobiographies. Instead of turning the university into her major subject of investigation, she uses the academy and her academic knowledge as the starting points for her task to reframe the public image of Arabs. Academic life narrative here becomes a didactic tool in a much more complex manner than formerly revealed by autobiography scholars and by critics of ethnic memoir. Obviously, the activity of writing is an essential part of the academic discipline. What differentiates academic writing from life writing is not the author but the audience. Whereas academic writing targets a small elite audience within academic circles, memoir as part of popular culture aims at reaching the general public. The reception analysis reveals how the blending of the academic with the personal impacts the audience and whether the readers actually adopt a reframed image of the Arab.

Letters from Cairo in the Marketplace

Letters from Cairo stands in a series of other non-fictional and fictional works published by Pauline Kaldas. Among them are poetry and shorter pieces of prose published in book format and anthologies. In addition, Kaldas is known for her scholarly publications that mostly focus on stereotyping and multi-ethnic identity definition. Her academic work therefore shows close overlaps to the issues brought up in her autobiography (Kaldas, Home page). The memoir was published in April 2007 by Syracuse University Press. This was almost five years after the family's return from Egypt and six years after the event of 9/11. The impact of the WOT on the demand of books on the Arab world, however, still was at a high level at the time of publication. The ongoing political instability in the region and the lasting need of the public to learn about Arab and Middle Eastern culture continue this trend. The presses have reacted to the rising demand by establishing special series on Arab and Arab American issues. Syracuse is one of the precursors in this respect. The press maintains a special series[23] on Arab American writing. As the press states on its homepage, the collection has the following objective:

23 Syracuse stands out in the publishing landscape due to its lasting interest in issues related to the Middle East. At the time of writing, the press sustains a total of nine special series which all show connections to "Middle East Studies." Additional series in other categories are related to Middle Eastern topics. The region has clearly become a major focus of the press, which serves as additional confirmation for the lasting market demand in this field (Syracuse, Home page).

This series seeks to both present and celebrate Arab American literature in English in all its rich variety – fiction, drama, memoir, poetry, creative prose, and literary and cultural criticism. After more than a century of Arab immigration to the United States, Arab American literature remains largely obscure, and we hope to assist in redressing the balance. The writers we will publish will all write out of this multileveled texture of exile and diaspora –literature written in English by diaspora Arabs commands the unique perspective of an insider/outsider and commands the intensity and humanity of being nowhere and everywhere at home – Arabs influenced by America and Americans influenced by the Middle East.

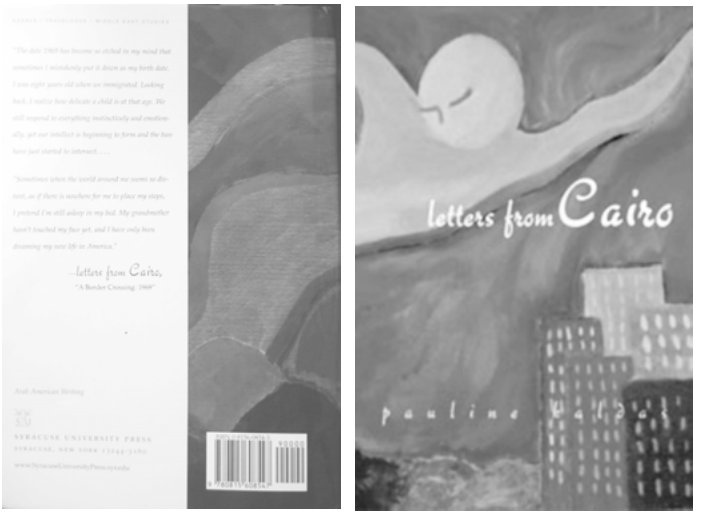
This explicit focus on Arab American literature is quite unique when looking at the overall landscape of publishing houses. The possibility to introduce such a series obviously reflects the leading market position of the press which is characterized by a high degree of differentiation. The large number of books which have meanwhile become part of the series indicates the lasting demand on the topics described by the press in its mission statement. Some of the most influential works in the field of Arab American Studies – both scholarly and bellestristic – have thus been published by Syracuse. In addition to steering the interest of its special-interest readers with keywords such as "exile and diaspora," the press emphasizes the lasting lack of knowledge about Arab Americans on its homepage. Conveying this knowledge by means of literature constitutes a major aim of the press. This plays into the hands of framing processes that above all rely on cognitive information provision.

In order to achieve this knowledge building in the public, a large audience needs to be attracted by the respective publications. The size of this audience clearly needs to exceed the academic readership that is usually reached by scholarly writings. As the sales figures of *Letters from Cairo* provided by the press reveal, this goal has only been partially achieved, however. As of November 2011, a total of 487 copies were sold within a timespan of nearly five years since the book appeared on the market. Compared to the distribution range of Ansary's memoir, for example, this figure is considerably smaller. *Letters from Cairo* therefore clearly cannot count as a bestseller when compared to other titles in the Arab American Writing series of Syracuse Press.

Sales figures also, at least partially, reflect the marketing strategy of a press. Despite being part of the Arab American Writing series, Syracuse lists the book under "memoir" (Kuerbis). Obviously, the focus on memoir as non-fiction is not as prevalent as in the case of Ansary. This slight dominance of the personal over clear-cut non-fiction also becomes visible when looking at the market appearance of the book. The front cover shows a painting of a human-looking figure in curved shape. In the right corner of the painting, a few houses can be seen. The reader can infer this to represent the silhouette of Cairo as the city mentioned in the title. The background is kept in darker blue. The figure spans over the entire front cover. No gender can be identified. The head of the figure can be interpreted to represent the

moon. The figure clearly dominates the cover by its sheer size. A large part of the arms, hands, and the lower body actually expand beyond the frame of the cover. The reader thus has to use his/her imagination to envision the invisible part of the body. The title of the book is written in a font that reminds one of handwriting. The city name of Cairo is clearly emphasized in bold letters. Kaldas's name appears at the bottom in light blue color and small letters, hardly visible.

Image 8: Book Cover of Letters from Cairo (back and front)



Source: Back and front cover of the memoir ("*LC*, Back Cover"; "*LC*, Front Cover").

The artistic and very playful design of the cover stands in total contrast to the photographic image shown on the cover of Ansary's memoir. The colors, the naïve shapes, the surreal figure – all of these features point to a world of imagination rather than of factual storytelling. To the reader unfamiliar with the content, the book could as well include a selection of art works or paintings. This openness of interpretation is reiterated by the fact that there is no hint to genre given on the cover. Except for the indication of an epistolary format based on the title of the book pointing to "Letters," there is no subline referring to life writing. To the spectator familiar with the interior of the book, the front cover represents a metaphor of the memoir at large, which, due to its combination of different forms of writing such as poetry and drawing, assembles an art work in itself.

The drawing on the front cover actually expands to the back part of the book. Here, the orange figure captures half of the page with only the lower body being visible. As the reader learns when looking at the inner cover, this semi-visibility of

the body does carry symbolic meaning. The painting is entitled "Suspended Between" and was drawn by Kaldas herself. On the left part of the back cover, there are two longer quotes from Kaldas's chapter "A Border Crossing: 1969." The first quote highlights the year 1969 as the year of Kaldas's immigration to the U.S. The importance of childhood memories and the way in which memories are processed stand at the center of the excerpt. "We still respond to everything instinctively and emotionally, yet our intellect is beginning to form and the two have just started to intersect," the passage reads. These lines identify the topic of migration as one focus of the memoir. This connection between emotion and cognition promises the readers deeper insights into the complex workings of human relocation. The second quote on the back of the book also reflects the emotional tone of the first one. It describes childhood memory and alludes to a dreamlike life in America. Below the excerpts, one finds a direct reference to the Arab Amerian Writing series of Syracuse Uuniversity Press. Above the text, the categories "Essays/Travelogue/Middle East Studies" contain no particular reference to life writing. Different from Ansary's memoir, there are no further quotations from journalistic or scholarly reviews. The text thus remains uncommented and neither includes nor excludes any particular readers as target group.

The inner part of the book cover allows the reader to gain more detailed insights into the contents. An editorial review focuses on the reason of Kaldas's journey to Egypt and mentions some biographical background. In addition, the review identifies the major themes of the memoir, such as Arab American identity, homeland, reconciling past and present, place, family, and origin. Furthermore, Kaldas's combination of different genres is particularly stressed as accounting for "a richly detailed portrait of life in Cairo […]." The second part of the editorial review clusters the given topics in broader categories ranging from "class issues and political activism to the impact of "Western culture." In quoting from Kaldas's self-description as a "cultural interpreter," her ability to shed light on the "complexities of Egyptian culture" is revealed. This rather analytical focus of the review is balanced by further elaborations on the emotional and entertaining impact of Kaldas's personal letters and the contributions of her children. In sum, as the last line states, the memoir thus offers a "unique lens for observing Middle Eastern societies."

This editorial review aims to create a well-struck balance between the thematic and thus rather analytical aspects of Kaldas's reflections and the emotional ones. The reference to themes such as politics and identity struggle, however, differs from the very playful cover painting. The themes thus identified to a high degree correspond to the issue frames found in the textual framing analysis. The same holds true for the influence of the Orientalist meta-frame, since the cultural impact of the "West" serves as major orientation in the review. In addition, the fact that Kaldas is praised for providing a unique lens for observing "Middle Eastern societies" underscores the reductionist impact of Orientalism. Although Kaldas writes on Egypt, her

insights can be applied to other countries of the Middle East. The binary language of *East* and *West* found in the memoir also carries over to the editorial reviewer. He uses the binary as a short hand for awakening specific expectations in the reader. What clearly remains excluded from the picture is the WOT. Whereas 9/11 and its political consequences were visibly used as a marketing tool in Ansary's case, Kaldas's narrative, at least from the outside, upholds its rather non-violent and unpolitical appearance (Editorial Review). What rules the editorial review is Kaldas's ability to alternate between two perspectives in order to convey insider knowledge. This function is in line with the results of the frame analysis.

The right side of the inner cover shows a picture of the family sitting on horses in front of the pyramids in Cairo. Due to the touristy background, the image appears like a stereotypical family portrait from a vacation, one that the reader might expect to see in a family album. Below the picture is a very short biographical sketch of Kaldas that only mentions her university position and previous publications. Read alongside each other, all the given elements, i.e., the design, the excerpt, the editorial review, and the picture, all suggest a rather harmonious and emotional life reflection in which the WOT or other political issues have little room. As the textual frame analysis has demonstated, this innocent appearance of the book only partly holds true. It remains to be explored in how far this diversity of frames is reflected in the responses of the audience.

The Journalistic Readership

Similar to the meager critical attention paid to Ansary's memoir, *Letters from Cairo* has not been discussed by literary scholars. There are no analyses of Kaldas's work in the fields of American Literature or Arab American Studies. Journalistic reviews therefore provide the only hints as to how the book has been received by readers with a professional interest in the work. In contrast to Ansary, whose public popularity triggered fairly excessive media responses, the number of journalistic reviews on Kaldas's memoir is limited. The only comprehensive review, in addition to the editorial one cited on the book cover, can be found on "The Book Omnivore." The Omnivore is a blog-based portal offering comprehensive background information and reviews on a broad range of topics related to reading and writing. The site can be categorized under the larger umbrella of online book clubs[24] which are enjoying

24 Online book clubs are the successors of televized book discussion shows which became popular especially at the end of the 1990s. Media analysts highlight the function of these book clubs as merging forces between the literary and the larger media market. Evelyn Alsultany illustrates this phenomenon: "A blending of the literary and the media could be observed when book clubs, such as Oprah Winfrey's, became popular. That show had a large impact on the audience and inspired both more reading and conversations, and also

increasing popularity in the new media age. With their capacity to reach a diverse audience and encourage reading as an interactive activity, these sites also foster literary discourse as "social engagement" (Scharber 433).[25] The review found on Kaldas's *Letters*, however, was not posted by one of the platform's members but originally appeared in the *Roanoke Times* in September 2007.[26]

The review opens with a quite obvious link to the political circumstances surrounding a memoir from an Arab American author. "As the West struggles daily to comprehend the modern Middle East," reviewer Bertelsen acknowledges, "books like Pauline Kaldas's 'Letters from Cairo' are very welcome." The very first line of the review thus immediately draws attention to the binary frame of *East* and *West*. Without further preliminaries, the review assumes a predominantly political interpretation of the Middle East and the Middle Easterner. This is further illustrated by the short plot summary that follows the opening line of the review. The summary identifies 9/11 as the key departure point for Kaldas's journey to her Egyptian roots. In contrast to the editorial review found on the book cover, which did not mention the WOT frame at all, the perception of the journalistic reviewer here undoubtedly reflects the dominant media framing.

Besides the political frame, culture is identified by Bertelsen as dominating the memoir, both in terms of format and content. The mixture of different genres including "travel literature, memoir, multicultural literature, art, and Egyptian recipes" marks the quality of the book as welcome read for anybody interested in questions of culture in a broader sense (Bertelsen, Rev. of *LC*). Furthermore, the reviewer devotes particular attention to the aspect of food and the inclusion of recipes in the memoir. The notion of culture as it shimmers through the discussion of the book is not limited to culinary culture or traditional cultural performance. Instead,

popularized certain novels" (Personal interview). This insight also underlines the commercial aspect of media production as a result of public discourse which can never be cancelled out of the equation.

25 The study of online book clubs marks one of the few areas in which reception studies are significantly progressing. Cassandra Scharber, for example, studied the use of online book clubs by children and young adults. The results confirm that book clubs not only encourage reading as such but also function as a larger didactic tool to teach different modes of reading and responses to texts in the classroom (436).

26 The author of the review is the journalist Cynthia Bertelsen who occasionally works as a reviewer for regional newspapers. Bertelsen appears as a self-described "freelance indexer of medical and culinary books" in the *New York Journal of Books* website. She is currently working on a book on international foods (Bertelsen, "Reviewer Profile"). This link clearly situates Kaldas's memoir in the corner of food memoirs. Due to the multiplicity of themes which expand the frame of a cookbook memoir, this reductionist categorization hardly does justice to the book.

the author also defines culture as a driving theme within the context of Egypt's history. As Bertelson states: "'Letters from Cairo' also tosses out tidbits about Egyptian and Arab culture and history." The word "tidbits" here gains a double meaning, since the author plays on cuisine language while at the same time pointing to the more serious historical issues appearing in the book. This minimization certainly prevents an overloading of audience members not interested in far-reaching historical analyses. Despite this culinary-laden definition of culture in Bertelsen's review, one can still sense the fairly high importance culture plays in the memoir.

A similar stress is put on the aspect of multi-ethnic identity negotiation in the review. Kaldas is described as "neither fully Egyptian nor fully American […]." Her book is consequently viewed as the process of the author's coming to terms with her identity while sharing this process with the general audience. As the review highlights, personal and almost intimate insights and feelings are thus underscored by various forms of documentation. Bertelsen thus infers that following the memoir is "like reading a friend's personal journal." Obviously, the aspects of truth and authenticity here again become visible. The format of the book supports this authenticity that does not rely on the scholarly exploration of Egyptian American identity as based on dry facts. The excessive inclusion of personal documents, however, also raises critique. As Bertelsen notes in a discerning tone, "Kaldas's children's drawings and e-mails don't add much to the book and some passages pall." Other recurrent text modules, such as Kaldas's "reflections" on immigration, are highly welcomed by the reviewer. They "provide much to consider at a time when immigration issues dominate political discourse," Bertelsen concludes.

Especially this explicit relation between Kaldas's reflections and "political discourse" highlights that even the reception of supposedly personal and intimate literary accounts cannot be separated from larger debates in the public. Kaldas is not only assumed to play a role in this discourse; she can also be assumed to impact it, as the review suggests. Bertelsen's comment on the reflection triggered by the memoir thus also represents an urge to motivate the audience to take the narrative as impetus to adopt these thought processes. This finding also impacts the way in which Bertelsen categorizes Kaldas's memoir at large. As she states toward the end of her review, Kaldas's "attempt to explain the cultural fissures between Arabs and the West is a worthy addition to the literature." In the very last sentence that follows, the reviewer additionally clarifies the aspired effect of this act of cultural interpretation. "Kaldas's translation of Arab culture – through the prism of Egypt – opens the way to understanding a people we simply must know better."

The latter lines strikingly underline a seemingly recurring pattern in the reception of Arab American life writing of the contemporary period. *Letters from Cairo*, despite its seemingly exclusive focus on personal and family matters, is read along the lines of the larger political and thus mediated discourse. As the theoretical underpinnings of discursive intervention state, this result can only be achieved through

the transmission of alternative knowledge to fill blank spots in the cognitive mind-map of the audience and thus recategorize existing stereotypes based on more detailed information. It is this eagerness for knowledge gain on the Middle East and Kaldas's capability to provide it which Bertelsen alludes to. In this context, the review also highlights that it takes cultural authenticity to instill this alternative knowledge. Kaldas's role as a "translator" is only made possible by her self-positioning on the American side of the hyphen, while her ethnic background endows her with the cultural authencity to look through the "prism of Egypt." Despite this seeming hybridity, however, Bertelsen does not deny the lasting binary structure of the world. Her mentioning of the fracture between "Arabs and the West" therefore once again points to the dominance of binary Orientalist thinking. As is the case in the narrative itself, though, the way in which this vocabulary is used here, does not correspond to Orientalism as suppressive practice. Rather, the dualism provides a necessary cognitive tool for the audience to cluster new information in the categories of *East* and *West*.

Clearly, the frame analysis of this single journalistic review can only serve as an indicator of how the journalistic audience at large might read Kaldas's memoir. Bertelson's reading signals the impact of the cultural, political, and racial frameworks found in Kaldas's work. The review also establishes the connection to cultural authority as basis to provide knowledge on these issues. Kaldas's identity as a scholar, which plays quite a dominant role in the narrative itself, does not get mentioned at all by the journalist. The same holds true for Kaldas's intensive elaboration on the media world. It therefore remains an act of speculation to assume that the reviewer's stressing of the larger discursive trajectories surrounding the memoir is a consequence of the media issue frame or whether this interpretation would have occurred without direct references to the media found in the book.

In sum, the shortage of critical reflections on Kaldas's memoir severely limits the conclusions one can draw concerning the reception of the book. This very shortcoming, however, also provides important insights concerning the position of memoirs within the larger competition of the media market. As the complex entanglement of overlapping frames as well as the political actuality of Kaldas's book underline, her memoir does not have to stand back behind Ansary's memoir. Both books provide important starting points to reframe common stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs in the public view. Yet, the fact that Ansary occupied the position of a public media figure even before the publication of his memoir obviously influenced the distribution of his book. His political and journalistic works are therefore read alongside his autobiography. The latter consequently received fairly high attention among journalistic reviewers. This does not hold true for Kaldas. Although her academic profession provides her with much credibility to reshape common frames of interpretation based on insider knowledge, her personal status remains that of a scholar who acts mostly unseen in academic circles. Consequent-

ly, the tool of cross-media communication employed in Ansary's case seems to make an enormous difference when trying to bring individual life narratives by Arab Americans to public attention. As can be suspected, this logic is also reflected in the reception analysis of the larger consumer audience.

The Consumer Audience

The slender journalistic response to Kaldas's memoir and the rather small sales figures already indicate a limited overall response on the part of the consumer audience. When researching the audience reviews on the book, this hypothesis receives confirmation. Despite the positioning of the book in the Arab American Writers Series and the prestige of Syracuse University Press, the marketing efforts have not turned *Letters* into a widely-read publication. On popular discussion platforms, the memoir does receive some attention. On *Goodreads*, there are seven ratings to be found at the time of writing. The book is given an average rating of four out of five stars (Community Reviews of *LC*). No comprehensive reviews are published here.

The only more elaborate audience review on the memoir was posted by an Amazon customer in July 2007, shorty after the publication. Due to the limited length of the review, it can be quoted in full:

> Dear Pauline,
> I finished "Letters from Cairo" last night and just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed it. Your rich language, deeply personal reflections, and thoughtful presentation of the meaning of family, place, and land of origin were delightful. Mostly I am grateful for your willingness to share your life with the literary world and for your ability to reconcil [sic] past and present as well as to find re-newed joy in making Virginia your home.
> Thanks so much for the pleasure of reading your book! (Amstutz)

It is interesting to note that this reviewer does not address other readers as his audience but the author of the memoir. The fact that this review is written as a letter reflects the epistolary format of the memoir itself. The reviewer's appreciation of Kaldas's personal storytelling suggests that this is not an unintentional coincidence. Despite the fact that the reader obviously enjoyed the book, only limited findings can be drawn with respect to the adoption of textual frames. The mentioning of "family, place, and land" puts the personal identity struggle and the cultural frame of Kaldas's account into the center of attention. Another noteworthy aspect is that the reader specifically thinks of the "literary world" as target audience of the book. The broader public discourse does not get mentioned. This situates the memoir in the literary realm while non-fictional elements and its position in the media discourse are disregarded. As to the question of multi-ethnic readers as particular

target audience, the name of the reviewer and the rather patriotic statement on Viriginia indicate that he does not have an immigrant background, though, this assumption is highly speculative and reductionist. Assuming that it does hold true, however, this finding corresponds to the impression that Kaldas primarily writes for the general American audience when reframing the Arab in the public eye.

When juxtaposing the results of the textual frame investigation with the limited findings derived from the reception analysis, the following comparative overview of frame resonance emerges:

Table 4: Frame Resonance Matrix of Letters from Cairo

Frame Level	Frame	Text (Production/ Medium)	Journalistic Audience (Reception)*	General Audience (Reception)*
Ideological	Orientalism	••	••	
Political	Neo-Orientalism	••	••	
Issue Level	Literature	••	•	•
	Culture	•••	•••	•
	Race	•••	••	•
	Economy	••		
	Politics	••	•	
	Media	••	•	

Legend: The number of dots marks the salience of the respective frame, as based on the close-reading analysis.
* = The dots in both audience columns are printed in grey to indicate that the limited number of reviews only allows for tentative conclusions concerning frame resonance.

The chart emphasizes that the multitude of different frames constituted by Kaldas in the memoir does not transfer to the audience. Despite the shortage of data on audience reception, the given textual evidence merely suggests the salience of the culture frame, whereby culture tends to be used as an umbrella term by the reviewers. These findings nevertheless allow for an important conclusion with respect to the impact of Kaldas's efforts to reframe the image of the Arab through the Egyptian American lens. Although the potential for this mediation effect is provided by the complexity of the memoir, the lack of audience reactions does not allow for a wider discursive impact outside literary circles. The thought-provoking impact mentioned up by the journalistic reviewer is thus not reflected in the wider audience. Still, the memoir is regarded as an important source of knowledge about the Middle East by those who read it. Although on a small scale, Kaldas at least in individual cases succeeds in reframing the image of the Arab apart from the dominant WOT frame.