WRITING THE
ARAB-AUSTRALIAN NARRATIVE

The development of new autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature on Arab-Australian Muslim male identities from Western Sydney

Doctorate of Creative Arts
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Shukraan we say in Arabic to those whom we thank. Shukraan to my wife, Jane Luise Worsley, and our sixteen-month-old son, Kahlil Isa Ahmad. Shukraan to my doctoral supervisors, Professor Ivor Indyk, Professor Greg Noble and Associate Professor Chris Andrews. And shukraan to Professor Anthony Uhlmann, Dr Matthew McGuire, Melinda Jewell and Ben Denham from the Western Sydney University Writing and Society Research Centre, Dr Mridula Nath Chakraborty from Monash University and Professor Ghassan Hage from the University of Melbourne.
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of an exegesis, ‘White Fantasies and Black Fictions’, and a creative work, ‘The Lebs’. Together they analyse current representations of Arab-Australian Muslim male identity in Western Sydney, and offer alternatives through the medium of autobiographical fiction.

‘White Fantasies and Black Fictions’ explores Arab-Australian Muslim male identity as a strategic hybrid formation unique to Australia that emerged from a climate of Islamophobic and xenophobic marginalisation. The ‘Leb’ constructed himself, and was constructed by, the dominant White Australian culture, in relation to local, national and international events, including a series of drive-by shootings and gang affiliations in the late 90s, a series of gang rapes in the year 2000, the September 11 attacks on New York City in 2001, and the Cronulla Riots in 2005. In particular, the exegesis focuses on media, fiction and film representations, which informed public perceptions and self-perceptions of the ‘Leb’. I argue that what is constructed and imagined as a foreign presence and menace within the dominant White Australian consciousness is a uniquely Australian identity which draws on elements of ‘Lebanese-ness’, ‘Arab-ness’, ‘Muslim-ness’, and notions of ‘African-American-ness’ popularised and glamourised to young Arab-Australian Muslim men through the global media – as well as on forms of masculinity common among Australian men of a particular socio-economic condition regardless of their cultural and/or religious backgrounds.

This approach is supported by a series of close readings of relevant texts, including Ghassan Hage’s *White Nation* (1998), which theorises the White Australian context in which the ‘Leb’ identity emerged, and Collins, Noble, Poynting and Tabar’s *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* (2000), which investigates the Australian media’s presentations and politically motivated racial stereotyping of youth crime in Sydney to the year 2000. To connect these local and national representations to a global imperialist and orientalist Western discourse, this exegesis investigates the
depiction of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood cinema, based on the research of Jack G. Shaheen in *Reel Bad Arabs* (2009). In consideration of the African-American influence on the Australian ‘Leb’ character, this exegesis also examines bell hooks’ *We Real Cool* (2004), which contrasts popular culture representations to the lived experiences of Black men in the United States. This discussion culminates in an extended analysis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X & Haley 1992). Given Malcolm X’s African-American male identity and his confrontation with White power structures, as well as his unique relationship to, and adoption of, Islam and the Arab World, the exegesis argues that *The Autobiography* offers Arab-Australian Muslim male writers a new insight into autobiographical writing and a model for producing autobiography.

The work of autobiographical fiction, ‘The Lebs’, comprises three novellas. They are set, in chronological order, in the years 2001, 2003 and 2006. It is told from the double perspectives of an adolescent, Bani Adam, and his grown-up counterpart looking back over the past. It is a sequel to my first work of fiction, *The Tribe* (Ahmad 2014), which portrayed a large Arab-Australian Muslim Shi’ite family from the perspective of Bani at the ages of seven, nine and eleven. In ‘The Lebs’ Bani Adam is a student at the infamous Punchbowl Boys High School in Western Sydney, which regularly appears in the media and is surrounded by barbed wire fences and cameras. In response to the demonisation of young Arab-Australian Muslim men because of the Skaf gang rapes in 2000 and the September 11 attacks on New York City in 2001, the high school students, who call themselves ‘Lebs’, react to their marginalisation, low socio-economic status and poor education with racist, sexist, homophobic and violent attitudes and behaviour towards each other, their teachers and the general public. While Bani observes and comments on the behaviour of his peers, and often participates in it, he is keen to distance himself from what he perceives to be the inferior and flawed cultural group that is his own. When Bani leaves school, however, and seeks to develop his interest in theatre by taking part in a workshop with a collective of White middle class artists from Sydney’s inner west, he discovers that the public, political and media stereotypes which have shaped his identity as a Leb are part of a larger network of conflicting cultures, faiths, genders, sexualities and classes within contemporary multicultural society.
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EXEGESIS

WHITE FANTASIES AND BLACK FICTIONS
Introduction: Hybrid Formation

In the years leading up to the 2001 September 11 attacks on New York City, and then in the years immediately after them, a swirl of public debate concerning young men of Arab and Muslim backgrounds from Western Sydney dominated Australian headlines. Questions and conclusions about the nature of these young men’s lives and their experiences began to fill the Australian consciousness, but little of this emanated from either those young men themselves or the research conducted into their identities. Rather, the information came from a loud and mostly conservative media and political machine, as well as film, television and literary representations, which clouded Australia’s Arab and Muslim male identities and narratives with criminalising stereotyping that alluded to terrorist conspiracy, sexual assaults, drug-dealing, drive-by shootings and gang affiliations. One of the locations in Australia that was impacted by these stereotypes was the school I attended between 1998 and 2004. Punchbowl Boys High School was surrounded by nine-foot high fences, barbed wire and cameras, and regularly appeared in Sydney’s mainstream media in relation to gun, gang, drug and sexual violence. The school’s reputation during these years was often referred to by Sydney news outlets during the school’s 2013 transformation due to the efforts of a newly appointed principal named Jihad Dib. One article stated that, ‘Punchbowl was once synonymous with trouble – all drive-bys, gangs and drugs – and Punchbowl Boys High suffered with it’ (Rolfe 2013). The vast majority of students at Punchbowl Boys during this time were first, second and third generation young Australian men whose parents and grandparents had migrated to Australia from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Some of the other boys had Egyptian, Saudi, Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish and Indonesian backgrounds. The boys were mostly Muslim, from Sunni, Shi’ite and Alawite denominations, but among them were Christians too, primarily Lebanese Maronite Christians. They were recognisable by a set of clichéd characteristics, as propagated in tabloid articles such as Casey and Ogg’s ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ front-page feature in the Sydney Daily Telegraph (3 November 1998) – dark skin, dark eyes, dark hair, and they dressed in running shoes, tracksuit pants, tight singlets or t-shirts, sports jackets,
and caps and hoodies, in popular brand names such as Nike, Fila, Adidas and Everlast.

Journalists, politicians, writers, filmmakers and the general Australian public began to apply simplistic descriptors to these young men, including ‘Middle Eastern’, ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’, ‘Muslim’, and most prevalently ‘Lebanese’. This will be seen in the examples and case studies to come, taken from sources ranging from Field’s feature film *The Combination* (2009) to Wockner and Porta’s crime novel, *Evil in the Suburbs* (2010) to Devine’s ‘Survivor of Total Horror’ article in *The Daily Telegraph* (2011). These labels were used interchangeably, and with no distinction (Collins et al. 2000, p.59) in spite of the fact that they all have significantly different meanings and more importantly, despite the fact that the young men being referred to were in terms of birthplace neither ‘Lebanese’ nor ‘Middle Eastern’, and despite the fact that they were not all Muslims. For me this introduced an immediate need to create a consistent category and marker for the identity that is discussed in this doctoral thesis. One option, which will be used in this exegesis, is ‘Arab-Australian’. This title acknowledges the diverse nationalities of the Arab League’s twenty-two Arab nations as opposed to just the Middle East’s eleven nations or Lebanon, which is just one nation. ‘Arab-Australian’ is an identity distinct from ‘Middle Eastern Australian’ because it does not include Israelis, who are also from the Middle East and are thus Middle Eastern. ‘Arab-Australian’ can include non-Middle Easterners who claim Arab ancestry, like many Turks and Indonesians. Using the term ‘Arab-Australian’ instead of ‘Middle Eastern Australian’ also prioritises groups’ and individuals’ cultural and racial identities over their geographical origins in relation to Europe. And ‘Arab’ is hyphenated with ‘Australian’ because this identity is unique to Australia: I draw from the research of Noble and Tabar on hyphenating names in Australia as part of a ‘straightforward duality,’ and ‘Arab’ as a ‘cultural and ethnic marker – his and his parents’ backgrounds – while Australian here refers to the state or nation, or that within which he lives and has rights’ (2002, pp.129-130).

However, while ‘Arab-Australian’ might be regarded as a ‘politically correct’ term for the identity I am discussing in this research, I cannot neglect the reasons for its interchangeability with terms such as ‘Middle Eastern’, ‘Muslim’ and most prominently, ‘Lebanese’, not just among ‘outsider’ communities looking in, but also within the community itself. As recognised by Hage in his investigation into the
2005 Cronulla Riots, this relates to the politics of ‘hybridity’ in contemporary multicultural Australia.

The cultural forms exhibited by some Lebanese-Australian youths … that became generalised as ‘Lebanese behaviour’ and irked so many people were clearly a hybrid formation: the forms of working or under-class masculinity that were put on show were a touch Lebanese, but nothing that you can find exhibited in this way in Lebanon, except perhaps among Lebanese Australians living in Lebanon! They also contained a touch of the black and Latino American cultural subaltern hype that has been globalised by the mass media through the propagation of particular types of music, clothing, walking, etc. (2011, p.197).

Hage argues that while these young men had diverse and eclectic cultural backgrounds, their identity was uniquely Australian, given their ‘hybridity’. This ‘hybridity’ is perhaps most relevantly defined for the purposes of this thesis by Noble and Tabar: ‘The notion of “hybridity” currently is used to register (positively) the ways in which identity formation, especially for diasporic populations, draws on and combines different elements to create something new’ (2002, p.131). This recognition of ‘Lebanese’ behaviour in Australia as a hybrid formation is empirically demonstrated by Tabar and Noble, whose findings draw on seven interviewees who were second-generation Arabic-speaking males aged between sixteen and nineteen:

Despite the diverse backgrounds from which these young men come, their rationale for the existence of their group was that they were all ‘Lebanese,’ as though this was an all-encompassing but singular category. In doing so, the differences between the Syrians and the Lebanese, the Christians and the Muslims and the different sects to which the Muslims belong are momentarily put aside, despite the fact that these sectarian differences could be activated in different contexts (2002, p.134).

Here, we see how the term ‘Lebanese’ takes on metonymical properties. It is a marker by which one can self-identify and be identified by the broader society, that has more to do with a sense of ‘Lebanese-ness’, ‘Arab-ness’ and ‘Woggy-ness’, as well as the way one is ‘treated’ within one’s friendship and familial networks and by the broader society (Noble & Tabar 2002, pp.134, 136-137), than it has to do with a Lebanese, Middle Eastern or Arab homeland.
Portraying the hybrid identity of the Arab-Australian Muslim male from Western Sydney between the years 2000 and 2006 is the basis of the creative component of this doctoral thesis, which I have called ‘The Lebs’. This is a name that the students of Punchbowl Boys High School, who are the central characters in my creative work, imposed upon themselves. Although short in Australian English for ‘Lebanese’, the word ‘Leb’ as it is used in this context more generally refers to any Australian youths of Middle Eastern and/or Arab background and/or appearance, particularly those from the western suburbs of Sydney. According to Hage, this was an identity that was not, as is often implied by members of the Australian public and news media, ‘un-Australian’. Rather, it was too Australian (‘over-integrated’ in contrast to ‘un-integrated’), because it was lacking in a degree of shame – ‘They were totally comfortable on the beach being sexist, being macho, being vulgar and being aggressive. They were really very much at home’ (2011, p.179).

In depicting this hybridised over-integrated Australian identity in my creative work, I seek to generate an original portrayal of Arab-Australian Muslim males from Western Sydney, the ‘Lebs’ – a portrayal that can counteract the negative stereotypes and oversimplifications that have often made it difficult to engage with and understand a complex and new identity as part of contemporary Australian culture. Additionally, in contrast to the ‘Leb’ as a unique Australian identity, the creative component of my doctoral thesis attempts to establish the ‘Australian’ and the ‘Aussie’ as a unique Australian identity too, so that rather than being a term within Australia that refers to all Australian citizens, it refers to Australians who are of ‘White’, ‘Caucasian’ and ‘Anglo’ origins (Noble & Tabar 2002, p.130).

The creative component of this thesis is produced in the form of fiction that draws on Arab/Muslim and African-American oral storytelling traditions and Arab/Muslim and African-American ‘literacy narratives’ based on ‘conversion’ – stories of emancipation through learning to read and write. It is written as three novellas that can function as standalone pieces for oral transmission as well as for silent reading. While it is presented in this doctoral thesis in the written format, it follows on from my first work of fiction, The Tribe (Ahmad 2014), which I demonstrated could be received as a text for oral transmission through a stage adaptation with Urban Theatre Projects for the 2015 Sydney Festival and Belvoir Theatre in 2016 (Neutze 2016). ‘The Lebs’ follows the experiences of Bani Adam, a child of two Lebanese immigrants who is negotiating his place in Australia as an
‘Arab’, ‘Australian’, ‘Westerner’ and ‘Muslim’ within a climate of Islamophobia and xenophobia brought on by a series of local and global incidents, including gang rapes that took place in Sydney’s west in 2000 and the September 11 attacks on New York City in 2001. In contrast to the hundreds of Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian Punchbowl Boys who celebrate and glorify their identity as ‘Lebs’, Bani aspires to rise above the walls, fences and cameras of Punchbowl, toward what he sees as a standard of ‘Whiteness’, set up by his special connection to the school teachers and his great love and appreciation of the Western literary canon. But when Bani is finally presented with an opportunity to connect with an alternative identity, in a White middle class performing arts scene in Sydney’s inner west, he finds himself unable to escape the stereotypes and generalisations that seem to have infiltrated all aspects of White Australian thinking, and he begins to formulate his own stereotypes, generalisations and assumptions about the ‘White artist’ in response.

This exegesis discusses the academic research which informed the development of my work of fiction, ‘The Lebs’, and more broadly, attempts to offer research which can inform the development of future Arab-Australian Muslim male autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature from Western Sydney (‘new Arab-Australian literature’ for short). In the first two chapters of the exegesis, I investigate the origins, contexts and purposes of contemporary Arab-Australian Muslim male representations and stereotypes, calling into question the lack of complexity of certain representative images. This analysis is based on two texts that are specific to Australian and Arab-Australian case studies, Ghassan Hage’s White Nation (1998), and Collins et al.’s Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime (2000). These texts will support an understanding of the cultural, social and political setting in which the ‘Leb’ identity exists – the ‘ethnic field’ (Tabar, Noble & Poynting 2010, p.15) within a ‘White-and-worried’ nation (Hage 1998, pp.10-11), which might contribute to the creation of new, complex and alternative literatures about young Arab-Australian Muslim men.

The third chapter in this exegesis is an examination of the representation of Arabs and Muslims as part of a global phenomenon, with a specific analysis of Jack G. Shaheen’s Reel Bad Arabs (2009), which alphabetically lists and analyses over 900 Hollywood films that contain some kind of representation of the Arab and/or Muslim other, making it the largest study of its kind ever produced. Shaheen attempts to demonstrate that there has been a deliberate strategy within contemporary
mainstream films to vilify and demonise the Arab/Muslim other as part of the global paradigm noted in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as ‘East versus West’ and ‘them versus us’ (2003, p.335). This chapter helps develop an understanding of Arab and Muslim representations within the global mass media in order to counteract the representation of Arab and Muslim homogeneity and aggression through a specifically Arab-Australian Muslim male perspective based in Western Sydney.

As recognised by Hage, the hybrid formation of ‘Lebanese’ behaviour in Australia included elements of African-American subaltern hype that had been propagated through the mass media (2011, p.197). This builds on the empirical research of Noble and Tabar, who recognised that ‘Lebanese-ness’ and “‘Lebanese” boys’ in Australia formed an ‘essentially heterogeneous and hybrid identity, which runs against a basic assumption of multiculturalism that every ethnic community in the Australian society possesses a neatly bounded and homogenous cultural identity’ (2002, p.143). In order to best develop and represent this aspect of the hybrid formation that I have named the ‘Lebs’, the fourth chapter in this exegesis will include a close reading of *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) by African-American feminist, social activist and writer bell hooks. In my analysis of hooks’ work I ask: What images of Black subaltern hype were these young Arab-Australian Muslim men emulating exactly, and, in contrast, what are the lived experiences and realities of Black men in the United States today that young Arab-Australian Muslim men can learn from? In particular, hooks addresses ‘alternatives’ to the stereotypes and popular images of Black men, and men in general, and this I believe can influence the representation of young Arab-Australian Muslim males in new Arab-Australian literature, especially in relation to the treatment of women and homosexuals within their cultural contexts.

In the final two chapters of this exegesis I examine the literary strategies and traditions in a number of texts that informed the writing of the creative component of my thesis. In my primary focus on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1992) which was produced by Black civil rights leader Malcolm X with the assistance of biographer Alex Haley, I consider the various literary devices and techniques that shape autobiographical fiction, creative nonfiction and autobiographical writing in literature that emerges from marginalised and racialised identities. This will include a discussion of oral storytelling systems, the use of tense, voice and viewpoint (particularly the use of the first-person perspective), and the construction of
narrative, namely the conversion and literacy narrative found in the written accounts of ‘men of colour’. My research into *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* will also consider the symbolic influence of Islamic traditions on oral storytelling and literacy narratives in Black autobiographical writings of this kind. I will argue that through a fluid understanding of ‘truth’ and symbolic gesture, literary discourses in Islam can provide a link between African-American autobiographical literature of the 1960s and Arab-Australian Muslim literature in contemporary Australia – the hybrid formation in full circle.
A central goal in this doctoral thesis is to offer a complex understanding and portrayal of the category in Australia that has come to be known as ‘Leb’, specifically within the confines of Punchbowl Boys High School. I will argue that ‘Leb’ was a category which revealed itself among young men within a media and political climate of racial vilification as compensation for their marginalisation and sense of injury. Therefore, while my creative work will directly address the private spaces and activities of those who might call themselves ‘Lebs’, the thesis also needs to establish a well-defined notion of the broader cultural context in which the ‘Leb’ identity emerged. People identify as, and are identified as ‘Leb’, in relation to what? They are marginalised and injured by whom? Answers to such questions inform the social and political atmosphere of the Arab-Australian narrative. It is for this reason that the first chapter of this exegesis considers some of the terms and ideas proposed by anthropologist Ghassan Hage in his book, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998). By turning the lens on Australia’s dominant cultural groups rather than Arab and Muslim minority groups, we may be able to establish the broader context in which the ‘Leb’ defined himself during the first decade of the 21st century, especially when it comes to representing ‘Leb’ responses to significant local, national and global incidents, from the Skaf gang rapes in 2000 to the September 11 attacks in 2001 to the Cronulla Riots in 2005. A supplementary aspect of this chapter is its investigation of the ‘role’ of Ghassan Hage as the narrator of his book. Although *White Nation* is an academic text, I seek to find the ‘character’ within the research as a reversal of the customary task of a Doctorate of Creative Arts – that being to conduct research as a basis for a creative work. I will argue that creative and scholarly works complement one another in this way, and that in literature one can find the fiction in a truth and the truth in a fiction.

The title of Hage’s book, *White Nation*, seems to be a reference to the highly controversial political party of the late 90s called ‘One Nation’. Led by conservative
independent politician Pauline Hanson, One Nation represents a dissatisfied faction within the dominant White culture of Australia. In the late 90s One Nation called for a reintroduction of the ‘White Australia Policy’, rejected Aboriginal land rights and raised concerns about an allegedly inevitable ‘Asian invasion’ of Australia. These policies first came to national prominence in Hanson’s maiden speech at Parliament House in Canberra on September 10, 1996. White Nation was written during, and in response to, this Hanson era, since Hanson’s support and popularity at the time exposed both the racist and the anti-intellectual culture that had been brewing in Australia. It is through this unique aspect of Australian culture that Hage immediately begins to present himself as a character within his research, the ‘Arab other’ within ‘White Australia’ and ‘the intellectual’ within ‘anti-intellectual Australia’.

The preface to White Nation is titled, ‘My Granny is Seizing Power!’ In it, Hage alludes to his grandmother’s attitude toward intellectualism, her opinions and worldviews on issues such as race, without having conducted any research or having obtained any formal education. According to Hage, it is Granny’s claim, and the claim of others like her, such as those within the One Nation Party, that ‘life taught them’. In addition to education being undervalued among this fraction of Australians, Hage argues that having an education is even seen as indicating membership of an out-of-touch and arrogant group. ‘But Granny,’ Hage responds, ‘I have a life as well you know, and it teaches me too. Can’t you see that books and research provide me with extra knowledge?’ (1998, pp.7-8). Of course, this does not come without deliberate use of irony and melodrama. In literal terms Granny’s views seem to be more of a nuisance to Hage personally than a serious threat to broader Australian society – as if a cosseted old migrant grandmother is actually going to take over Australia! However, while intellectual battles with one’s grandmother may require a degree of self-professed cynicism, ‘Granny’ in White Nation also becomes a metonym for the growing culture of anti-intellectualism among groups such as One Nation, which Hage does indeed consider to be a serious threat to (multicultural) Australian society. It is because he hears his grandmother’s once contained and therefore harmless views now being propagated in parliament and on mainstream media that he declares his granny is seizing power, and he emphasises the danger by arguing that similar forms of anti-intellectualism helped give rise to Nazism (1998, pp.8-9). Thus, Hage constructs himself as the ‘intellectual’ in contrast to ‘Granny’
and ‘Hanson’ and ‘Hitler’ – what I recognise as a creative writer to be a collection of characters who frame and contextualise the narrator’s academic research.

In his introduction, Hage also begins to construct himself as the ‘ethnic other’ in contrast to the ‘White Australian’, further establishing what might be called characters, or even caricatures, in *White Nation*:

To someone of Lebanese background who has gone through part of the Lebanese civil war, like me, the day Pauline Hanson uttered the words ‘civil war’ in Parliament was truly of nightmarish quality, more so than anyone born in Australia can understand. If only the lady knew what she was talking about she would have realised how disgusting the very sound of those words is (1998, p.25).

Alongside Ghassan Hage the ‘intellectual’, we are introduced here to Ghassan Hage the Lebanese-Australian – living in a diaspora, coping with the impacts of war and displacement in contrast to a White Australian’s privileged and infantile fantasy and their romanticising of violence. From this point on we are acutely aware of being addressed by the voice of an educated Arab-Australian who is setting up the cultural context not only for Australia’s minority groups, but for himself.

The presence of Hage as a ‘character’ and ‘narrator’ in *White Nation* raises a broad range of possibilities for presenting both creative and scholarly work. In both cases we recognise some reliance of one form on the other – the scholarly is informed by the creative and the creative is informed by the scholarly. The creative aspects of Hage’s *White Nation* provide a personal and intimate access point to relieve the weight of academia. And it is the academic and scholarly research of theorists such as Hage that can inform and contextualise the personal and intimate experiences described in creative writing. As will be seen, Hage’s account of ‘Whiteness’ in Australia provides a clear sense of the context in which one might produce autobiographical writing from a minority perspective.

In general terms, Ghassan Hage, as both writer and character, presents *White Nation* as a classification and characterisation of what it has meant to be ‘White’ in Australia. This, of course, cannot be understood without a characterisation of what it means to be the ‘other’ and the ‘othered’ in Australia, terms that might best be explained by citing Pease in *Undoing Privilege*: ‘Othering is a method of portraying
difference as if it were in some way alien to that which is normal’ (2010, p.13). *White Nation* argues that various racialised identities in Australia, such as those of Asian, Arab, Greek and Italian heritage, are imagined, positioned and managed as being in some way alien in relation to ‘Whiteness’ and ‘White’ values. ‘White’ imagined as the normal, standard and default Australian culture, and ‘White people’ imagining themselves as ‘in control’ of Australia is what Hage calls the ‘fantasy of White supremacy’ (1998, p.18). This is the belief in one Australian group’s dominance and mastery over others due to identification with European conquest and colonisation. This unique form of White supremacy in Australia is defined by Hage as a ‘fantasy’ because it exists in opposition to the multicultural ‘real’ – an actual Australian society which contains citizens with hundreds of cultural backgrounds and identities. It is a society in which the people with those backgrounds exist and function as ‘Australian’ in spite of (not because of) White control, dominance, tolerance, acceptance, policy-making and decision-making. Hage’s book offers a focus on the concept of ‘Whiteness’ in relation to migrant and refugee communities, with particular case studies centred on Australia’s Greek and Italian communities, and its Asian communities, especially between the Gulf War and the Hanson era of the 90s. While there is limited discussion of Aboriginal communities in *White Nation*, which Hage recognises as a significant gap in his research (1998, p.24), there is specific attention paid to the perceptions and treatment of Arabs and Muslims in Australia – most likely inspired by Hage’s interest in, and deep understanding of, his own cultural background. Fundamental to *White Nation* is the argument that we cannot understand racism in Australia without linking it to power and nationalism, because the enactment of racism has more to do with managing ‘the other’ (that which is seen as alien in relation to what a dominant cultural group imagines as normal) than it has to do with harbouring a negative opinion toward the other. This idea can help set a particular tone for Arab-Australian Muslim male narratives, in that characters define themselves in response to power structures, spatial management and spatial ownership rather than just in response to the racist language they hear about themselves on the five o’clock news.

Although there may be a clear sense of difference and discrimination between ‘ethnic’ cultural groups and ‘White’ cultural groups in Australia, such discrepancies are not necessarily based on categories of race and appearance. Firstly, this is because in Australia, being fair-skinned, as is the case for some Aboriginals, Arabs,
Greeks and Italians, does not necessarily mean a person is seen as or benefits from being White. Secondly, those who would be identified as ‘White Australian’ are often more likely to regard themselves as just ‘Australian’ (and to regard ‘non-White’ Australians as simply ‘not Australian’), than they are to consider themselves as belonging to one among many authentically Australian identities. This means that in order to understand fantasies of White supremacy in Australia, we must first have a working Australian definition of the term ‘White’. In some cases, ‘White Australian’ means ‘Anglo-Australian’ but Hage argues that even this term does not fully encapsulate what it means to be ‘White’ in Australia, for it leaves out many non-Anglo Australians who relate to, identify with, as well as benefit from and gain tangible and symbolic capital from, what he calls the ‘White nation fantasy’ (1998, p.18). This is a condition which assumes a form of facilitation over the nation state, in which case, for example, a White racist who says to the ethnic other, ‘Go back to where you came from’, and a White anti-racist who says, ‘It’s a multicultural country and we welcome everyone’, both start with the assumption that Australia is an inherently White nation, and that Indigenous, migrant and refugee identities are merely objects to be governed within the White national space. Along these lines, Hage argues that ‘Whiteness’ is ‘a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion’ (1998, p.20). ‘White’ is not the tangible identity of a single race or culture of people; rather, it is the shared illusion of identity among select groups of people, an illusion which can be accumulated and utilised in the form of cultural, social and political capital. (Similarly, and in the coming chapters, I will also explore the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity as a fantasy – a construction that is created and imposed by a dominant White Australian cultural group, particularly through the mass media, and that is created and self-imposed by the Arab-Australian Muslim male himself, often as a way of compensating for marginalisation).

The distinction between ‘White’ and ‘ethnic other’ in Australia is fundamental to this thesis, since so much of Arab-Australian identity is defined by, defined in relation to, and defined in rejection of, ‘Whiteness’. For example, creative writing about the Arab-Australian Muslim reactions to the events of 9/11 cannot function without a consideration of the White-dominated media and White-dominated political structure in Australia, as well as White Australian foreign policies, which aim to establish and articulate Australia’s dominant and official
position on the incident, and which led to a sense of marginalisation, discrimination, othering and persecution among Arabs, Arab-Australians and Muslims in Australia (Poynting et al. 2004, pp.158-164).

Using Hage’s definition of ‘White’ as a starting point, we can begin to unpack the argument that ‘racism’, as it exists in Australia, is not (simply) about racism. It is about national belonging, manifesting through the distribution of power, and acts of nationalism, tolerance and acceptance. This requires a distinction between believing one is White, which is an illusory sense of identity, and possessing White privilege, which involves the accumulation and utilisation of capital because one imagines oneself as, or is imagined by the broader society as, White.

A common response by those accused of enacting what Hage defines as ‘racism’ is the statement, ‘Everybody’s racist’ (1998, p.33). For example, an Anglo-Australian police officer who is called racist for targeting Lebanese-Australian youth might reply, ‘Lebanese youth are racist towards Aussies too.’ However, while most people may harbour some kind of distaste or prejudice towards a person or group from a different racial identity because of that racial identity, the assertion that ‘everybody’s racist’ universalises the higher degrees of racism that only some individuals and groups can enact. Hage points out that racism is a structure in which decisions and policies can be made in consideration of, or in relation to, one’s race. ‘So… while everyone is capable of stereotyping and essentialising others, not everyone is capable of using their racism to discriminate and subjugate others. Only the latter really qualifies as racism’ (1998, p.33). Central to the definition of racism here is the degree to which one has ‘power’. For example, while both Arab-Australians and White Australians may have expressed an equal amount of prejudice towards each other during the 2005 Cronulla Riots (and they did), only groups and individuals from the White Australian community had the power to establish the ‘Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad’ (Davies 2007) to legally target the criminal activities of a specific racial identity in Australia. While there are certainly examples where Arab-Australian communities can and have exerted power over individuals and groups from within the dominant White Australian culture (for example, through the retaliation attacks that followed the Cronulla Riots) (Kennedy et al. 2005), in broad terms the ‘racism’ of this cultural group rarely has the political, economic or media power to travel beyond prejudiced community discourse.
Although *White Nation* does not go into great detail regarding how race intersects with class and gender, we can recognise that since acts of what Hage defines as ‘racism’ depend on the degree to which individuals or groups have social, cultural, political and economic power, there are limits to the enactment of ‘racism’ even among those belonging to the dominant culture. For example, a ‘wealthy Arab-Australian male’ may be able to enact ‘racism’ to a greater extent than a ‘poor White female’ because he has greater access to ‘power’. In a later chapter that analyses the work of African-American social activist, feminist and writer bell hooks, I will examine how the enactment of racism weaves in and out of enactments of patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism. It will be through these intersections of race, class, gender and space that we can discuss the distribution and management of power (or lack thereof) among Arab-Australian Muslim men, which I believe is fundamental to any complex literary representation of Arab-Australian identities. For example, in the creative component of this thesis I attempt to portray the racist stereotyping of Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian men in mainstream Australian news media as inherently sexist, misogynous and patriarchal, as well as portray the misogynous, sexist and patriarchal attitudes expressed by some Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian men during the trial of the fourteen men who were convicted of the 2000 Skaf gang rapes.

In the chapter titled, ‘Evil White Nationalists’, Hage argues that we need to examine more carefully the movement of the hand that tears the scarf off a Muslim woman’s head (1998, p.36). ‘There is a dimension of territorial and, more generally, spatial power inherent in racist violence that categories deriving from the concept of “race” cannot by themselves encompass’ (1998, p.28). Hage suggests that what at first looks like racism in Australia is more often than not an act of nationalism – of protecting that which White Australians trust to be the true and best situation for the nation and its citizens. Although it is commonly considered ‘racist’ to perceive the hijab as representative of an inferior race and culture, there is nothing in that perception that would necessarily lead to an attack on the hijab. It is the belief that the hijab and what it represents are ‘undesirable’ that evokes the action of ripping it off. Hage argues that, ‘Unlike notions of inferiority, undesirability certainly implies, and propels actions. The subject acts because he or she sees in the scarf, through whatever it may symbolise to him or her, a harmful presence that affects their own well-being’ (1998, p.37). Thus, the debate moves from a matter of ‘race’ to a matter
of ‘space’. ‘Undesirability’ is a relative concept. Some people may consider it undesirable to have women wearing the hijab in Australia, but have little or no concern about women wearing it in their ‘own’ countries. This attitude prompts the classic ‘racist’ statements that go, ‘I don’t care what you do in your country, but in this country you follow our ways.’ Remarks like these are only concerned with race in relation to spatial management – what is ‘too many’ and ‘undesirable’ in one place is easily viewed as ‘not enough’ and ‘desirable’ in another (Hage 1998, p.38). This is why in the interviews Hage conducted with those who had actually torn off a Muslim woman’s hijab, the issue of there being ‘too many’ of these hijab-wearing people often came up (1998, pp.37-38). It is not so much that the subjects considered Muslims to be lesser beings (though they may have); what they found more troubling was their fear that the presence of too many of these people might lead to all Australian women being forced to wear the hijab. Similar to forms of homophobia, this suggests a type of racism based on the contagion model; to tear off the hijab is an attempt by members of the dominant, non-Muslim culture to prevent contamination of, and maintain control over, a territory that he or she imagines as entirely their own.

The act of tearing off the hijab also reveals the varying degrees of power and influence among White Australians; it is a reminder that ‘Whiteness’ is neither inherent nor static, but rather a form of capital that can be accumulated. White policymakers may ban or regulate the hijab in Australia, in which case they symbolically tear it off with their power to influence policy, while those from the dominant White culture that literally tear off the hijab are acting because they feel they have no power to influence policy.

Hage goes on to argue that while some White Australians enact their nationalism by tearing off the hijab, others enact it by ‘tolerating’ and ‘accepting’ the hijab: ‘To begin with, the popular language of acceptance, often encountered in the form “They’re just as Australian as we are” or “They’re Australian, too”, reinforces the placing of the Anglo-Celtic Australians in the position of power they acquire within the discourse of tolerance’ (1998, p.102). Australia’s ethnic other is imagined as someone who must be granted the acceptance and tolerance of the dominant culture to carry on with his or her foreign and/or Indigenous practices. This inflates the fantasy position of the White Australian from being simply a member of a multicultural society to being a generous White member of a monocultural society.
that is willing to ‘put-up-with’ the customs and practices of the ethnic other as an act of kindness. This tolerance of course, is only offered as long as the act does not impinge on one’s own customs and practices, which is why the notion of ‘free speech’ has made it very difficult for some Australians and Westerners to tolerate and accept the Islamic belief that it is forbidden to depict the Prophet Muhammad, leading to clashes such as those in Sydney on September 15, 2012. Australian Muslims were criticised for holding placards that stated, ‘Behead all those who insult the Prophet’ (Gridneff & Dmytryshchak 2012). When freedoms come into effective conflict, some of the rhetoric falls away, as is contextualised in an article written by Hage some years after White Nation, titled ‘Multiculturalism and the Ungovernable Muslim’ (2011). In this article Hage recognises that multicultural policy in Australia is not compatible with the values of some Muslims because they are ‘seriously religious’ (adhering to the laws of their God over the laws of men) and they are therefore ungovernable and undesirable in White Australia (2011, p.163).

The way in which ‘tolerance’ and ‘acceptance’ often fall away can be central to creative and autobiographical depictions of key and highly topical moments in recent Arab-Australian history. These moments range from reactions to the 2001 September 11 attacks to retaliations to the 2005 Cronulla Riots. The Arab-Australian narrative, which at times can completely ignore Whiteness and exist as it usually does, in and of itself, could also consider the limits that White multiculturalism has placed on the uniqueness of the Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian identity and how these limits have affected individual and personal experiences.

Every wave of migration in Australia since colonisation began in 1788, in addition to increasing awareness of Indigenous rights and histories, continues to transform the nation into a visibly more culturally diverse society. As this changes what it means to be ‘Australian’, influencing both policy and identity independently of what individuals and groups within the dominant culture desire and decide, the White Australian fear of ‘ethnic takeover’ intensifies. Hage refers to this as ‘The Discourse of Anglo Decline’ (1998, pp.179-231).

At the time that White Nation was published, the fear of Anglo decline had gained its most mainstream political articulation at the height of the Hanson era, alongside a push taken up by Prime Minister Howard against the intellectual ‘black armband’ view of history, which was seen as devaluing the British Australian contribution to the culture (Hage 1998, pp.179-180). As Hage explains, ‘This
discourse either passively mourns or actively calls for resistance against what it perceives as a state-sanctioned assault on the cultural forms that have their roots in the British colonisation of Australia’ (1998, p.179). Here Hage refers to the fear of decline – which plays out through a resistance to takeover and a mourning of what has already been lost in the takeover – as a ‘perception’. This is because ‘The Discourse of Anglo Decline’ can be based on paranoid speculations that it could happen, regardless of whether there is any visible evidence of it, or because there is indeed a gradual shift in local demographics which to some White groups and individuals appears to be occurring as more ‘third world-looking people’ occupy spaces that they imagine as having once belonged entirely to them. ‘It is primarily a lived reality for some Australians who, because of their specific social and cultural background, have not been able to incorporate into their national fantasy space the migrant presence that has resulted from the immigration of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s’ (1998, p.210). This is one of the reasons that the perception of Anglo decline is believed to be state sanctioned – some White Australians connect what looks like a sudden change in local and national demographics to conspiracy theories which claim that the government has been infiltrated. For these individuals the migrant other has already taken over and everyday experiences lead them to feel an actual sense of loss, which has been facilitated by leaders who have betrayed them.

Though the example here is specific to notions of ‘Asian invasion’ in Australia during the late 1990s, the premise of the discourse of Anglo decline also applies to White Australia’s caricature of the Arab-Australian – specifically under the banner of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Lebanese’. In the context of the 2000 Skaf gang rapes, the 2001 September 11 attacks on New York City, the 2004 Madrid Bombing and the 2005 London Bombings, Abdallah argues in ‘Muslims in Australia’ that all Lebanese/Arabs and/or Muslims became stigmatised as a foreign presence that poses a new threat to Australia’s Western culture (2010, pp.26-27). In the creative component of this thesis I attempt to address this discourse through the rhetoric employed in young Arab-Australian Muslim male communities, where terms such as ‘Lebs Rule’, ‘Lebbro 4 Life’ and ‘Australia Under New Management’ pop up in graffiti, on social media, and in the mainstream Australian news media (Gibson 2007) and this seems to heighten White anxiety of ethnic takeover and Anglo decline.
As a continuation of Hage’s preface and opening statement, in which he positions himself in contrast to the anti-intellectual and the White Australian, the final paragraph in *White Nation* attempts to reverse our perspective on the ‘White-and-worried-about-the-nation’ culture that emerged in Australia during the late 90s (Hage 1998, p.11). Hage claims that Australia’s unique breed of Hansonites, made up mostly of those who would self-identify, and are identified by others, as ‘White Australians’, came to see themselves as the only ones that needed to be concerned about the state of the nation. This is perhaps the most significant fantasy of White supremacy according to Ghassan Hage – that worrying about the nation is a uniquely White Australian matter because the White Australian is fantasised as the only Australian. The ethnic other – Indigenous, migrant, refugee – is either an object with little or no agency of its own, or an agent that poses a threat to ‘real’ Australian culture. These ‘others’ are not factored in as having the capacity or moral position to worry about the nation. ‘In the face of this destructive White tendency, some questions need to be asked: Are Whites still good for Australia? Are they dividing Australia? Do we need to have an assimilation program to help ease them into the multicultural mainstream?’ (Hage 1998, p.247). These questions of Hage’s subvert the historically White questions that are often imposed on Australia’s ethnic other from the fantasy position of cultural dominance. I believe that the answers to questions about who worries, and why they worry, set a context for the development of new Arab-Australian literature. While it may not be necessary to reveal the presence of Hage’s ‘White nation fantasy’ in the conscious and literal experiences of any young Arab-Australian Muslim male characters, the fantasy of White supremacy looms in the background as an ever-present social structure to which Arab-Australian characters are reacting in various ways.

Having established Hage’s concept of the ‘White nation fantasy’ as a broad socio-political Australian context, we can now begin exploring the cultural traits specific to Arab-Australian Muslim males from Western Sydney within that context. This will include the young men’s ways of talking, walking, dressing and interacting (with each other, with the opposite gender, police, politicians, journalists and the general public), as well as their reactions to, and internalisations of, a series of criminal incidents and media reports on incidents such as the 2000 Skaf gang rapes. In the next chapter I explore the emergence of specific social and cultural behaviours of the ‘Lebs’ during the late 90s and early 2000s – behaviours that came from within
a community of young men attempting to define themselves, and those that came
from a ‘White-and-worried’ nation that was defining them. This will be based on a
and Noble, and a selection of media articles and creative texts which I believe can
lead to more sophisticated understandings and representations of Arab-Australian
Muslim male identities than the ones that were propagated in mainstream Australia
shortly before, during and after the events of September 11, 2001.
Chapter 2: Lebs and the Local Ethnic Threat

On November 3, 1998 Sydneysiders woke up to find a front-page feature in *The Daily Telegraph* titled, ‘DIAL-A-GUN: Gang says it’s easier than buying a pizza’ (Casey & Ogg 1998, p.1). The article pictured six young men with Arab backgrounds from Punchbowl Boys High School. They were dressed in Fila and Adidas jackets and hoodies, they had menacing and aggressive expressions on their faces, and they each had their fingers crossed in the shapes of letters or cocked in the shape of a gun. ‘Members of the Punchbowl Homeboys yesterday demonstrate their call signs,’ the photo caption stated. Here we see the emergence and creation of a unique identity for a group from Western Sydney, one that is generated by both the members of the group itself and also by outsiders looking in.

In the previous chapter I investigated a context in which the Australian ethnic other might exist, the context of the ‘White nation fantasy’ as a social and cultural setting for new Arab-Australian literature. In this chapter I investigate the position of the Australian ethnic other, specifically the Arab-Australian Muslim male other, both as an Australian figure that exists in media, visual and literary representations, and as the lived identity of some Australian citizens within contemporary Australian society. By identifying and deconstructing the stereotypes, generalisations and misconceptions that have often been generated about young Arab-Australian Muslim male identities from Western Sydney, we can begin to challenge them by introducing more complex social interactions, narrative structures and characterisations in the development of new literature.

After its original appearance in *The Telegraph’s* ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article, the photograph of the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ became the cover image and opening case study for a book published in 2000 called *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* by Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting and Paul Tabar. These writers state that the concern of their book is the social construction of crime and the socioeconomic roots of criminal and criminalised behaviour, a focus which addresses many dimensions of
the relationship between ethnicity, youth, masculinity, racism and crime (Collins et al. 2000, pp.22-26). Although their findings may be applicable to a broad range of socio-political conditions (both national and international), the research here deals specifically with the identities of, and the handling of, Arab-Australian (particularly Lebanese-Australian), and Asian-Australian (particularly Vietnamese-Australian), young men from the south-western and western suburbs of Sydney up until the year 2000. Within this framework Collins et al. recognise two incidents that contextualised the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article. The first took place on 17 October 1998. A fourteen-year-old boy of Korean background named Edward Lee was stabbed to death in Punchbowl, the result of an altercation between Lee and his three friends and a group who were reported as being a gang of up to twenty young men of ‘Middle-Eastern appearance’ and of ‘Lebanese background’ (Collins et al. 2000, p.1). The second event took place on 2 November 1998, an overnight drive-by shoot-up of Lakemba police station in which perpetrators were labelled as being of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ and likely to be of ‘Lebanese background’ (Collins et al. 2000, p.1). The aftermath of these incidents was a sensationalised media and political campaign which portrayed ethnic youth crime as running rampant across Sydney. This campaign threatened to vilify and demonise entire Lebanese-Australian communities in the process, firstly because all people of Lebanese background or appearance, particularly young men, were now treated and perceived as criminal suspects (with numerous incidents of such young men being harassed by police), and secondly because the broader Lebanese-Australian communities’ lack of cooperation with the police, or their genuine inability to aid in tracking down wanted criminals, led some people, especially talk-back radio hosts, to believe that the entire population of citizens from Lebanese backgrounds were colluding and conspiring together, and that this population was therefore inherently criminal (Collins et al. 2000, p.10). Collins et al. argue that this attitude failed to recognise the diversity of Lebanese communities and led to crude racial stereotyping.

Sydney’s Lebanese community is very disparate, as are all Sydney’s ethnic communities. Some Lebanese are Catholics and some are Muslims. Even within these two religious groups are significant factions and differences. Some can trace their roots in Sydney over 100 years; others have arrived in the past 20 years. Some are very wealthy, others own marginal small businesses, others are white collar
workers, and others are factory workers or unemployed. Some have university degrees, others never finished high school. They have different Lebanese regional histories and affiliations. The upshot of all this is that there is no such thing as ‘the Lebanese culture’. Rather, there are Lebanese cultures, just as there are Lebanese communities (Collins et al. 2000, p.10).

This complex diversity that Collins et al. refer to had meant nothing to news reporters and politicians who had clumped Australia’s ‘Lebanese’ into a homogenous group and portrayed them as a local and national ethnic threat. Collins et al. list over one hundred examples of media and political comments that illustrate the vilification and stigmatisation of Lebanese-Australian communities. Among them are statements by the NSW Premier at the time, Bob Carr, who was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as saying that the recent disturbances of drugs and car theft (though he was careful not to specify which disturbances exactly) were linked to a ‘Lebanese gang’ (Collins et al. 2000, p.3). As we have already seen and will continue to see in coming chapters, specific to Australia are these examples where the terms ‘Lebanese’, ‘Lebanese background’, ‘Middle Eastern’, ‘Middle Eastern background’, ‘Middle Eastern appearance’, ‘Arab’, ‘Arabic-speaking’ and ‘Muslim’ are used interchangeably. Since ‘the Lebanese community’ tended to be the largest Arab and/or Muslim community (Noble & Tabar 2002, p.129), at the time, the term ‘Lebanese’ often came to embody any and all ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ communities in Australia. The term was used in this way by members of the dominant culture in relation to crime, for example the journalists who called the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ a ‘Lebanese gang’, and it was also used in this way by members of the racialised communities, such as the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ themselves, who told the reporters they were a ‘Lebanese gang’. The interchangeability of ‘Arab’ and/or ‘Muslim’ with ‘Lebanese’ was also based on the marker of ‘Lebanese’ as something which members within a marginalised racialised group had in common, as can be seen in interviews conducted by Noble and Tabar:

It’s not that there aren’t differences, or that they aren’t important, but at this level of identification they aren’t that important, just as, at another level, Lebanese-ness becomes less important than wog-ness, when they identify with Greeks and Italians, and even Asian students, in opposition to ‘Australian’ students (2002, p.134).
Furthermore, Noble and Tabar demonstrate through their interviews that ‘Lebanese’ and acts of ‘Lebanese-ness’ came to represent a number of ideological characteristics that were empowering for youth in the face of marginalisation and racialisation, including honour, respect, morality, courage, family, pride, security, unity and strength. This characterisation is significant, not only because it recognises cultural assets among those who feel a sense of ‘Lebanese-ness’, but also because it is asserted in opposition to Anglo-Australians (White Australians) who are seen as lacking in these traits and as representing the source of their marginalisation, which the ‘other’ has no control over (Noble & Tabar 2002, p.135, 137).

While Premier Carr’s reference to a Lebanese gang might have applied specifically to the murderers of Edward Lee or those who had shot-up Lakemba police station, Collins et al. point out that the term ‘Lebanese gang’ often seemed to be mixed up with what were simply the ‘friendship networks’ of young Arab-Australian men in Sydney (2000, p.11). This is a fundamental point in deconstructing the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article and image on the front page of The Telegraph. The photo caption indicates that the pictured ‘gang’ are ‘demonstrating their call signs … the hand signals are used to communicate simple messages between gang members’ (Casey & Ogg 1998, p.1). But why, we might ask, did the boys tell the journalists they were a gang with easy access to guns? Would a serious gang guilty of murder and drive-by shootings really expose themselves in this way to the media, the police, the politicians and the general public? And why, we might also ask, did the journalists who wrote the article and took the photo approach the story so seriously? Would a journalist and newspaper editor have deemed it newsworthy if five Anglo-Australian youths from a North Shore high school had called themselves a homeboy gang?

What is certain is that the five ‘Lebanese’ boys in the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ image do not come off as the kind of professional criminal gang that Premier Carr had been describing. Their image is reminiscent of the dress style and physical gestures of African-American hip-hop and gangsta rap artists who had become known to them through the global mass media. In particular, we should consider the ‘call signs’ used to ‘signal messages to other gang members’. Anybody who had shown an interest in African-American hip-hop culture up until the year 1998, which basically included every Arab-Australian male in South-Western and Western Sydney between the ages
of 10 and 28, would have recognised that the hand signals of the boys were just
emulations of the ‘Westside’ and ‘Eastside’ and ‘Thug Life’ gestures created by rap
artists such as Biggie Smalls and 2Pac Shakur. The ‘Westside’ gesture, in which the
young men open the thumb, cross the centre fingers and spread the outer fingers to
make a ‘W’, originally represented the geographical identities of gangsta rappers
such as 2Pac and Outlawz, who were from the West Coast of America. Although the
young Arab-Australian Muslim men were often making a direct reference to the
African-American rap stars and the American West Coast when flashing the
‘Westside’ signal, this gesture might also have begun to represent their own marginal
Australian identities and geographical identities because the majority of young Arab-
Australian Muslim men lived in Sydney’s ‘West’, a region that seemed in the
consciousness of the news media to begin somewhere around Belmore, Lakemba and
Bankstown, through to Cabramatta, Liverpool and Campbelltown on one side, and
Auburn, Parramatta and Penrith on the other.

What is most ironic about the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article is that while the
journalists claimed the boys in the image were flashing unique and coded hand
signals to communicate messages, they were also well aware that the boys were
simply attempting to mimic African-American hip-hop gangsta culture, stating that,
like the ‘black homeboy gangs in the United States’ the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’
wore ‘the same baggy jeans, sportswear such as Fila and Adidas, and listen to rap
music’ (Casey & Ogg 1998, p.4). Why then, had the journalists and photographer
interpreted the hand gestures as anything other than a harmless copy?

Whether the journalists were fully aware that the hand signals were just
copies of the boys’ favourite rap stars or not, they certainly knew, just as the
‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ knew, that this image and article would terrify and shock
the general Australian public, and therefore secure a measure of media impact for
them. As explained by Collins et al., ‘This teenage friendship group … might have
briefly enjoyed their newfound notoriety and the impression of having taken for a
ride the credulous reporters of ethnocentric media’ (2000, p.2). Indeed, one can even
see from the image that the boys were having a laugh with or, according to Collins et
al., having a laugh at, the journalists and photographer while playing out their
gangsta fantasies: ‘The tabloid on the front page photo shows pretty clearly that the
men are having fun ridiculing the reporters’ (2000, p.46). In particular, we could
draw attention to one boy in the photo, standing second from the right, who was
bearing a large and innocent-looking smile across his dark-olive complexion and making the gesture of a gun with his fingers – clearly not the same as having cocked an actual gun! This is problematic enough, but the greater controversy is how the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ image was created, which is also recognised by Collins et al.

The boys in the photo – who are today either engaged in university or further education study or in small business – were posed by the Telegraph’s journalist to look the part: they were asked to make hand signals around and look mean (2000, p.2).

Here we realise that while it was the intention of the ‘Lebanese gang’, who as it turns out were just as serious about education as they were about gangsta rap, to look as cool and dangerous as their Afro-American subaltern heroes, the intention of the journalists was to exploit these young men’s ghetto gangsta fantasies as part of a broader and already exaggerated media and political hype around ethnic gangs in Sydney. Thus, one might argue that the boys in the article and the journalists who generated the article were colluding. The ultimate losers in this exchange were the Lebanese-Australian and Arab-Australian communities at large. The article’s explicit references to Australian-born boys as ‘Lebanese’, and its claims that ethnic crime and violence were on the rise in Sydney’s south-western suburbs, namely Lakemba and Punchbowl, reveal the vilifying and demonising campaign described by Collins et al. against Lebanese, and more broadly Arab, communities within a nation that Hage portrays as ‘White-and-worried’ (1998, pp.10-11).

It is perhaps the multiple dimensions in the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article that prompted the authors of Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime to single out the image for their book cover. The photograph depicted the striking physical appearance and hybridity of the young men who had come to represent the local ethnic threat of the time, and simultaneously, the image represented the fraudulent and misconstrued depiction of young men from Arab-Australian communities that had been generated by the Australian news media. The image also represented the contradictory relationship between ‘ethnic suburban youth’ and the media in Australia, which can be both empowering and disempowering for the subjects at the same time: the boys in the photograph had been exploited and manipulated by a news and political agenda that had little credibility, and yet the boys were clearly pleased with
themselves for successfully and deceitfully frightening those too ignorant to
differentiate between professional crime gangs and a marginalised group of friends
who were simply emulating their favourite rap stars. In fact, it is for these same
reasons that the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ image can invoke and inspire the development of
young Arab-Australian Muslim male characters from Western Sydney in literature.
Rather than simply being the media stereotype, the ‘Leb’ consciously performs the
media stereotype because ‘notoriety’ is empowering. Collins et al. have recognised
this as a form of protest masculinity – symbolic power or aggression affirmed as
compensation for marginalisation, powerlessness and the hidden injuries of class
(2000, p.166), revealing in the process that the Arab-Australian milieu is
characterised by joy, humour, irony and cynicism as much as socio-economic and
cultural disadvantage, threat and misery. Understanding the media vilification of
these young men should enable a creative writer to step beyond vilification, to
contextualise a characters’ behaviour as often being a response to vilification.

In this book … we have tried to emphasise the need to investigate youth crime in a
way that draws on different dimensions of social experience, that address the
complexity and differentiation of specific locales and communities … Such an
approach, we hope, will enable the development of a more realistic and effective set
of policies and practices for addressing youth crime in Sydney in coming decades
(Collins et al. 2000, p.248).

These are the closing remarks of Collins, Noble, Poynting and Tabar in
Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime. It might be deemed ironic, even tragic, that the
research which they hoped could lead media and politicians into a better
understanding of, and engagement with, youth crime in Sydney was released just as
Australian media outlets were about to stereotype, racialise, ethnicise and
marginalise young Arab-Australian Muslim men on an unprecedented scale.

It was the year 2000 and a group that came to be known as the notorious
‘Skaf Gang’ were convicted for the coordinated gang rapes of several young Anglo-
Australian women. Gang leader Bilal Skaf received a controversial 55-year jail
sentence for his role in the crimes – the highest ever for an offender of this kind, and
‘more than most murderers receive’ (Poynting et al. 2004, p.135). As will be seen in
the various case studies, during the allegations, trials and convictions and their
aftermath, Bilal Skaf and the other thirteen young men involved were collectively identified in news headlines and texts as men of ‘Lebanese’, ‘Middle Eastern’ and ‘Muslim’ background. Journalists, politicians and writers also repeatedly homed in on the myth that the rapists were brought up to regard their ‘White’, ‘Western,’ and ‘Caucasian’ victims as ‘sluts’. They located the actions and attitudes of the rapists within a ‘common-sense orientalist’ framework of evidence that the broader Arab and Muslim communities in Australia were ‘anti-Aussie’, ‘anti-White’ and ‘anti-Western’ (Poynting et al. 2004, p.117).

Although the ‘sexual assault narrative’ should not be considered in any way an essential theme for new Arab-Australian literature, I do believe that complex portrayals of young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney from the year 2000 onwards should consider how public, political, media and community responses to the Skaf gang rapes influenced the psychology and behaviour of the ‘Lebs’ themselves. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will investigate the impacts of some of the representations of the Skaf Gang and the gang rapes in news media, in literature, and in statements by community leaders.

Among the numerous articles and news reports covering the Skaf gang rapes between 2000 and 2002 were the recurring commentaries of conservative media journalist Miranda Devine. In an article in The Sydney Morning Herald titled, ‘Racist Rapes: Finally the truth comes out’, Devine argues that it was not racism against people whom she refers to as ‘Lebanese Muslims’ which had fuelled the media hype. She claims that the hype was fuelled by the racism of the ‘Lebanese Muslims’ themselves:

So now we know the facts, straight from the Supreme Court, that a group of Lebanese Muslim gang rapists from south-western Sydney hunted their victims on the basis of their ethnicity and subjected them to hours of degrading, dehumanising torture. The young women, and girls as young as 14, were ‘sluts’ and ‘Aussie pigs’, the rapists said. So now that some of the perpetrators are in jail, will those people who cried racism and media ‘sensationalism’ hang their heads in shame? Hardly (Devine 2002).
Devine’s opening paragraph attempts to reverse the claims that racism towards Lebanese and Muslims was fuelling reportage on the gang rapes with a counter claim that the crimes were racist acts perpetrated by Lebanese and Muslims. This seems to suggest that because ‘racist’ comments were made by the perpetrators during their crimes, the reportage of the crimes could not in its own right be racist. However, it does not seem clear why one must make an either/or argument here – that either the media was being racist towards Arab-Australian Muslims or that Arab-Australian Muslims were guilty of hate crimes and ‘racist rapes’. In fact, we can see from Devine’s article that these two forms of racism can co-exist. On the one hand, the Skaf Gang referring to their Anglo-Australian victims as ‘Aussie pigs’ and claiming that they were going to ‘fuck you Leb style’ during the assaults was racist, and on the other hand it is racist, and more precisely a ‘White nation fantasy’, when Devine refers to the Australian-born perpetrators of the crimes as ‘Lebanese’ – intentionally positioning them as foreign and alien within their own nation. More bewildering is the identification of the perpetrators as ‘Muslim’, since there was no recorded documentation of a connection between the Islamic faith, the Muslim backgrounds of the perpetrators, and the crimes that had been committed (though there were claims that the perpetrators attempted to justify their crimes by citing verses in the Quran, which enabled commentators to frame Islam and Muslims as inherently misogynist) (Tabar et al. 2010, p.96). One might ask why, even when reporting on the nature of the offences as ‘racist rapes’ and ‘hate crimes’, the religious backgrounds of the perpetrators and the cultural heritage of the perpetrators’ parents and grandparents needed to be mentioned at all.

Ten years after the Skaf Gang had been prosecuted for their crimes, Devine continued to release articles of the same nature, one on May 15, 2011 reporting that, ‘The gang rapists, Australian-born Lebanese Muslims roamed Sydney hunting for non-Muslim teenage girls they regarded as “Aussie sluts”’ (Devine 2011). Here we see a slight evolution in Devine’s rhetoric, having adopted the term ‘Australian-born’ to refer to the perpetrators. However, her sentence is structured in such a way as to suggest that the rapists, though Australian-born, were still and foremost ‘Lebanese’, and to construct ‘Muslim’ identity as inherently foreign. One could ask why Devine, writing an Australian newspaper article for Australian readers, needed to mention the cultural, racial and religious backgrounds of the perpetrators at all if indeed she considered them ‘Australian’. The term ‘Australian-born’ becomes a rhetorical
device to distance the perpetrators’ identities from the identity of Australia’s dominant cultural groups, a way of saying, ‘Sure, they are Australian-born but they are not really Australian like you and me.’ This can be contextualised through Hage’s concept of a ‘White nation fantasy’ because the imaginary position of ‘White Australian’ is the only position considered actually Australian by members and groups from the dominant culture. Hage’s work might be especially applicable to Devine’s sense of Australianness, in that her American-born heritage would technically make her less Australian than the ‘Australian-born Lebanese Muslim’ gang rapists. We discover that for some Australians, imagining oneself as White constitutes Australianness more than imagining one’s self as ‘Australian-born’.

Kate Gleeson explores how racialising specific Australian gang rapes has been a trope in Sydney’s history. She draws parallels between the reports on Irish-Australian gang rapes in 1887 and the gang rapes in 2000:

The Mt. Rennie case of 1887, perpetrated by 20 young men of Irish Catholic descent who were white “natives” of Australia, exemplifies the long history of gang rape in Sydney. In both the Mt. Rennie and Skaf cases, responses were remarkably uniform and wholly inadequate. In both, the problem of gang rape was identified as a problem of the rapists’ “communities” rather than of the greater society in which they resided (2004, p.183).

Gleeson’s work is particularly important because it recognises a historical pattern of othering minority racial groups in Australian news media and in public and political discourse. In such cases, we see an inability to investigate certain crimes as either endemic in Australian culture or as those of singular persons within an Australian context due to a xenophobic disposition within the broader society. This argument is also made by Collins et al. in *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* which documents similar incidents to the Skaf gang rapes that were perpetrated by men from Australia’s dominant cultural groups. The sexual assault and murder of Leigh Leigh at Stockton in 1989, for example, reveals that such crimes are socially rather than ethnically conditioned, since they tend to occur across all cultural groups in Australia (2000, p.9). However, because the men who raped and murdered Leigh Leigh could be categorised as ‘White’ (or to be more exact, uncategorised and
normalised because they were White), no racialised dimension to the crime was ever implied in mainstream media.

Collins et al. also refer to the brutal gang rape and murder of Anita Cobby in 1986. Similar to the Skaf gang rapes in 2000, the reportage on Anita Cobby’s murder was linked to the Western Sydney location where the crime was committed and the Western Sydney origins of the perpetrators, Blacktown. However, not mentioned in the reportage was the ‘ethnic’ background of the men who committed the crime, which happened to be the same Irish heritage as the perpetrators in the Mt. Rennie case of 1887. Collins et al. argue that Anita Cobby’s murder was not seen as an ‘ethnic crime’, and politicians and newspapers did not refer to the incident as an ‘Irish crime’, because one hundred years on, ‘the Irish are now seen as part of the Anglo-Celtic majority’ (Collins et al. 2000, p.9). This shift in the categorisation of Irish communities between 1887 and 1986 comes about because of a long period of assimilation and integration into Anglo-Australian society, but more importantly, because the contemporary definition of ‘ethnic’ does not include Anglo-Celts, even ‘foreign’ ones, in relation to criminal matters (Collins et al. 2000, p.9). Put another way, while Australians of Irish descent might have been deemed ‘foreign’ in relation to people of British descent, they are not deemed foreign in relation to Hage’s definition of ‘White’ descent – as applying to members of the fantasy position of cultural dominance which came out of European expansion and settlement (Hage 2000, p.20). While both Irish and Arab communities may be deemed ‘foreign’ at one point or another in Australian history, ‘Irish’ can be normalised and accepted into Hage’s ‘national White fantasy’ in a way that is currently unimaginable in the case of ‘third world-looking’ Australians. This is reinforced by the fact that Australian politicians and media personalities have not called for Irish community leaders in Australia to intervene whenever the perpetrator of a crime happens to be of Irish descent, while there is an ongoing history of expectation that Arab-Muslim community leaders accept part of the responsibility and participate in community consultations whenever people of Arab and Muslim backgrounds perpetrate serious crimes (Collins et al. 2000, pp.6-7). We might consider, for example, the comments made by Devine in her ‘Racist Rape’ article concerning the racial vilification of all Arab-Australian Muslim males.
Yes, it is unfair that the vast bulk of law-abiding Lebanese Muslim boys and men should be smeared by association. But their temporary discomfort may be necessary so that the powerful social tool of shame is applied to the families and communities that nurtured the rapists, gave them succour and brought them up with such a hatred of Australia’s dominant culture and contempt for its women (Divine 2002).

Here we see how firstly Devine downplays the impact of racial vilification in the media of Arab-Australian Muslim men (and what she ignores completely, the impact on Arab-Australian Muslim women). What she describes as simply a ‘temporary discomfort’ is recognised by Abdallah as ‘traumatising’ to some Australians of Middle-Eastern background (2010, p.27), and it is argued by Posetti that public assaults on Muslims were found to be linked to the ‘biased’ media coverage (2010, pp.80-81). Secondly, Devine attributes the blame for the gang rapes, and the responsibility to take action in response to them, not just to the perpetrators but also to the ‘families’ and ‘communities’ of those perpetrators. This prompts the question: would Devine have made similar statements about blame and responsibility if the communities and families of the criminals had come from Irish or British backgrounds? The media responses to the gang rapes and murders of Leigh Leigh and Anita Cobby suggest otherwise.

One of the most detailed accounts of the Skaf gang rapes made its appearance, ten years on, in popular Australian literature. The true crime novel titled *Evil in the Suburbs* (2010) was written by Cindy Wockner, *The Daily Telegraph*’s Legal Affairs Editor who led the paper’s coverage of the rapes, and Michael Porta, the detective sergeant who linked together a series of rapes across South-Western Sydney, ultimately leading police to the Skaf Gang. The cover of *Evil in the Suburbs* features mug shots of gang leader Bilal Skaf and his younger brother, Mohammed Skaf. Particularly striking is the image of Bilal, bearing a large grin that exposes his small crooked white teeth. The combination of the title and the unremorseful mug shots serves to reinforce the common tropes and associations mainstream Australian news media had already generated connecting men of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’, the western suburbs of Sydney and ‘evil’.

The blurb on the book’s cover promises that this will be the ‘first time’ we are told the ‘gripping full story of the gang rapes’, which includes ‘personal stories
of the young women who had the courage to report the crimes,’ and how the police ‘tracked down the perpetrators’. As both a ‘novel’ and a ‘true account’, *Evil in the Suburbs* attempts to detail the factual events and dates surrounding the Skaf gang rapes and the prosecution of the gang rapists, while also taking the reader into the emotional and psychological experiences of the key figures, especially the victims, involved in the crimes and their aftermath. It does so in a way that would be impossible without a fictionalisation of the internal struggles of the various ‘characters’. For example, in the opening paragraph Wockner and Porta attempt to convey gang rape victim Natalie Vickers’ emotional turmoil in the lead-up to confronting her attackers in court: ‘This was one day Natalie did not want to face, dreaded facing, couldn’t bear facing’ (2010, p.1). While Wockner and Porta have based their descriptions of the emotions of their ‘characters’ on real-life interviews with their subjects (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.305), this style of writing depends on the fictionalised depiction of Vickers as literally having had these thoughts in the moment the authors claim she had them. Here, the goal of the authors is not to convey with factual and historical accuracy what their ‘characters’ are thinking, but rather to connect the ‘characters’’ external experiences of the crimes with the internal thoughts and desires which they believe motivated the crimes and the responses of the victims.

In an attempt to follow the activities, thoughts and feelings of the many figures involved in the Skaf gang rapes, the book is written from a scattered third-person perspective, which primarily follows the personal stories, experiences and thoughts of the gang rape victims, including Sally Sharp and Natalie Vickers, and a number of other women who suffered similar fates. The novel moves from the assaults themselves to the trauma the women experience to the court cases to the convictions of their rapists and their ‘road to recovery’ (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.296). In this way, the story attempts to convey, through figurative themes and images, a representation of the victims who experienced, fought against and overcame a series of harrowing sex crimes. The first chapter, ‘Power’, for example, details gang rape victim Natalie Vickers’ day in court, while moving in and out of recollections involving the fourteen boys who had lured her to a Western Sydney park, pinned her, and took turns raping her while the others looked on and laughed (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.3). The chapter is framed by an account of what Natalie Vickers will be wearing when she faces these attackers in the courtroom:
‘Red, wear red – it’s a power colour,’ her mother suggested helpfully. ‘Of course, wear red,’ Natalie told herself. Why hadn’t she thought of that herself? She needed to be powerful for the day ahead and she needed an appearance to reflect that power, even if, deep down, all she felt was a mixture of fear and indignation, bile rising in her throat (Wockner & Porta 2010, pp.1-2).

Even though the metaphor of ‘power’ exerted through a red outfit is extremely overstated here, it places the reader in the shoes (or rather, the clothes) of the victim in the aftermath of the crimes. This demonstrates the power of presenting the text through personal perspectives, which enables the reader to sense the anxiety and fear of the victims and to sympathise with them – to go out of ourselves, and share or identify with the position of another, as Bennett and Royle put it (2004, p.107). This approach also demonstrates the power of presenting the story as a literary text rather than as an article in the news media, the primary medium in which these crimes had previously been communicated to the public. As writers of a literary text, Wockner and Porta do not simply attempt to represent ‘reality’; they attempt to ‘produce our reality, make our worlds’ (Bennett & Royle 2004, p.32) by constructing a version of reality in which the gang rapes took place from the perspective of the victims. In this way, the victims are re-imagined and re-created through the description of the colour red as strong and powerful in the face of an ‘evil’ which has emerged from ‘the suburbs’.

The perspectives often shift however, from chapter to chapter and even from scene to scene, as Wockner and Porta also zoom in on the gang rapists themselves. For example, the fourth chapter, ‘The Family Skaf’, describes the appearance of gang rapists Bilal and Mohammed Skaf’s home, ‘a modest three-bedroom weatherboard cottage nestled in Greenacre’, and the loot within their bedroom, an ‘Aladdin’s cave of goodies, the ill-gotten spoils of their extracurricular activities’ (2010, p.17). These descriptions establish the Western Sydney identity of the Skaf brothers and their characterisation in an orientalist fashion as Arab thieves. In this chapter the authors also mention that in 1998 Bilal Skaf had visited his parents’ country of origin, Lebanon (2010, p.21). Here, Wockner and Porta carefully insinuate that it was Bilal’s time in Lebanon that influenced his criminal behaviour: ‘Whatever happened to him in Lebanon, not long after Bilal returned to Australia he
graduated from minor crime to big league player’ (2010, p.21). This kind of speculative language – ‘whatever happened’ – is a cheap but effective literary device, incriminating Lebanon and Lebanese values without the need for proof or examples of the criminal behaviour that Bilal may have adopted overseas. While implicating Lebanon, it also absolves Australia of responsibility – it is not Australians committing these crimes, it is the foreigners with foreign values who reside in Australia committing them. Collins et al. argue that, ‘The characterisation of crime, especially youth street crime, as culturally alien, imported from abroad, is firmly implanted in the English language’ (2000, p.44), and indeed, we see how the English language is used to characterise youth street crime as imported from abroad with the simple use of the phrase ‘whatever happened’. Lebanon is implicated in the crimes of Australian citizens even though there is no evident connection between Lebanon and the crimes themselves. In continuing the construction of our reality and our world, Wockner and Porta’s phrase, ‘whatever happened’ pressures us to imagine the Skaf gang rapes as foreign and unfamiliar, even though Australians have seen, heard and read about similar incidents perpetrated by members of the dominant culture many times before (Collins et al. 2000, p.9). The descriptions of Mohammed Skaf’s, and especially Bilal Skaf’s, personal lives and spaces are accumulated throughout the fourth chapter in order to build a sense of the gang rapists’ identities independent of what their victims know about them.

In other examples, the authors focus on the perspectives of people associated with the victims or criminals, such as Bilal Skaf’s mother. The second chapter, ‘Family Ties’, for example, opens with, ‘Like any mother, Baria Skaf must have been thrilled when her adored eldest son presented her with a precious gift’ (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.7). The gift turns out to be a christening pendant that Bilal Skaf stole from a young woman named Maria Rossi (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.8). Through Baria’s perspective this chapter also adds to the construction of the Skaf home, in particular describing a picture mounted in the living room of Bilal ‘arrogantly holding a large military-style rifle in one hand and a shining handgun in the other’ (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.8). The novel describes the Skaf family’s unashamed display of this image, which famously appeared in almost every news outlet that reported the crimes. This is combined with the insinuation that Baria knew her son had stolen the pendant which she proudly wore around her neck (2010, p.7), which implies that Bilal’s tendencies toward violence and aggression are not only
endorsed by himself, but also by his family members and his ‘Lebanese’ culture. This relates back to both Devine’s claim that the families and cultural/religious communities ‘nurtured the rapists, gave them succour and brought them up with hatred’ (Devine 2002), and Collins et al.’s observation that a broader Australian society came to perceive the entire ‘Lebanese community’ as colluding and conspiring with one another, fashioning a culture that is inherently criminal (2000, p.10).

The perspective also scatters as the authors move from a specific character’s viewpoint to an unknown viewpoint which, rather than following the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a particular individual, aims to provide journalistic information concerning the gang rapes and the trials. For example, in the final chapter of the book, ‘Road to Recovery’, the scene begins with gang rape victim, Sally Sharp, discussing her court case against Mohammed Ghanem on the phone with Detective Peter Walke. Here, the authors go inside Sally’s head, to share her thoughts while she is on the phone: ‘She desperately wanted to succeed and open a door to a normal life for herself. It was something to cling on to. Up until that point she had had no motivation for anything’ (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.296). Then, the viewpoint gradually shifts away from Sally to pragmatically document the results of the case against Ghanem and the results of the appeals of the other gang rapists who were convicted:

In April 2007, after Sally’s non-appearance in court and with the Crown case eroded, Ghanem was found not guilty of the charges in relation to Sally. It was a bitter blow to Sally, to the Strike Force and to the prosecution. But it was not the only blow to come after the initial verdicts and heavy sentences. Other members of the gang appealed and some of them won their appeals in the NSW Court of Criminal Appeal, or CCA (Wockner & Porta 2010, p.299).

By using differing perspectives the authors attempt to fulfil the promise on the blurb of giving the ‘full story’ and the ‘personal stories’ of the Skaf gang rapes. However, they also use this approach in an attempt to disguise their otherwise overt agenda against the cultural and religious heritage of the gang rapists. This raises questions about cross-cultural representations in literature, and in particular the question posed by Bennett and Royle: ‘From what point of view does one make
ethical and other judgements about other people, other societies and other cultures?’ (2004, p.217). While we can certainly respect the importance of depicting the victims of the crimes in a compassionate, sympathetic and empowered light, Wockner and Porta’s novel, much like the media reports, is unable to do this without continuing the simplistic and racist stereotyping which interprets the crimes in terms of a foreign community, culture and religion, with an ongoing focus on the Arab, Muslim and Western Sydney identities of the criminals. For example, Wockner and Porta write that, ‘Near Punchbowl High School, a passing car slowed down and a group of Middle Eastern boys emerged and surrounded the by now frightened young girl’ (2010, p.14). This statement downplays the rapists’ Australian identities and amplifies their Arab identities in contrast to ‘actual’ Australians. What exactly makes these boys Middle Eastern instead of Australian? Why not just call them ‘a group of boys’? From a literary point of view, ‘Middle Eastern’ becomes an effect, a device that enables us to distinguish racially between ‘evil’ and ‘innocent’. Wockner and Porta also refer to ‘Punchbowl High School’ in this passage. They most likely mean Punchbowl Boys High School, seeing as it is the only high school in the suburb of Punchbowl named after Punchbowl. Here we see how particular locations in Sydney become literary effects too, devices that enable us to distinguish geographically between the ‘safe’ and the ‘dangerous’. As we have seen in the many case studies in this chapter and the handful of excerpts from Evil in the Suburbs already examined, ‘Punchbowl’, and more broadly ‘Western Sydney’, are often connected with ‘Middle Eastern’ crime, as well as with crime in general, because Western Sydney is positioned as Sydney’s geographical ‘other’, primarily through economic and class factors (Powell 1993, p.xvii), just as culturally and linguistically diverse minorities are positioned as Australia’s racial other.

The term ‘Middle Eastern’ in Wockner and Porta’s text is particularly striking because unlike the term ‘Lebanese’, it attempts to be a physical description of the rapists as well as a cultural identity, especially in the explicit use of the term ‘Middle Eastern appearance’.

Chatting innocently on the phone, Maria looked up. Fear suddenly gripped her. Six boys of Middle Eastern appearance materialised out of the darkness and surrounded her car, like some kind of macabre scene from a kidnap movie. The driver’s side
door was wrenched open. Before she had time to think, Maria saw the unmistakable flash of a blade knife (2010, p.9).

As a literary device, describing all the men in this scene as ‘Middle Eastern appearance’, reduces them to caricatures with no distinct individual qualities or traits worth imagining or representing. Even if the men are being represented as a homogenous entity, the term ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ is ambiguous, because there is no example or trait inherent to the term which enables readers to see what the appearance it refers to looks like, such as a specific skin tone, hair colour or eye colour, and because the six men in the scene emerge from darkness. Within this night-time setting, what aspects of any one of these men, or of the men as a whole, made them Middle Eastern in appearance? For Wockner and Porta, ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ is a description intended to convey otherness and foreignness in relation to the authors’ own sense of ‘Australianness’. In this way, Wockner and Porta’s use of the term ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ is perhaps best understood through Noble and Tabar’s reference to ‘the media and political representations of Arabic-speaking people which construct them first as a cohesive community and ethnicity, and then “criminalises” that ethnicity, so that the criminal act becomes un-Australian’ (2002, p.137).

In October 2006, the then Mufti of Australia, Taj El-Din Hamid Hilaly, was reported in The Australian as having justified the Skaf gang rapes of 2000 on the basis of the victims’ immorality and immodesty. As translated from Arabic to English in an article titled, ‘Muslim leader blames women for sex attacks’, the sermon is said to have contained comments such as:

If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the backyard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it ... whose fault is it, the cats or the uncovered meat? ... The uncovered meat is the problem …

If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred (Kerbaj 2006).

Following this report was yet another onslaught of media coverage. As recognised by Switzer, ‘The story led prime-time television and radio news and
current affairs for several days, and dominated both talkback radio and The Australian’s opinion-page coverage for at least a couple of weeks’ (2010, pp.124-125). It is important to examine two aspects of the response to Sheik Hilali’s comments: Firstly, the impact of the comments themselves, and secondly, the impact of the news reporting on those comments.

When Hilali’s comments were reported in the public sphere, the reaction from many Muslim community leaders was to immediately speak out against them. Prominent members of the community such as the Islamic Council of Victoria’s Waleed Aly and female Muslim leader Aziza Abdel-Halim called the sermon repugnant and said it had no basis in any factual evidence or Islamic beliefs (Switzer 2010, p.125). However, while some Muslims may have shared in the disgust of Aly and Abdel-Halim, specific forms of misogynist, sexist and patriarchal attitudes among young Arab-Australian Muslim men (and in some cases among Arab-Australian Muslim women) may have led them to sympathise with Hilali’s ‘victim blaming’ and ‘slut shaming’. This is supported by Tabar et al.’s research in On Being Lebanese in Australia (2010) in which interviews with eighteen male and female respondents of Lebanese Muslim and Christian background revealed that ‘the conservative character of their sexuality has become a sign of ethnic distinction designed to show the moral “superiority” of the “Lebanese community” in an Anglo-dominated society’ (p.103). What also needs to be examined, however, is the context in which Hilali had made his comments – a climate of ongoing xenophobic and Islamophobic media reports such as those of Devine, which had begun to other and alienate Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian young men and women, their communities, families and leaders. As further noted by Tabar et al., the position of ‘moral superiority’ was ‘transformed into a community strategy to protect the “honour” and respectability of the community in an environment in which its identity has been attacked for at least a decade’ (2010, p.103).

One of the primary reasons that Hilali’s sermon garnered so much media attention is that it seemed to consolidate the White belief that Muslims in Australia were in fact the barbaric, uncivilised and un-Australian menace that commentators had been claiming they were since 1998. This also fuelled the alternative perspective, a claim among many Muslim leaders and left-wing commentators that what was behind the ongoing reporting of ‘Lebanese’ and ‘Muslim’ crime, and then the excessive reporting on Sheik Hilali’s comments, was the conservative culture of
racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia in Australia. As recognised by Switzer, ‘According to critics, The Australian’s decision to publish and debate the story extensively was wrong because it reinforced the world’s anxieties and fears about Muslims at the time’ (2010, p.125). Hilali’s comments and the comments of those who embraced his comments, can thus be understood through the observation of Tabar et al. that the circulation of youthful masculine discourse during this time had not only come from a desire to control the sexuality of women, but also out of frustration and a sense of ‘injury’ and ‘defensiveness’ due to experiences of racism and marginalisation (2010, p.97), particularly in relation to the Australian news media. What we see in the Sheik Hilali incident is not simply neutral reporting about the sexist views of Muslims, but an exchange involving sexist attitudes within specific Australian-Muslim communities and racist attitudes that exist within right-wing Australian media circles. This informs the development of my creative thesis because I attempt to depict the sexism and misogyny among, between and taught to the ‘Leb’ characters in the context of the racialisation and marginalisation from which their sexism and misogyny had emerged.

In the private, community, media and political responses to the incidents examined in this chapter, we see a pattern of outsiders constructing, and insiders self-constructing, the young Arab-Australian Muslim male identity of Western Sydney as an internal menace to Australian society. In the next chapter I will examine how the notion of a local and national ethnic threat, which has primarily been bandied about under the term ‘Lebanese’, fits within a global Islamophobia, one that is both orientalist and imperialist in nature. This perspective must inform the development of an Arab-Australian literature that responds to the global representations of Arab-Muslims as well as the national and local ones.
Chapter 3: Lebs and the Global Muslim Threat

One year after the Skaf gang rapes, the September 11 attacks on New York City transformed the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim worldwide, and in Australia. Hage explains that Islam came to represent a global threat after the events of 9/11, but it took on varying signifiers from nation to nation: ‘While Islam was becoming homogenised as the global threatening other, the category that embodied the Islamic threat differed from one country to another: Asians in Britain … Turks in Germany and North Africans in France. In Australia it is the category Lebanese that came to embody this threat’ (2011, p.161). The Australian representation of the global Muslim threat can be recognised in incidents leading up to 9/11 that we have already examined, such as the shootings and murders leading into the 1998 ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article and the 2000 Skaf gang rapes. It can also be recognised in Australian events that occurred shortly after 9/11, such as the 2005 Cronulla Riots, in which 5000 White Australian citizens rioted against anybody they deemed to be of ‘Lebanese’ appearance and/or descent and chanted bigoted remarks such as ‘No more Lebs’ (Kennedy & Murphy 2005). We have so far explored how terms such as ‘Lebanese’ and ‘Leb’ came to signify the Muslim and Arab identity and appearance of many young men from Western Sydney, and how the Australian news media constructed the ‘Lebanese’ within the national discourse of an ethnic and alien threat to a ‘White-and-worried’ nation. Now in this chapter I will consider the position of young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney within the broader international discourse of ‘East’ versus ‘West’ and ‘them’ versus ‘us’. While touching on Edward Said’s Orientalism, this chapter will concentrate on the work of Jack G. Shaheen, an Arab-American academic who examines the historical vilification of Arabs in Hollywood cinema. I will discuss the global perceptions and stereotyping of the Arab and Muslim other as constructed in mainstream film, and how this filters into the national and local perceptions and stereotyping of the ‘Lebanese’ in Australia.
I have selected Shaheen’s *Reel Bad Arabs* (2009) as my primary text in this chapter for three reasons. Firstly, since the influence and reach of Hollywood cinema over the past century has outweighed other forms of artistic representation around the world, the depictions of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood play one of the most significant roles in shaping global perceptions of Arab and Muslim identity. Secondly, Shaheen’s study isolates over 900 Hollywood films that offer a (negative) depiction of the Arab and/or Muslim, making it one of the largest databases in the world for the representations of Arabs and Muslims in any medium. And lastly, deconstructing an international representation of the Arab and Muslim identity alongside a local one can inform the eclectic nature of Australianness – the fact that we are from here and somewhere else at the same time, an awareness that can contribute to the creation of new Arab-Australian creative writing.

My analysis will be broken down into three components of Hollywood depictions of Arab/Muslims – the representation of Arab/Muslim lands, the representation of Arab/Muslim men, and the representation of Arab/Muslim women. These Hollywood depictions will be compared and contrasted to contemporary depictions of Arabs and Muslims in popular Australian films and media, including *The Combination* (2009) and *Cedar Boys* (2009). My analysis examines the relationships between global, national and local perceptions and representations.

In Edward Said’s 1978 book, *Orientalism*, he investigates the historical Western depictions of Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian people, places and cultures, which overwhelmingly include myths about their mysticism and primitiveness, barbarism and violence, hyper-sexuality or lack of sexuality. These depictions create preconceived notions about the ‘East’ and the ‘Easterner’ in a process that reflects and serves Western interests, an organised activity called ‘orientalism’: ‘Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it, by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it’ (Said 2003, p.3). The activities detailed here occurred primarily in Britain and France up until the Second World War and then in the United States, with the focus shifting to Arabs in what Said calls, The Latest Phase:
Since World War II, and more noticeably after each of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture, even as in the academic world, in the policy planner’s world, and in the world of business, very serious attention is paid the Arab (2003, p.285).

This is due to the fact that the Arab’s lands and resources are a central target for Western interests. Therefore, an image of the Arab, which may or may not coincide with any truths, must be created which justifies and excuses Western impositions on the East, as Said further explains:

If the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is a negative value. He is seen as the disrupter of Israel’s and the West’s existence, or in another view of the same thing, as a surmountable obstacle to Israel’s creation in 1948 (2003, p.286).

A key example of such ‘negative’ portrayals of Arab and Muslim identities, of this ‘latest phase’ of orientalism, is the depiction of Arabs and Muslims from the beginning of Hollywood Cinema to the present day. This is the basis of the film study by Jack Shaheen. Shaheen’s title, Reel Bad Arabs, is a play on the word ‘real’ – real people and real places in contrast to fictional people and fictional places that represent Arab identities on the film reels of the world’s dominant filmmaking industry.

Pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? Black beard, headdress, dark glasses. In the background – a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips. Can you see him? Think about it: when was the last time you saw a movie depicting an Arab or American of Arab heritage as a regular guy? (Shaheen 2009, p.8).

Reel Bad Arabs lists in alphabetical order over 900 American films since the establishment of Hollywood that negatively portray Arab people, especially Arab-Muslim people. This list includes films where the presence of Arab characters is central to the plot, such as in the 1970 epic Lawrence of Arabia, and films where Arabs are simply background villains for stories that do not concern Arabs at all, such as the 1985 science fiction classic Back to the Future, where a murder scene
involves Arab caricatures armed with assault rifles and speaking a gibberish language which is supposed to be Arabic (Shaheen 2009, pp.91-92). Shaheen’s study extends over many decades and genres, from historical films such as adaptations of Cleopatra (1912, 1917, 1934, 1963) to thriller and action films such as adaptations of The Mummy (1932, 1959, 1999). Shaheen examines adventure films such as Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) and action blockbusters such as True Lies (1994) and even animated features such as Disney’s Aladdin (1992). While some theorists have considered symbolic and figurative portrayals of Arabs in Hollywood films, for example of the savage aliens in Star Wars (1977) called ‘The Sand People’, Reel Bad Arabs focuses on portrayals where the characters and the places are only ever intended as ‘literal’ depictions of Arabs and the Arab world.

In Shaheen’s introduction he offers an overview that contrasts his ‘Reel Arabs’ to the ‘Real Arabs’. Of ‘Real Arabs’ he is referring to the 265 million people who reside in the twenty-two Arab states and the many millions around the world who originated in those states (2009, p.8). Though Shaheen does not specify, this no doubt includes the few hundred thousand Arab migrants and Australian-born citizens of Arab background that live in Australia. Shaheen describes the contributions that these ‘Real Arabs’ made to contemporary global civilisation as a result of an early Arab enlightenment period, which made it feasible for Western scholars and artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, to develop and practise advanced educational systems some hundreds of years later. He describes ‘Real Arabs’ as diverse and as coming from mixed heritages, which is why some have dark skin, black eyes and black hair and others have fair skin, blue eyes and blonde hair. While most people who live in the Arab world are Muslim, he also reminds us that about fifteen million of them are Christian – a reality that is often forgotten in the Western imagining of the Arab. He goes on to point out that, ‘Their dress is traditional and Western. The majority are peaceful not violent; poor, not rich; most do not dwell in desert tents; none are surrounded by harem maidens, most have never seen an oil well or mounted a camel’ (2009, pp.8-9). In these descriptions Shaheen is offering an image of the Arab that refutes the common stereotype presented in Hollywood cinema. This is followed by a specific discussion about Arab-American identity, which includes his own, explaining that contrary to stereotypes, the largest populations of Arabs in America are from Christian not Muslim backgrounds, and that Muslims in America include immigrants from sixty different nations, not just Arab ones, as well as hundreds of
thousands of Muslims who are African-American – a reality that is ignored by moviemakers who depict Arabs and Muslims as one and the same people (2009, p.10). This is similar to the media and literary constructions of Arabs and Muslims in Australia, who are referred to as one and the same with terms such as ‘Lebanese’, ‘Middle Eastern’ and ‘Muslim’. These terms have been used interchangeably in the various texts and news reports I have already examined.

The analysis of the ‘Real Arab’ is followed by a chapter titled, ‘The Stereotype’s Entry’. Here, Shaheen reveals the emergence of the ‘Reel Arab’ – a vilified caricature that exists in the film reels of Hollywood cinema. Shaheen explains how, in some of the earliest Hollywood films ever made, filmmakers such as Frenchman Georges Méliès created images of a mythic Arabia where, ‘Arabs ride camels, brandish scimitars, kill one another, and drool over the Western heroine, ignoring their own women’ (2009, p.14). Shaheen recognises that the stereotypical image of the Arab here did not begin with filmmakers; rather, they inherited a pre-existing image: ‘In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European artists and writers helped reduce the [Arab] region to a colony. They presented images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces, and slimy souks [markets] inhabited by the cultural “other” – the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim’ (2009, p.13). This discussion allows us to see a direct connection between the historical Western depictions of Arabs in art, literature and films discussed by Said, the modern depictions of Arabs in Hollywood cinema discussed by Shaheen, and the contemporary Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian depictions in Australian media, film and literature discussed by Australian theorists. As noted by Isakhan, ‘Contemporary Australian journalists have not so much invented the tropes and stereotypes that they have used to construct this negative image and limited discursive field, as they have invoked a rich tapestry of pre-existing notions about the non-Western world’ (2010, p.4). Here, the Arab-Muslim Australian and the White Australian become part of the global historical, social, cultural, political, religious, economic, and ideological phenomenon originally exposed in Orientalism:

All this inflamed the sense of persecution felt by people forced, on almost a daily basis, to declare themselves to be either Westerners or Easterners. No one seemed to be free from the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, resulting in a sense of
reinforced, deepened, hardened identity that has not been particularly edifying (Said 2003, p.335).

Within this context, we can see how, after the events of September 11, 2001, the Arab-Australian Muslim male is forced to assume the role of a ‘folk devil’ – he moves seamlessly from gangster to rapist to terrorist (Poynting et al. 2004, p.49).

In the opening scene to the 1992 Disney classic *Aladdin*, an Arab-type merchant rides through the desert singing an introductory song to the movie called ‘Arabian Nights’, no doubt a reference to the popular Arab, Persian and Indian stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* (Dawood 1973). According to Shaheen, in the film’s 1992 cinema release, the opening lyrics were: ‘Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ears if they don’t like your face, it’s barbaric but hey it’s home.’ Disney producers later toned down these lyrics for the VHS/DVD release of the film, so that the merchant now sings: ‘Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam. Where it’s flat and immense and the heat is intense, it’s barbaric but hey it’s home.’ (Shaheen 2009, p.57). While there is certainly a difference, Shaheen notes that the changes Disney made to the words were ‘not quite enough to change the message’ (2009, p.57). This is because the entire film is based on the portrayal of a ‘barbaric’ Arab world. It is not a ‘real’ Arab world, a place that you can go and visit, and nor does it resemble what the Arab world looks like today or what it looked like at any time in recorded history. It is certainly not the fifteenth-century Baghdad where the story of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* was originally set (Shaheen 2009, p.57). Disney’s *Aladdin* is set in a completely fictional Arab realm that the producers named ‘Agrabah’. As Shaheen describes it, Agrabah is a backward, mythical kingdom with a sombre desert castle, thieves, harem maidens and ugly vendors (2009, p.57). This is not an uncommon image of the Arab landscape in Hollywood cinema. Often, we are asked to accept this version of the Arab world – blazing heat and enormous sand dunes, gigantic palaces in the middle of the desert, marketplaces with merchants in turbans who will cut your hand off if you steal an apple, women who are either belly dancers or completely veiled servants, where there are herds of stubborn spitting camels and every man is armed with a scimitar. Shaheen names this fictional world ‘Arab-land’ – Hollywood’s Reel Arabia in place of the Real Arabia:

As I have already argued, the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity has been deeply embedded within the geographical identity of Sydney’s western suburbs, with the influence of Australian Arabness and its Muslim character made visible in particular forms of language, dress, food, landmarks, festivities, ceremonies, and so on within the physical landscape. Thus, one might counteract Hollywood’s ‘Arab-land’ in creative writing by building on Shaheen’s concerns. Away from even the ‘Real Arab-land’ of the Middle East and Arabia are worlds such as Western Sydney, which now embodies a ‘Real Arab’ setting as much as any other place on earth.

According to Shaheen, in literally hundreds of Hollywood films, ‘reel’ Arab men, often Arab women and, in some examples like the film Rules of Engagement (2000), even Arab children, are represented as inherently villainous and violent (2009, p.21). In particular, the Arab man has become the living embodiment of evil on the Hollywood screen. Sheikhs, for example, take on a completely new meaning in the Hollywood ‘reel’. In Arabic the word ‘sheik’ literally means a wise elderly person, the head of the family, and it is also the title of a Muslim male cleric (Shaheen 2009, p.25), similar to the Christian title ‘priest’ or Jewish title ‘rabbi’. However, you wouldn’t know this had you only ever encountered sheikhs at the movies. Here, the sheikh is commonly portrayed as the gluttonous hook-nosed sword-swinging misogynist of the desert. This is particularly the case in early Hollywood films cited by Shaheen such as The Unfaithful Odalisque (1903) and The Arab (1915). In The Sheik (1921), Sheikh Ahmed, played by Valentino, imprisons a British heroine and says to her, ‘When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her’ (Shaheen 2009, p.26). This is an American construction of the Arab man (‘Arab’ as though it is one and the same with ‘Muslim’) which correlates with contemporary White Australian fantasies of the Arab man. As noted by Tabar et al., during the reportage on the Skaf gang rapes in 2000, tabloid media and radio stations put forward the idea that Islam
was a religion which incited hatred of White women, encouraging young Lebanese Muslim men to commit acts of sexual violence against them (2010, p.96). This produces a paradoxical notion of the Arab man: on the one hand he loathes and dismisses the White woman because she does not behave like the moral Arab/Muslim woman, and on the other hand he pursues and lusts after the White woman because she exhibits a sexual uninhibitedness he does not find among Arab/Muslim women. In both portrayals the Arab man sees himself as entitled to ‘take’ the White woman and do as he pleases with her.

The Hollywood construction of the Arab man seeks to do more than just vilify him; it also seeks to humiliate him, with scores of comedies presenting Arabs as buffoons, stumbling all over themselves (Shaheen 2009, p.20). One particular example is in the Spielberg/Lucas action adventure Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). An Arab warrior faces off against Indiana Jones with a traditional Arabian sword, brandishing it in the air for almost ten seconds in an attempt to intimidate him. From a distance Jones draws a pistol and casually and easily shoots the warrior, bringing him to the ground (Shaheen 2009, p.420). Here, we see the portrayal of the Arab man as a person who is stuck in a primitive and barbaric society, still using scimitars and draping himself in sheets while the Western gentleman lives in a civilised and technologically superior world. Such stereotypes of the uncivilised, backward and barbaric nature of the Arab man, and stereotypes about his perverse sexual nature, are presented as part of the same package in the White Australian image of the Arab-Australian Muslim male. Tabar et al. argue that, ‘By attributing misogyny and violence to the Lebanese/Muslim culture, the issue of sexuality was brought forward to enact the Australian nation and define its “male” component: Australian men are imagined as “civilised” towards the opposite sex in contradistinction to Lebanese men’ (2010, pp.96-97). Here, Tabar et al.’s notion of ‘Australian men’ is used in the context of Hage’s ‘White nation fantasy’, with ‘Australian men’ denoting White Australian men, and ‘Lebanese men’ referring to both Lebanese-born men and Australian-born men of Lebanese background. Within this framing, reportage on the Skaf gang rapes in 2000 reinforced not only the view that all Arab-Australian Muslim men were inherently misogynistic and patriarchal as an extension of their cultural and religious backgrounds, but also the view that they were inferior to White Australian men who knew and behaved better. Indeed, a primary aspect of the
‘civilised’ male is the degree to which he sees himself, and is seen by other men and women, as able to respect and value and see as equal, the opposite gender.

As an alternative to the many degrading images we have seen of Arabs in Hollywood, Shaheen recommends several ‘top-notch’ movies produced in Australia, France, Germany and Italy (2009, p.40). Since Shaheen does not name the Australian films, it is difficult to know which he means exactly, though he is likely referring to Field’s The Combination (2009) and Caradee’s Cedar Boys (2009), given that at the time they were the only films to have ever represented Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian identities in Australian cinema, and given they were released around the same time Shaheen was conducting and completing his research. If this is the case, then Shaheen’s observations on Australian films, though perhaps containing an element of truth, seem ill-informed, or to be more precise, seem to come from an American perspective that does not fully appreciate the Australian experience of the ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’.

In both The Combination and Cedar Boys, young Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian men from Western Sydney take the lead as characters in stories produced and performed with the involvement of Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian directors, writers and actors.

On the one hand, we might argue that Shaheen is certainly correct that Australian cinema, unlike Hollywood cinema, has offered new and alternative roles for Arabs and Muslims, such as ‘the protagonist’, ‘the lead’ and ‘the hero’. On the other hand, The Combination and Cedar Boys also seem to return us to the familiar construction of a national and local ethnic menace. In The Combination, the first encounter between the lead male character, John (George Basha, who also wrote the film) and the lead female character Sydney (Clare Bowen) manifests these two constructions simultaneously: Sydney is randomly attacked by two men of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ and John heroically intervenes, threatening to ‘cap’ the men if they don’t apologise to her and ‘fuck off’. After the attackers leave, Sydney asks John, ‘Were you really going to shoot them?’ to which he replies, ‘You watch too much TV.’ One would assume that the writer and director of the film are using John’s response here to address the crude stereotyping of Arab-Australian men that was by that time commonplace in the Australian news media. Ironically, John might as well have said to her, ‘You’ve watched too much of The Combination.’ The Combination
and Cedar Boys, the film that followed a few months later, focus primarily on the drug-dealings, gang affiliations and gun violence associated with young Arab-Australian Muslim and Christian men from Western Sydney. In The Combination, Charlie (Firass Dirani) seeks ‘money’ and ‘respect’ by becoming a drug runner for a local drug lord, and after an altercation concerning some misplaced merchandise, he is shot dead. This leads into the final scene of the film, in which John, who is Charlie’s older brother and an ex-drug-dealer recently released from prison, seeks out the drug lord and exacts vengeance by beating him almost to death on a residential street. In Cedar Boys, Tarek (Les Chantery) is keen to escape his low socio-economic status and turns to stealing thousands of dollars’ worth of drugs, which he and two friends begin to deal throughout Sydney. Finally, the gang that he robbed capture him and shoot him dead. This also culminates in the final scene of the film, in which Tarek’s older brother Jamal (Bren Foster), an ex-drug-dealer serving a term in prison, seeks out a member of the gang and exacts vengeance by shanking his throat on the prison yard. Though Cedar Boys is slower, darker and subtler than The Combination, the striking similarities between the two films led one Cedar Boys reviewer to argue:

David Field’s tougher and equally-accomplished The Combination trod similar ground in early 2009. Both feature familial conflicts, run-ins with authority and grand but misguided schemes, and both suffer from trying to incorporate the truths about life as a young ethnic man with the conventions of an against-all-odds melodrama (Foster 2009).

The depiction of the men in these films seems no different to the portrayal in the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ article in The Daily Telegraph eleven years earlier – images of young Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian males from Western Sydney who are part of professional gang networks with easy access to guns and drugs (Casey & Ogg 1998). The fact that The Combination and Cedar Boys were produced in collaboration with Arab-Australian males reintroduces the idea I proposed for ‘DIAL-A-GUN’, that we see the young men colluding with non-Arab-Australian and non-Muslim-Australian producers to construct a fantasy that might temporarily empower and please them, but which ultimately perpetuates the demonising and
vilifying images that have contributed to xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia in Australia.

Although this exegesis concentrates on the development of literature, not films, the vilifying and demonising portrayals of Arab and Muslim men in Hollywood, as well as the limited, simplistic, and stereotypical portrayals of Arab-Australian men in Australian cinema, raise the general issue of the need for more complex portrayals of Arab-Muslim and Arab-Australian/Muslim-Australian identities in various art forms emerging from the West. One method to achieve this might be to nuance the activities of the ‘folk devil’, rather than deny those activities exist. The ‘Leb’ might sometimes have access to drugs, but he is not necessarily a drug-dealer like Charlie and Tarek; he might sometimes engage in aggressive behaviour, but he is not a murderer like John and Jamal; he might participate in patriarchal, sexist and misogynistic modes of thinking and behaviour, but is not a gang rapist like the Skafs; and he might sympathise with terrorist responses to Arab/Israeli, Arab/US and Arab/Australian conflicts, but he is not ‘Bin Laden in the suburbs’ (Poynting et al. 2004, p.1).

In addition to the construction of the Arab man in Reel Bad Arabs, Shaheen asks us to consider the historical portrayal of the Arab woman in Hollywood cinema. With but a few exceptions such as Princess Tam Tam (1935) and several Cleopatra and Arabian fantasy films (Shaheen 2009, p.29), the ‘Reel Arab’ woman has almost never been represented as a culturally diverse and three-dimensional human being, or as brave and compassionate and admirable. It is even rare that the Arab woman is portrayed as the counterpart of the villainous Arab man, helping him to scheme against America. Instead she is his oppressed, submissive and objectified servant. We are likely to see her either in the background or the foreground of Arab-land; both eroticised and hyper-sexualised, or in the paradoxical portrayal in these films, covered from head to toe and desexualised. In both constructions she is always completely silent. For example, in the three-hour epic, Lawrence of Arabia (1962), we encounter her once, standing in a black burka atop a mountain ululating at the Arab soldiers below (Shaheen 2009, p.316). In other films we see the ‘Reel Arab’ woman completely eroticised, as the disposable exotic dancer or harem girl, in examples such as Arabian Nights (1942) and The Sheltering Sky (1990), (Shaheen 2009, p.28, 85, 458).
Taken together, her mute on-screen non-behaviour and black-cloaked costume serve to alienate the Arab woman from her international sisters, and vice versa. Not only do reel Arab women never speak, but they are never in the work place, functioning as doctors, computer specialists, school teachers, print and broadcast journalists, or as successful, well-rounded electric or domestic engineers (Shaheen 2009, p.29).

The contrast between ‘Reel Arab’ women in Hollywood films and ‘Real Arab’ women around the world that Shaheen discusses here parallels the contrast between Arab women in Australian films and the lived experiences of Arab women in Australia today. While we may find hundreds of negative representations of young Arab-Australian Muslim men in Australian news media, literature and film, representations of Arab-Australian Muslim women are virtually non-existent. In both The Combination and Cedar Boys the only roles and representations of Arab-Australian and Muslim-Australian women are restricted to the domestic space. This mainly includes the lead characters’ mothers in both films, who as the family matriarchs are constantly checking in on their sons between cooking and cleaning. In The Combination, John and Charlie’s mother, Mary (Doris Younane), is first depicted washing dishes in the kitchen, and then she is seen hollowing out zucchinis while she watches television, followed by a scene where she is holding a washing basket, followed by a scene where she is serving Lebanese cuisine at the family restaurant, followed by a scene where she is peeling potatoes back at home, followed by a scene where she wakes up from taking a nap on the lounge room sofa and asks her son, ‘Are you hungry, do you want something to eat?’ An even more extreme example of the domesticated and subordinate ‘Reel Arab’ woman in The Combination is the depiction of John and Charlie’s grandmother. In all of her scenes (which total about thirty seconds of screen time) she is sitting on the front veranda of the house or in the living room watching over the activities of the men, never speaking a single word.

In Cedar Boys we are introduced to the same domesticated Arab-Australian woman we had met just a few months earlier in The Combination, who along with her husband and daughter, is only ever depicted within the confines of the family house. In the first five minutes of the film we see her chopping up food in the kitchen and asking the lead character, her son Tarek, if he is hungry. Later, she is seen at the
dining room table, eating dinner with her family, and next we see her standing in front of the house asking Tarek what time he will be home from visiting clubs in the city. The following morning, she is calling for Tarek to get out of bed and have breakfast, followed by a scene where she is serving breakfast to Tarek and his father. Then we see her in the living room questioning Tarek about where he gets his money (suspecting that her son is following his older brother’s drug path), and finally she is depicted drinking tea in the kitchen while Tarek takes a private and coded phone call.

My contention here is not that there is no basis for a domesticated representation of Arab-Australian and/or Muslim-Australian women in our creative arts; on the contrary, many of the young men in these stories might indeed have first-generation migrant mothers who are primarily homemakers. But is this the only kind of Arab-Australian and/or Muslim-Australian woman filmmakers and writers can imagine? Where are the characters that represent young Muslim and Christian Arab-Australian women based on the research and interviews of Tabar et al.? Tabar et al. found that such women maintain traditional views and values, with regard to getting married and having kids, while at the same time having strong modern and feminist values pertaining to their role in society, such as gaining financial independence, achieving a good education and aspiring to a career (2010, p.97). Even if Shaheen is correct in arguing that Australia is playing a more active role than Hollywood in placing Arabs and Muslims centre stage, it is only true with regard to the depiction of Arab men. The representation of Arab women, and the absence of representation, seems to conform to what he describes as Hollywood’s ‘Reel Arab’ women.

While Arab-Australian/Muslim-Australian women are either absent or domesticated in The Combination and Cedar Boys, it is the role of the Anglo-Australian woman to serve as the male protagonist’s female counterpart, as a love interest for the lead Arab-Australian male character. One might recognise this trope in the Hollywood construction of Arab men, who according to Shaheen, ‘Drool over the Western heroine, ignoring their own women’ (2009, p.14). More specific to Australia, however, the lead female roles in The Combination and Cedar Boys present the Arab-Australian male protagonist as having the opportunity to escape his cultural and socio-economic boundaries. Aime in Cedar Boys and Sydney in The Combination become symbolic of Western freedoms, particularly sexual freedoms, which are depicted in scenes of premarital sex in both films, and in strip club scenes in Cedar Boys. These images contrast the Anglo-Australian woman’s sexual freedom
to the Arab-Australian woman’s domestication and conservative morals. This reinforces what I am calling a ‘Leb perspective’ of the Anglo-Australian and Arab-Australian woman: interviews with young men of Lebanese Muslim and Christian backgrounds revealed that they ‘believed that “Aussie girls” enjoyed more freedom in relation to their sexuality and social mobility than Lebanese girls’ (Tabar et al. 2010, p.106).

I believe that literary representations of Arab-Australian Muslim identities should seek to subvert the cultural gender stereotypes that we see exhibited in both Australian and Hollywood depictions of Arab/Muslim female characters in contrast to non-Arab/non-Muslim female characters. ‘Leb’ interactions with, and contemplation or confusion about, both the Arab/Muslim and non-Arab/non-Muslim female characters should be based on conflicting social, cultural and religious Australian characteristics that are capable of evolving. For example, Arab-Australian Muslim women can be represented as enjoying freedom in relation to sexuality and social mobility (without this being detrimental to forming a functional relationship with their Arab-Australian Muslim male counterparts). And similarly, White Australian women can be depicted within conservative, desexualised and domestic spaces (without the implication that this is inherently more appealing to the ‘Leb’ who seeks out a ‘serious’ relationship or less appealing to the ‘Leb’ who seeks out a ‘casual’ relationship). In these and many other cases, the ‘Leb’ formulates romantic, sexual and friendship relationships with members of the opposite gender (and the same gender) both from within and outside of his socio-cultural identity, and both types of relationships involve a unique and creative engagement and an unpredictable outcome. This is confirmed by the research of Tabar et al., which suggests that at the height of public and media attention on the Skaf gang rapes, Lebanese-Australian boys were working ‘strategically’ between ‘complex and competing logics of gender order in contemporary Australia’, as opposed to just seeking out the ‘best deal’ that either their Arab/Muslim or secular/liberal/Australian cultural identities offered (2010, pp.109-110).

Why has Hollywood constructed these denigrating and vilifying stereotypes about the Arab? Shaheen suggests that there are many reasons for this form of contemporary US orientalism, including greed, peer pressure and the absence of vibrant film criticism (2009, p.36). He also points to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a
possible factor, stating that some industry professionals use their positions to push a political agenda, and he refers to an increase in negative representations of Arabs and Muslims following the Gulf War and the events of 9/11 (2009, p.36). This suggests that the vilification of Arabs in film is heavily tied to political and military interests – the Arab and Muslim other must be constructed as an enemy to justify the conflict. Shaheen also suggests the reverse effect: that films create the suspicion and fear that leads to conflict:

Damaging portraits, notably those presenting Arabs as America’s enemy, affect all people, influencing world opinion and policy. Given the pervasive stereotype, it comes as no surprise that some of us – and the US State Department – find it difficult to accept Egyptians, Moroccans, Palestinians, and other Arabs as friends (2009, p.35).

It is not hard to see how Australia and its relationship to its citizens of Arab and Muslim background may be influenced by this US agenda. After all, Australians watch more films from Hollywood than from any other country in the world, including our own. As well as Australia’s national conflict with its Arab and Muslim citizens between 2000 and 2005 (the Skaf gang rapes in 2000, and the Cronulla Riots in 2005), between 2001 and 2012 Australia also participated in two US-led Middle Eastern invasions: Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. There seems to be an obvious relationship between Australia’s perceptions of Arabs and Muslims, both here and abroad, and international perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. Hage recognises that in Australia perceptions of the ‘Lebanese’ are simply the embodiment of the international anti-Arab and anti-Muslim consciousness, and the work of Said and Shaheen helps us connect Australia’s relationship to the ‘Lebanese’ with a broader Western perception of the ‘Arab’ and the ‘Muslim’. Under these circumstances, the development of new Arab-Australian literature should consider, and directly and indirectly contribute to, the identity of the ‘Leb’ as part of a global Arab-Muslim image as well as the national and local Arab-Muslim image.

So far, this exegesis has explored the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity in relation to, and experienced from, the perspective of a local and international White dominant culture. In the next chapter I will explore how young Arab-Australian
Muslim men came to see and construct *themselves*, particularly within the ‘response-mode’ to ‘White nation’ thinking. I will explore some of the influences that shaped the ‘Leb’ identity, specifically the African-American gangsta hype that we saw Arab-Australian youths emulating in ‘DIAL-A-GUN’, as well as in *The Combination* and *Cedar Boys*. This will lead into a deeper investigation of African-American male identities. What truths are there behind the popular subaltern images of Black male ghetto-gangsta culture? And what realities are being left out of this culture that young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney can also discover? I believe this investigation will contribute to the development of literary representations of Arab-Australians that are hybrid and eclectic.
In ‘Multiculturalism and the Ungovernable Muslim’, Hage argues that the ‘Lebanese’ behaviour so many Australians found ‘irksome’ in the lead-up to the 2005 Cronulla Riots was a hybrid formation – the cultural traits exhibited contained forms of working and under-class masculinities, Lebaneseness unique to Australia, and ‘a touch of the black and Latino American cultural subaltern hype that has been globalised by the mass media through the propagation of particular types of music, clothing, walking, etc.’ (2011, p.197).

The so-called ‘touch’ of Black and Latino American influence on the young Arab-Australian Muslim male identity, especially the ‘Black’ aspect, supports the reasoning for a 2007 project called ‘All Eyes On Youth’ instigated by a Bankstown youth worker named Fadi Abdul-Rahman. It was Abdul-Rahman’s contention that since so many young men from Sydney’s West identified with popular African-American representations, perhaps a real-life African-American rapper could shed light on the myths of Black gangsta culture in the US and offer some positive and alternative worldviews. As covered in an episode of the SBS television program *Insight* called ‘True Colours’ (SBS, 2007), the African-American rapper who ultimately accepted this invitation went by the name ‘Napoleon’. He was an ex-member of the renowned gangsta rap group, ‘Outlawz’. Napoleon claimed to have experienced actual American ghettos – gangs, drugs, guns, sex – which American music and movies had glamourised to many young Australians from Western Sydney. He also appealed to them because like the majority of his Western Sydney fan base, he identified as a Muslim. But perhaps Napoleon’s greatest allure was that he was a close friend of the most famous Black gangsta rapper of all time, a slain twenty-five-year-old who went by the stage name 2Pac. Also known as Tupac Shakur, 2Pac came to embody the entire Black gangsta rap movement throughout the late 90s and seemed to speak directly to the young Arab-Australian Muslim male experience. Take for example 2Pac’s song ‘Changes’, which was released worldwide shortly after his murder in 1996:
Can’t a brotha get a little peace?
There’s war on the streets, and a war in the Middle East.
Instead of war on poverty,
They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me.

Wars in the Middle East, wars against drug-dealers and wars against young men of colour – these lyrics offer an immediate explanation as to why young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney within a ‘White nation’ context and within a hostile climate fostered by a xenophobic and Islamophobic Australian news media, may have found the voices of African-American male rappers so seductive. The sense of persecution felt by the ‘Leb’ on an almost daily basis seemed to parallel the African-American experience, leading to responses that Collins et al. recognise as forms of protest masculinity – the assertion of symbolic power and aggression (in this case from African-American gangsta culture), as compensation for the experience of marginalisation and injury (2000, p.167).

However, the danger here is that in most cases young Arab-Australian Muslim men were only engaging with a fetishised version of the African-American male made possible through the global mass media. For this reason, one might recognise that the ‘Lebs’ were not adopting African-American culture so much as adopting what I have called notions of African-Amercannness. The purpose of Napoleon’s visit to Australia was to help Australian youth move away from the ‘sexy’ and ‘cool’ fantasy of Black culture and into the painful and challenging realities faced by Black people, specifically Black males, in the United States every day. While ‘Lebs’ may have incorporated notions of African-Amercannness into their identities, and while these notions can certainly serve as some of the character traits in Arab-Australian narratives, it is the lived experiences of African-American men that I believe should actually provide an intercultural context for the development of new autobiographical literature about the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity. What do the lived experiences of some African-American men have in common with the lived experiences of Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney, and what may be the positive alternatives for both groups? To answer these questions, I have investigated the position and condition of Black men and Black masculinities based on the work of African-American feminist, social activist and cultural critic.
bell hooks. *We Real Cool* (hooks 2004) analyses the origins of, consequences of, and alternatives to, the social, political, economic and personal struggles facing Black men in the contemporary United States via the intersections of race, class and gender.

*White Nation* by Ghassan Hage argues that ‘White’ is not a racial identity and nor is it based on having a particular skin tone or appearance. Rather, it is a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion (Hage 1998, p.20). In contrast to White Australia, Hage recognises the migrant, refugee and Indigenous other in Australia, which historically includes Australians of Greek, Italian, Arab and Jewish backgrounds as well as Aboriginals, Asians, South Asians and Africans. This understanding of ‘White’ is perhaps the most significant difference between the language of Australian theorists such as Hage and the language of American theorists such as bell hooks. In *We Real Cool* ‘Whiteness’ takes on a more literal meaning. All fair skinned people, including Jews, Greeks and Italians, and before 9/11, even Arabs, seem to be ‘White’. In contrast ‘Black’ seems to refer to dark-skinned people, while the term ‘people of colour’ tends to refer more broadly to Asians, South Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans as well as Africans and African-Americans (hooks 2004). These differences between Australian and American racial categories reveal the unique and inherently constructed and subjective nature of race and racialisation from nation to nation, which come about due to the presence of a range of colonial origins and histories, varying relationships to Indigenous populations, varying constitutional rights and constitutional amendments, and varying waves and trends in migration, not to mention varying policies associated with slavery, segregation and civil liberties. Reflecting the racial signifiers unique to America, hooks often speaks of race in terms of ‘black’ and ‘white’. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, this motif can be identified as early as the first page:

> After militant civil rights struggle led to new ways of knowing and those ways of knowing were systemically ignored by elites within the power structure, it became evident that the root of white supremacy was not ignorance but the desire on the part of the unenlightened white people to maintain their dominance over black people in this nation and around the world (hooks 2004, p.1).
Here, the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ create an inarguable distinction between the subjugated African-American identity born out of slavery and the subjugator White-American identity born out of European colonisation. However, this motif seems to blur, and even ignore, the identities of Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, South Asians and Arabs in America, not to mention Africans in America, as distinct from African-American Americans, who do not seem to fit within, or significantly shape and impact in any way, the ‘black’ and ‘white’ society that hooks has described. Therefore, in order to extract any ‘real-world’ value from hooks’ arguments, we first need to engage her use of the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ as symbolic markers of racial classification, which are evoked from a milieu of socially constructed categories.

Although the ‘black and white’ motif often seems to produce a simplistic notion of racial classification, hooks mostly examines race in relation to class, gender and sexuality, categories that she recognises as intrinsically interconnected and constantly crossing paths, in a discourse appropriately named ‘intersectionality’. In hooks’ writing, the process of intersecting socio-political identities results in the case-by-case piling of categories – from what hooks might call ‘white racist sexist pornographic sexual fantasies’ (2004, p.67) to ‘gendered masculine patriarchy’ (2004, p.xiii). She uses the term ‘imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ to refer to the full embodiment of the problem faced by Americans and people all over the world today. Since very few individuals or groups represent all categories in this term, we must consider the way people move in and out of privilege and disadvantage rather than attempt to understand others and ourselves as fixed in positions of subjugation or positions of dominion. As hooks notes, by way of an example:

When slavery ended these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave masters used. Some newly freed black men would take their wives to the barn to beat them as the white owner had done (2004, p.4).

While this example does not counter the racist stereotype that Black men are violent, it explains the complex social situation in which some Black men
experienced, learned and began to practice violence. We are asked to consider the structures that have enabled White men to oppress Black men when analysing the violence that some Black men commit against Black women. The Black male is at the intersection between gender and race, existing not in a static state of oppressor or oppressed but as both the victimiser of patriarchy and misogyny and the traumatised victim of racism and White supremacy. However, simply piling up and blending categories of race, class, gender and sexuality does not necessarily provide a solid answer to the politics of identity. It can be argued that hooks’ process tends to produce a thin notion of each category rather than a complex and dynamic interplay between them. After all, degrees of class versus degrees of race versus degrees of gender versus degrees of sexuality within a specific nation state and time period, in addition to a consideration of further categories and contexts, ranging from one’s abilities and disabilities, to one’s age, profession, hobbies (which could be just as important to one’s identity and circumstances as one’s race, class, gender and sexuality), would produce categories as vast as the human race itself. This is not to dismiss ‘intersectionality’, but rather to recognise that it is best treated as only a foundation for engaging the complex nature of identities.

The management of identity politics via consideration of intersections is an essential basis for developing literature focused on Arab-Australian Muslim men, particularly as ‘Leb’ boys come into close intellectual, emotional and physical contact with members of different genders and sexualities, and people with different racial, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. As racist thinking comes into contact with sexist thinking, comes into contact with classist thinking, comes into contact with homophobic thinking, and so on, the author must navigate a contradictory space that is constantly balancing degrees of privilege against degrees of disadvantage.

One does not need to look very far to recognise the influence and adoption of Afro-American male popular culture in marginalised communities around the world, young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney being a key example in this research. While this tends to position the Black male identity as the ‘love’ and ‘envy’ of other marginalised identities, hooks argues that the lived experience of the Black man is to exist within a context and culture that does not love him – that fears him rather than loves him, and that in structures of domination, fear and love are
often confused (2004, p.xi). This begins as soon as the African-American identity begins. hooks claims that prior to slavery, African male explorers had already come to the Americas, but unlike the European male explorers who followed, they interacted peacefully with the Native Americans, revealing that their sense of masculinity was not defined by the will to dominate and colonise groups who were not like them (2004, p.2). This idea challenges the rise and popularisation of social Darwinist theories, which suggest that the human desire to dominate, especially the human male desire to dominate, is simply part of human nature.

When we read the annals of history … it is revealed that initially black males did not see themselves as sharing the same standpoint as white men about the nature of masculinity. Transplanted African men, even those coming from communities where sex roles shaped the division of labour, where the status of men was different and most times higher than that of women, had to be taught to equate their higher status as men with the right to dominate women, they had to be taught patriarchal masculinity (hooks 2004, p.3).

Here, the desire to dominate – to dominate each other, to dominate men of different races and cultures, and to dominate women – is transformed from a natural condition to a learned condition and a White male condition. Furthermore, the concept of ‘patriarchal masculinity’ separates patriarchy and masculinity, suggesting that men can be, and in the case of Black men had been, masculine without being patriarchal. These ideas offer subversive perspectives on what it has meant to be a ‘man’ within the modern and Western-dominated world, and they present all men with alternatives to patriarchal and Western modes of thinking. However, at times it does seem as though hooks herself romanticises and essentialises the nature of the ‘African man’ and the ‘White man’. While we should certainly acknowledge the influence of White slave masters on their Black male victims, and while there may indeed be examples of African men engaging with Native Americans that were not based on conquest, it is important to take into account the African involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. As Henry Louis Gates writes, ‘The sad truth is that without complex business partnerships between African elites and European traders and commercial agents, the slave trade to the New World would have been impossible, at least on the scale it occurred’ (Gates 2010). This is not to argue that therefore ‘Black
people are just as bad as White people’, but rather that ‘black’ and ‘white’ should be understood as language descriptors in *We Real Cool*, and that their purpose is not to offer absolute truths about ‘white’ human nature versus ‘black’ human nature, but rather to evoke new ways of thinking about what we believe and have been told is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. Similar descriptors could no doubt be considered in the development of new Arab-Australian literature, in which identities such as ‘Aussie’ and ‘Leb’ run through the writing as themes and motifs that shape a sense of Australianness rather than as universal truths about what it definitively means to be ‘Australian’, ‘White’, ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’, and so on.

In a chapter called ‘Don’t Make Me Hurt You’ hooks argues that as early as the eighteenth century we find iconographies in Western culture depicting Black males as uncivilised brutes without the ability to feel complex emotions, fear or remorse (2004, p.48). These are images that carry on well into the twentieth century in film, television, music, media and literature, with literally thousands of texts that only associate Black men with gangs, ghettos, prisons, guns, murders and a hyperphysical sexuality which tends to translate into misogynist-patriarchal behaviour. This includes much of the popular gangsta rap music of Biggie, Tupac, Snoop Dogg, Outlawz and NWA, TV programs such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Cops* (1989-present) and movies such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *South Central* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993), *Friday* (1995) and *Soul Plane* (2004). hooks even calls into question films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), which only disguise themselves as having complex and sophisticated portrayals of Black men. A close analysis of the film reveals that ‘while the black male confesses to having murdered for no reason, the white male he tutors in the art of survival is shown to be innocent’ (hooks 2004, p.49).

Between 2009 and 2014, the popular Black male gangsta images in American films, television and music could suddenly be identified in Australian film and television representations about young Arab-Australian Muslim and Christian men. This included films such as *The Combination* (2009), *Cedar Boys* (2009), and *Convict* (2014), and television programs like *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* (2010) and *East West 101* (2007-2010). While addressing issues and events that were specifically Australian (such as the 1998 Lakemba Police Station shooting in *Underbelly: The Golden Mile* and the 2005 Cronulla Riots in *The Combination*),
these texts seem to use the same symbols and stereotypes often found in a Black gangsta film – the ‘Leb’ characters have a distinct and inarticulate street vernacular, they are poor, they deal drugs, they conduct drive-by shootings, and they move in and out of prison. They also commit crimes without even a basic understanding or consideration of the penalties. In *The Combination*, Tom (Rashad Dehan) stabs a Pacific Islander boy because he beats Tom in a game of *Street Fighter*. Zeus (Ali Haider) shoots and kills an Anglo-Australian boy from school because of some racist banter. This is no different to Hollywood films like *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *American History X* (1998), in which Black students pull guns and knives on each other, and on White students, and take lives without remorse or any sense of real-life consequences.

Another Black gangsta trope we see in these Arab-Australian representations is the Black/ethnic man’s inability to cooperate with authority and institutions. In *Underbelly: The Golden Mile*, John Ibrahim (Firass Diranni) cannot conform to the expectations of school, so he drops out to become a successful drug-dealer in Kings Cross. We have seen and learnt of this theme in films like *One Eight Seven* (1997), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Notorious* (2009), in which both the African-American and Latino young male is too tough, too poor and too stupid to adapt to the Western school system. This corroborates hooks’ argument that Black men in America are often pigeonholed and stereotyped as ‘non-learners’ – all body and no mind (2004, p.33).

Perhaps the most direct example of mainstream Black iconography in Arab-Australian representations is the promotional image for *The Combination*. Six young men of mainly ‘Middle-Eastern’ appearance are pictured looking ‘gangsta’ and ‘ghetto’. At the centre is the character Zeus (Ali Haider) standing shirtless, bronze-skinned, tightly muscled, and holding one arm up to his chest in the shape of a gun just like the boy cocking his fingers in the shape of a gun in ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ – indeed this promotional image conjures up memories of the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ plaguing Sydney streets eleven years earlier! The difference, however, is that the boy in the ‘DIAL-A-GUN’ image had a large and innocent smile on his face (approaching the situation with an obvious sense of mockery), whereas the boy in *The Combination* image has a threatening and menacing expression. Zeus represents the gangsta the ‘Punchbowl Homeboys’ claimed they were rather than the gangsta they wished they were. I see this as a clear point of difference between the ‘Leb’ in
the development of the creative component of this thesis and the ‘Leb’ we meet in George Basha and David Field’s film, *The Combination*. Rather than the one-dimensional dangerous, serious, joyless, gangsta drug-dealer Leb, who is based on a fantasy, I seek to construct an ironic and resilient Leb, a character who knows the difference between what he is and what he would like to be, between how he is seen and how he sees himself.

Although some Black males may actually enact the kind of violent/sexist behaviours that are represented in popular Black imagery, hooks argues that those Black males who reject the racist/sexist stereotype are often still subjected to that stereotype: ‘Nonviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent. Black men who are not sexual harassers or rapists confront a public that relates to them as though this is who they are underneath the skin’ (2004, p.49). These circumstances seem to explicitly parallel the Arab-Australian Muslim male experience. In the case of the Skaf gang rapes, for example, young men of Arab-Australian Muslim backgrounds began to feel stigmatised as potential sexual predators (Switzer 2010, p.124). hooks comments that, ‘In actuality many black males explain their decision to become the “beast” as a surrender to realities they cannot change … Young black males, particularly underclass males, often derive a sense of satisfaction from being able to create fear in others, particularly white folks’ (2004, p.49). Again, this parallels the circumstances of many young Arab-Australian Muslim men: journalists and the general public may not fully understand the pleasure some young Arab-Australian men gain from generating fear in others, particularly as hooks puts it, fear in ‘white folks’, with their menacing poses. This is examined in the chapter ‘Someone to Fear’ in *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime*, where Collins et al. argue that the young men ‘threw back in the face of the threats from “mainstream” culture a valorised, empowering assertion of the ethnicity through which they had been labelled … They affirm a masculine and “ethnic” identity of toughness, danger and respect’ (2000, p.150). Framed by a Bourdieu-style argument, *Kebabs* recognises that these young men earned recognition and subcultural capital (systems of value, style, etc., that exist within a group) through the persona they had been projecting and that was being projected onto them, undertaking what earlier theorists had called ‘Protest Masculinity’. This asserts a form of symbolic power or aggression that compensates for the experience of marginalisation and powerlessness within particular class
structures (Collins et al. 2000, pp.165-166). In both the Arab-Australian and the African-American cases, young men in menacing iconographies pose no actual threat to the broader society in which they live, or they only become a threat as a form of ‘protest masculinity’ – in response to racist stereotyping. Thus, the ‘beast’ is revealed because of a predetermined image, according to which the marginalised young man is seen by others and/or sees himself in relation to others.

The transformation into ‘the beast’ can be an important theme and narrative arc in creative Arab-Australian representations that seek to counteract and reimagine simplistic tropes and stereotypes. It is not that the ‘Leb’ is simply a gangster like the ones we see in _The Combination_, and nor is he simply pretending to be a gangster like the young men we see in ‘DIAL-A-GUN’; he might actually become the ‘gangster’, the ‘criminal’, the ‘terrorist’, the ‘misogynist’, as a submission to, and response to, the context and setting of racialisation and marginalisation.

However, though it is important to recognise that many of the images and representations of African-American men and Arab-Australian men that we have discussed here are often filled with stereotypes and generalisations which do not substantially represent African-American or Arab-Australian male identities, it is equally important not to ignore the degree of African-American male violence, and similarly the degree of Arab-Australian male violence, which is often prevalent in many underprivileged communities and contexts. hooks recognises that while there are young Black men who assume the gangsta persona but will never commit a serious act of violence, there are also large numbers of underclass Black males who are actively violent, with Black-on-Black homicide being one of the greatest causes of death in Black life, in addition to Black male violence directed towards females (2004, pp.56-62). Various theorists and public personalities, including many Black male rap artists, often suggest that Black male violence is the Black man’s way of raging against economic oppression and racism, but according to hooks there are plenty of Black men in positions of privilege and wellbeing who still see it as acceptable to respond to a situation with violence and that if this was entirely about economic oppression and racism, Black women would also be gunning each other down and being equally violent to Black males – she argues that it is sexist thinking and practice that teaches Black men that violent rages are acceptable (2004, p.62).

Although in my creative work I do not seek to reinforce the international or the local stereotypes about Arab and Muslim males, equally I do not want to deny or
avoid the violent and criminal activities perpetrated by ‘Lebs’ that are known to themselves as well as the media, police, politicians, school teachers, researchers, and their community leaders and families. This includes acts of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional violence against each other, against outsiders and against women which correlate with major case studies investigated in *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* such as the murder of Edward Lee in Punchbowl in 1998 (Collins et al. 2000, p.1). Rather than tell a positive story about the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity, my aim is to offer a multifaceted understanding of what causes violent and dangerous behaviour in underclass racialised Australian communities. On the one hand this aim draws on Collins et al. who argue that patterns of socioeconomic disadvantage shaped by the persistence of racialisation, and racialised representations of crime, tend to conceal the socioeconomic roots of crime (2000, p.229). And on the other hand, it draws from hooks, who recognises that even racialised men in positions of wealth and wellbeing have the capacity to violently act out (2004, p.62). Together, these arguments should help the new literature draw the conclusion that acts of male-on-male violence, as well as male-on-female violence in any cultural setting, are structural, systemic and educational issues rather than racial and ethnic ones.

In the chapter titled, ‘It’s a Dick Thing’, hooks explores the culture of sexual ‘acting out’ among Black men. Although it is not specified, the title here seems to be referencing a routine by African-American comedian and actor Eddie Murphy from his world-renowned stand-up performance, *Delirious* (1983). Over a sea of laughter, whistles and applause, Murphy explains:

> All men fuck other women. We are low by nature and have to do it. We are men. All men do it. We have to do it. We are men. It is a man thing. Men must find and conquer as much pussy as they can get. Do not think for two seconds that you are the only one your man is fucking. He is a man and has to conquer women … it is a dick thing.

In contrast to this humour, hooks proposes that rather than men, specifically Black men, being ‘low by nature’, the desire to cheat, lie to and conquer women is a learned condition which has come about through racist sexist capitalism. She points
out that ‘since sexuality in the West has been linked to fantasies of domination from its inception … African people in the so-called new world were automatically entering a setting where the sexual script was encoded with sadomasochistic rituals of domination, of power and play’ (2004, p.69). Here, hooks creates a direct link between the origins of an Afro-American identity, which was made up of slaves who were not conditioned to dominator forms of sexuality, to the comments being applauded and cheered on in Murphy’s performance, in which some African-Americans have now come to accept that the desire to dominate, to deceive, and to dictate power in inherently violent sexual relations is simply part of the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ need that all men have to ‘conquer’ women and each other. While perceptions of the Black male body are often based on an imaginary pornographic discourse, in which Whites seek the Black body to confirm that it is the exotic super-sexed flesh of their fantasies (hooks 2004, p.79), Murphy’s comments reveal that some Black males within patriarchal capitalist structures also adopt and propagate the view that they are hypersexual and sexually superior to White men, contributing to the myth that all Black men, regardless of their class or education, tread a line between the ‘man’ and the ‘beast’.

Such self-perceptions of ‘sexual prowess’ can also be recognised among young Arab-Australian Muslim men. To an extent this might be the direct result of the consumption of patriarchal African-American and more generally American popular culture, which is globally promoting and glorifying the supposed ‘natural need’ that all men have to dominate women. More specific to the Arab-Australian experience however, Poynting et al. argue that:

Indeed, research by the present authors on masculinity and identity among second-generation Lebanese-background young men has documented how boasting of the supposed attributes of the manhood of their culture of origin is a common theme of their conversation, often advanced in the face of experienced cultural denigration (2004, p.126).

Poynting et al. also go on to argue that there is nothing ‘culturally specific’ about this behaviour, with the same theme being found among many ethnicities, including Anglo-Australian men (2004, p.126). However, unique to the ‘Leb’ male experience seems to be its relationship to his White Australian female counterpart.
Tabar et al. argue that, ‘Many Muslim informants indicated that “Aussie girls” believed in the hyper-sexualised character of the Lebanese boys, and thus, some Lebanese boys seemed to believe this myth and made maximum use of it in their interaction with the opposite sex outside their community’ (2010, p.109). This finding does not confirm the outsider perception of the ‘Lebanese boys’ sexual character as much as it confirms the perception of sexual prowess ‘Lebanese boys’ had of themselves, and explains the interconnected origins of this myth. ‘Lebanese boys’ come to believe what they believe is believed about them, which evokes particular forms of behaviour, and which then evokes the myth.

We can also find examples where Arab-Australian Muslim men are perceived as hypersexual by the broader dominant culture around them. However, unlike stereotypes concerning Black men, this is usually seen as a cultural matter rather than as a biological one. It is perpetuated by an essentialist discourse that seems to deem all Arab and Muslim men as members of a sexist, misogynist and patriarchal culture and religion. As Tabar et al. argue with reference to the Skaf gang rapes, ‘In response to this event, tabloid media, radio stations, opinion writers, callers to radio shows and letter writers to the editors of newspapers attributed the crime to the Lebanese, (or, in some versions, Muslim) culture of these young men, which they considered to be inherently violent and misogynous’ (2010, p.96).

The socially-imposed and self-imposed myth of Arab-Australian Muslim male hyper-sexuality provides a basis for exploring the sexual activities and fantasies of ‘Lebs’, and how they are related to by the broader society, in the development of new Arab-Australian literature. I draw again on the conclusions of Tabar et al., who recognise that ‘the youthful, masculine discourse circulating within this regime is not only designed to ultimately secure the “boys” dominance over the body and sexuality of their female counterparts, but also has to be understood as defensive or “injured” in the context of the experience of racism and marginalisation in Australian society’ (2010, p.97). New Arab-Australian literature might consider the hypersexual activities of young Arab-Australian Muslim men within a discourse of racist/sexist relations – how the ‘Leb’ moves strategically between identities and sexual values to accommodate and deal with his mixed sense of Australianness, Arabness, Muslimness and colouredness.
As she approaches the conclusion to *We Real Cool* hooks takes an incredibly harsh stance against Black hip-hop and rap culture, in one section stating that:

While the patriarchal boys in the hip-hop crew may talk about keeping it real, there has been no musical culture with black men at the forefront of its creation that has been as steeped in the politics of fantasy and denial as the more popular strands of hip-hop (2004, p.150).

This is the first reference in *We Real Cool* to the meaning of the title – the Black man’s declaration that hip-hop and rap music is about the ‘real’ experience of ‘Black lives’, ‘the streets’ and ‘the ghettos’. hooks argues that rather than ‘keeping it real’ however, hip-hop and rap music have only reinforced stereotypes and fictions about Black men, propagating gangsta culture, materialism, capitalism, violence and patriarchal forms of masculinity, and having offered no possibilities of redemptive change or healing (2004, p.153). Though one might agree with this generally, I contend that hooks’ lack of specificity here, in regards to artists and rap songs, seems to essentialise and simplify the entire Black hip-hop movement. While a large percentage of Black male hip-hop artists and rap songs promote denigrating and disempowering messages and images, numbers such as 2Pac’s ‘Changes’ list racial, social, political and economic inequalities within and outside of America and also argue that ‘we need to change the way we live … and the way we treat each other’, which promote a healthy alternative for Black men and for people in general. Additionally, one of the overall arguments of this exegesis is that there are aspects within African-American male popular rap and hip-hop culture which have offered empowering alternatives for males with parallel identities, namely young Arab-Australian Muslim men. Such males gain a sense of cosmopolitan belonging in the face of ‘injury’ and ‘marginalisation’ through hip-hop and rap music, which should not be overlooked or undervalued.

As already established, hooks’ criticism of rap and hip-hop is part of the general aim in *We Real Cool* to propose empowering and alternative ways of thinking about and thinking among Black men. This is not so much based on what *could be* but rather what *was*. ‘I have talked about the blues as a musical form black males once chose because it allowed them to express a range of complex emotions, from the most intense joy to profound heartbreak and sorrow’ (hooks 2004, p.148).
In this quote and throughout her text, the writer bell hooks develops into a nostalgic character – sentimental about the way it was before slavery, the way it was during the civil rights movements, the way it was before capitalism, and the way it was before rap and hip-hop. In the final pages she argues that her nostalgia for the civil rights movements, which includes the original culture of Black music as much as the leaders, marches and speeches, came about because of the lack of alternatives that Black hip-hop and rap culture offers Black men today. ‘Nostalgia for the civil rights movement is linked to the humanizing blueprints for freedom that it offered black folks, especially black males’ (hooks 2004, p.153). Here the theme of nostalgia helps to construct the author’s generational identity and sense of sentimentality. Though this gives us a distinct narrator’s voice, once again the lack of specificity continues to essentialise the Black hip-hop movement. As will be discussed in the next chapter, theorists such as Daulatzai see elements of hip-hop culture not as the decline of the civil rights movement but as the next stage in the movement, particularly through conversions to Islam among the majority of early Black male hip-hop artists (Daulatzai 2012, p.109). This is an especially significant aspect of the civil rights movement against White supremacy and racism, because it begins to shift the national African-American struggle toward an international ‘all-colours’ and ‘third-world’ struggle. Islam becomes an influence that links Arabs, Africans and Asians to African-Americans, and African-Americans to Arab-Australians, which I will argue provides a symbolic gateway into the development of new Arab-Australian literature.

In addition to listing the struggles faced by Black men in the contemporary United States, hooks frequently interjects alternative possibilities and ideas for young Black men. Consistent with her sentimentality and nostalgia for the civil rights struggle, she recognises ‘love’ in the form of ‘nonviolence’, as promoted by Martin Luther King, to be an empowering option. ‘Black male survival requires that they learn to challenge patriarchal notions of manhood, that they claim nonviolence as the only progressive stance to take in a world where all life is threatened by patriarchal imperialist war’ (hooks 2004, p.64). Of course, nonviolent resistance is not a unique African-American strategy, having been employed spectacularly by the independence movement in India under the leadership of Gandhi, by the Solidarity movement in Poland, by the Chinese students on Tiananmen Square in 1989, and so on. Here, however, hooks speaks directly to the African-American male experience,
which is about finding alternatives to Black male violence based on the mirroring of White male violence in America (2004, p.66). In contrast to the gangsta culture which stresses that ‘keeping it real’ means a Black man must be emotionless, silent, dangerous and dominant, she is stressing that love and healing are what should actually be deemed ‘real cool’.

hooks also sustains the claim that steps toward freedom and justice in any culture require improvements in education, literacy and critical consciousness. She argues that, ‘Mass-based literacy programs, especially ones that would target unemployed black males, which link learning to the development of critical thinking, are needed to rectify the failure of early schooling’ (2004, p.45). Here, literacy and critical consciousness are seen to offer Black men tools to challenge a system that is set against them, but hooks also identifies that literacy-based programs aid Black men to enter the system: ‘Learning to read and write are basic skills that are needed if one is to work and be a fully productive citizen’ (2004, p.40). Whether literacy is used to challenge a system or enter a system, hooks’ claim is supported here by an entire canon of literary works that both discuss her arguments and are the physical manifestations of her arguments. ‘Biographies and autobiographies of black men who managed to transcend the poverty they were born into all tell stories of individuals who struggled to educate themselves within educational systems that were not supportive’ (hooks 2004, p.35). Examples of such stories include James Baldwin’s Notes of a Native Son (1955) and Richard Wright’s Black Boy (1945), and perhaps most notably The Autobiography of Malcolm X (X & Haley 1965), which will be the focus of the final two chapters of this exegesis. In these texts and many others, a central component of the narrative is how the person at the centre of the story obtained the skills to write/tell the story, while the written existence of the narrative itself is a living artefact that comes out of, and reveals the importance of, and further inspires, one’s intellectual development. This creates a cyclical relationship between the literacy development of Black men and the literacy narrative in the literature they produce: the story at the centre of their text is about how they developed the ability to read and write. For example, in the case of Malcolm X, he learns to read and write while he is in prison which enables him to produce his autobiography, and learning to read and write while he is in prison becomes one of the central narratives in his autobiography (X & Haley 1992, pp.198-200).
This brief introduction to the life and writing of Malcolm X opens a window into the final two chapters of this exegesis, which will consider the impact that African-American literary traditions, those that inform literary techniques inside specific texts and those that inform the broader societies and individuals creating and engaging those texts, can have on the development of autobiographical literature by and about young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney. Through an in-depth analysis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* I attempt to reveal a symbolic cultural exchange between Arab-Muslim, African-American Muslim and Arab-Australian Muslim identities, and I examine the influence that Eastern traditions, particularly oral storytelling and literacy narratives from the Arab-Muslim world, have had on the development of ‘Black Muslim’ literature, and could have on the Arab-Australian experience.
Chapter 5: Malcolmites and Muhammadans: Part 1

_The Autobiography of Malcolm X_ was written by the African-American civil rights leader known as Malcolm X with the assistance of African-American writer Alex Haley, who was also the author of the novel _Roots: The Saga of an American Family_ (1976). While their text is considered the ‘true’ account of Malcolm X’s life and times, covering a thirty-nine-year period from birth to assassination to funeral, in this chapter and the next I will argue that _The Autobiography of Malcolm X_ is a version of Malcolm X – a creative and fictional depiction, woven by multiple authors, presented in numerous editions, with numerous subheadings, and in numerous orders, as the story of the man most famously known as ‘Malcolm X’. Some claim the text does not cover the most pivotal moments in Malcolm X’s political trajectory, and others claim that it tones down and glamourises certain aspects of his life. It is a text that was ever-changing during its creation, as lived experiences and revelations constantly reshaped the authors’ imaginations. I will argue that these factors create a fluid understanding of truth in literature – truth as a single construction of multiple realities. This will parallel my broader argument that the Arab-Australian Muslim male identity is a fluid concept, open to a new version of truth with each new representation.

My analysis of _The Autobiography of Malcolm X_ will consider the development of Malcolm X as a character in the Black autobiographical narrative, as I have considered figures such as Ghassan Hage and bell hooks as characters in their narratives. I will also consider the text’s development of voice and oral storytelling techniques, the development of tense and perspective (specifically those of a present and future narrator operating simultaneously), and the development of themes and motifs such as change, conversion and transformation as a result of education, enlightenment and critical consciousness. I will argue that these devices symbolically draw from an Arab-Muslim tradition that can inform and inspire the development of new Arab-Australian literature. In particular, they can inform autobiographical narratives and social and cultural commentaries on civil and race rights within the
context of a ‘White nation fantasy’. In this chapter, I begin my argument by analysing some of the central themes and techniques built into the narrative structure and narrative arc of the autobiographical document Malcolm X and Alex Haley produced.

The autobiography and the biography are literary forms that give an account of a person’s life. They differ only in who is telling the story – an autobiography is an account of a person’s life written by that person, a biography is an account of a person’s life written by another person. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the subheadings that accompany the title, ‘With the assistance of Alex Haley’ (X & Haley 1992) or ‘As told to Alex Haley’ (X & Haley 2001), suggest that it is an autobiography with elements of biography, involving both the autobiographer, Malcolm X, and the biographer, Alex Haley. In his epilogue, which in some editions appears as an introduction, Alex Haley details the nature of his collaboration with Malcolm X (X & Haley 1992). It had come to the attention of a publisher that very little was known about the rising public figure who had declared himself to the world with an ‘X’, apart from some side comments he had made during speeches and interviews regarding his criminal past and time in jail before joining a Black nationalist movement called the Nation of Islam (NOI) under the leadership of a man who went by the name Elijah Muhammad. Haley was asked if he felt he could get the now nationally known firebrand to consent to telling the intimate details of his entire life (1992, p.443). He writes that Malcolm X was suspicious about the offer to produce an autobiography at first, and took two days to make the following decision: ‘I’ll agree. I think my life story may help people to appreciate better how Mr. Muhammad salvages black people. But I don’t want my motives for this misinterpreted by anybody – the Nation of Islam must get every penny that might come of me’ (1992, p.444). After signing the contract, Haley claims that Malcolm X immediately pulled from his wallet a piece of paper and read to him, ‘This book I dedicate to The Honourable Elijah Muhammad, who found me here in America in the muck and mire of the filthiest civilisation and society on this earth, and pulled me out, cleaned me up, and stood me on my feet, and made me the man I am today’ (1992, p.445). Haley then goes on to describe the additional agreements between him and Malcolm, that he would not be allowed to write anything that Malcolm did not say, or leave out anything that Malcolm wanted in, and that in return Malcolm would
give him all the time he requested to produce the 100,000-word ‘as told to’ story of his entire life. Haley also requested that he be allowed to include comments of his own about the text, which now stand as either the epilogue or foreword or introduction in various editions of the book (1992, pp.445-446).

The chronological narrative presented by Malcolm X and Alex Haley in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* takes us from Malcolm’s birth, to his early schooling, to his criminal activities, to his incarceration, to his involvement with the NOI, and then finally to his split from the NOI and journey to Mecca. *The Autobiography* opens with the words of one whom we understand to be the narrator Malcolm X describing the events of his childhood, back when he was known as ‘Malcolm Little’. After his father was brutally murdered, Malcolm’s mother failed in her efforts to support her eight children and was sent to a mental institution and the children were separated – Malcolm was placed in the care of a polite White foster family. It was during these years that the Malcolm X narrator of the story describes one of the most important incidents of his life. He is in an all-White class, he is performing well in school and he has ambitions of becoming a lawyer, when finally his teacher confronts him: “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all like you here, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that’s no realistic goal for a nigger” (1992, p.43). Completely disheartened by the experience, and with White people in general, Malcolm leaves the care of his foster family to live with his older sister in Boston. From here he moves on to Harlem where as a teenager he is introduced to crime, becoming a drug-dealer, thief and pimp. The narrator Malcolm X often interpolates the events of these years with critical analyses of the individuals and communities he encountered as a young man named Malcolm Little. He describes for example, the perverse nature of his White male clients, explaining that some of them, particularly those who were impotent, would pay him to find a Black man they could watch have sex with a White woman. ‘A sleek, black Negro male having a white woman. Was this the white man wanting to witness his deepest sexual fear?’ (1992, p.138). This question reveals the analytical character of the text’s narrator, a civil rights figure who reflects upon events in his teenage years and provides psychological, racial and cultural criticism of them as an enlightened adult witness.

Narrator Malcolm X is also critical of himself during this time: ‘I was a true hustler – uneducated, unskilled at anything honourable, and I considered myself
nervy and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself’ (1992, p.125). Here we simultaneously experience the self-disgusted and reflective ‘Malcolm X’ and the proud naive ‘Malcolm Little’, presenting a critical contrast between the person who speaks to us in the present and the person in the past.

Following a string of burglaries, Malcolm and his best friend Shorty are finally captured by police and tried in court. Narrator Malcolm X suggests, using very careful wording, that their prison sentences of seven years were due to being captured while in the company of two White women they were sexually involved with. ‘Later, when I learned the full truth about the white man, I reflected many times that the average burglary sentence for a first offender, as we all were, was about two years. But we weren’t going to get the average – not for our crimes’ (1992, p.173). Ironically, unjust imprisonment is the turning point for Malcolm Little in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I argue that there are three elements in the narrative that explain Malcolm X’s miraculous change during his incarceration: firstly, a self-made education focused on literacy and critical awareness, secondly, a conversion to a hybridised form of Islam called the Nation of Islam (but Islam nonetheless), and lastly, a paternal and nurturing relationship with the NOI leader, a small and unassuming man named ‘The Honourable Elijah Muhammad’.

Narrator Malcolm X claims to have first heard about the teachings of Elijah Muhammad through his siblings during their routine prison visits. He was immediately struck by the teachings, which promised liberation to the Black man, but he could not effectively communicate his enthusiasm to the outside world. ‘I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad’ (1992, p.197). This led Malcolm Little to develop what the narrator Malcolm X refers to as a ‘homemade education’ (1992, p.197), which started with the very first word in the English dictionary, ‘Aardvark’ (1992, p.199). Malcolm X recounts how he trawled through the dictionary, from start to finish, copying out each word and its meaning. This strengthened his penmanship and broadened his word-base. ‘I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying’ (1992, p.199). Malcolm read extensively throughout the remainder of his time in prison, from H.G. Wells to W.E.B. Du Bois to Aesop. He also joined the prison debate team, in a desperate attempt to begin sharing what he had learned. ‘My
reading had my mind like steam under pressure. Someway, I had to start telling the white man about himself to his face’ (1992, p.112). Through its account of Malcolm X’s extensive reading, his faith in Elijah Muhammad and the NOI, and his debate contests, The Autobiography is constructing the early stages of what the reader understands to be the identity of a Black civil rights leader.

Although we cannot fully examine the factors that shaped Malcolm X’s transformation from criminal to Black civil rights leader separately from one another, The Autobiography undoubtedly stresses the importance of literacy as a unique tool for reforming marginalised and oppressed communities. I have already discussed the key arguments proposed by hooks in We Real Cool (2004) that suggest education is integral to the healing and empowerment of disenfranchised young Black men. To delve a little further now, in the 1997 Media Education Foundation documentary, Transformation and Cultural Criticism, hooks states that freedom and justice in any culture can be attributed to mass-based literacy movements because degrees of literacy determine how we see what we see. She offers up the Malcolm X narrative as a primary example, stating that, ‘If we look at someone like Malcolm X, he charts his own intellectual development through reading.’ Here is one such example of this in The Autobiography:

Every book I picked up had few sentences which didn’t contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been Chinese. When I skipped those words of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said … I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary – to study, to learn some words (1992, p.198).

In this passage, narrator Malcolm X clearly demonstrates how he developed intellectually through his interest in reading. However, this on its own does not sustain hooks’ additional claim that reading determined how Malcolm X saw what he saw, an assertion which situates ‘awareness’ and ‘realisation’ as core functions of literacy. This is emphasised as a separate factor in the Malcolm X narrative, as narrator Malcolm X states: ‘No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand’ (1992, p.200). In this passage narrator Malcolm X extends the notion of literacy from referring to the ability to put letters and words together, to the ability to deconstruct
information embedded within language and then critically and publicly respond to that information. Writing ‘understand’ in italics stresses the impact that reading has had on our incarcerated protagonist – it is going to propel the Malcolm Little character in the story toward becoming ‘Malcolm X’, the narrator who directly addresses us.

Malcolm X’s literacy may have enabled him to engage in the NOI and the Black civil rights struggle, but it is the literacy narrative in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that symbolically engages in an Islamic tradition. The Muslim Prophet Muhammad was said to have received verses and revelations from Allah (God) through the Angel Gibreel (Gabriel) for twenty-three years. The topics of these verses included history, philosophy, economics, politics, science and nature, and they became the complete text that we now know to be The Holy Qur’an. The Qur’an is formally regarded as Muhammad’s miracle because it was received by, and recited as a mercy to humankind from, a man known to be illiterate. Not only the content, but also the poetic wording of that content, were seen as miraculous, which Muslim scholars argue can only be fully appreciated in the language that it was originally recited, Arabic. In a biography of the Prophet Muhammad by Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (2007), it is suggested that Muhammad had been illiterate until the age of forty. One night while he was meditating in the cave of Hira, the Angel Gibreel appeared before him with a message from God. ‘Muhammad. Read,’ said the Angel. Muhammad replied, ‘I am not of those who read.’ And Gibreel repeated, ‘Read in the name of your Lord, Who created humankind out of a clinging clot. Read, and your Lord is most bountiful, He who taught by means of the pen, taught humankind that which they did not know’ (Ramadan 2007, p.29). Some theorists argue, however, that this story does not literally mean Muhammad could not read (in the basic sense of the word), but rather that Muhammad had no particular way with words:

The fact is that it would be highly unlikely for a successful merchant like Muhammad to have been unable to read and write the receipts of his own business. Obviously, he was neither a scribe nor a scholar, and he in no way had the verbal prowess of a poet. But he must have been able to read and write some basic Arabic – names, dates, goods, services – and, considering that many of his customers were Jews, he may even have had rudimentary skills in Aramaic (Aslan 2005, p.29).
Here, Reza Aslan’s *No god but God* proposes a radical redefinition of the term ‘literacy’. When Muhammad said to the Angel Gibreel, ‘I am not of those who read’, rather than mean that he did not recognise alphabetic and numeric symbols, he may have been suggesting that he was not among those scribes, scholars and poets who are masterful in their use of the Arabic language. According to this interpretation, the concept of literacy becomes more than simply the ability to read and write – it includes the ability to control and evoke a complex use of language and, in a manner similar to what we see in Malcolm X’s intellectual development, includes the ability to understand. If we use this definition, we can conclude that while most people might have reading and writing skills, only a select few achieve high levels of literacy and verbal skills over the course of their lives. This was the case for Malcolm Little. He learned to read and write (indeed he attained some basic reading and writing skills during his early schooling), but his intensive reading and writing in prison led to what hooks calls ‘critical reflection’ and ‘critical consciousness’ (2004, p.28), and a mastery over the English language, especially as an orator. As a result, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a literacy narrative – it tells the story of a coming to consciousness through reading and writing.

We might also categorise the Prophet Muhammad’s life-story as a literacy narrative. It is a narrative which not only explains his revelations, but is also a revelation in itself. In ‘Surat Al-‘Alaq’ from The Qur’an, Allah endows Muhammad with the ability to read (recite) and affirms the transference of knowledge as a divine force. ‘Read, for your Lord is most bountiful, who taught by means of the pen, taught humankind that which they did not know’ (Surah 96: 4-5). Here the ‘pen’ becomes a supernatural and transcendent energy, equal in its power to the staff of Moses or the ark of Noah, with the ability to transform and liberate. In *The Autobiography*, it is this very ‘pen’ that transforms and liberates Malcolm Little during the process of converting to Islam – he did not only adopt the Muslim religion, he also adopted the Muslim tradition. Narrator Malcolm X even testifies to this in the second half of the narrative, stating, ‘I silently vowed to Allah that I never would forget that any wings I wore had been put on by the religion of Islam’ (1992, p.331).

This brings me to the second and third factors in Malcolm X’s prison transformation – his religious conversion and the figure that inspired the conversion. The first version of Islam that Malcolm Little adopted, while under the guidance of
The Honourable Elijah Muhammad, differed from traditional and orthodox beliefs. Founded by the elusive W.D Fard, the ‘Nation of Islam’ began as a small movement in Detroit at some time during the early 1930s. As detailed by Clegg in *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad*, Fard claimed to be from Mecca, Saudi Arabia and of royal parentage (2007, p.20). Under the ‘original name’ of Fard Muhammad, he spoke to thousands of local African-Americans, saying that the true nature of the Black man was inherently righteous and the true nature of the White man was inherently wicked. He also taught Black power and Black separation, referring to both the Bible and the Qur’an.

A man then known as Elijah Poole, originally from Cordele, Georgia, had regularly been attending Fard Muhammad’s meetings, and when he finally shook hands with him, he lent into his ear and asked, ‘You are that one we read in the Bible that he would come in the last days under the name Jesus … You are that one?’ Fard Muhammad replied, ‘Yes, I am the One, but who knows that but yourself, and be quiet’ (Clegg 2007, pp.20-22). As Fard Muhammad built the NOI, he began to prepare Elijah Poole, his newly appointed Supreme Minister, for leadership of the organisation. In 1934, while awaiting arrest on charges of disturbing the peace, Fard Muhammad left Chicago. Before he vanished, he bestowed the title of ‘Messenger of Allah’ upon his chief lieutenant under the ‘original’ name ‘Elijah Muhammad’. ‘The last words and handshakes were exchanged in an airport terminal, following over thirty months of instruction and friendship. For Elijah, the final moments were as pregnant with mystery and symbolism as the first, as the man he knew as Fard Muhammad, the second Jesus, the Mahdi, the Son of Man, and Allah in Person soared into the Chicago sky’ (Clegg 2007, pp.34-36).

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, narrator Malcolm X explains that it was his siblings who first introduced him to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI: ‘My brothers and sisters in Detroit and Chicago had all become converted to what they were being taught was the “natural religion for the black man”’ (1992, p.181). While Malcolm Little was in jail, his siblings wrote him letters and visited him, and they promised they would get him out of prison. At first Malcolm Little interpreted this literally, assuming they had planned a ‘hustle’. He was shocked to discover the abstract nature of the prison from which they could release him – the prison of his mind (X & Haley 1992, p.180). They explained to him that God in the form of a man had come to save the Black people from the wilderness of North
America and they told him that this man was Black, that indeed, God was Black. The impact that this had on Malcolm Little and his siblings and the thousands of other African-American converts at the time was tremendous. To be told that God was Black after having been raised in a society that stressed for centuries God was White, fair-skinned, blue-eyed and blond-haired, as depicted in the renaissance portraits of Jesus, was radical and revolutionary, as well as empowering. There is no doubt that this ideology served its purpose – which, according to Clegg, was to facilitate the recruitment of NOI members (2007, p.43).

Narrator Malcolm X recounts what his siblings taught him during their prison visits – a story propagated by Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad that was influenced by Christianity, Islam and Black Nationalism called ‘Yacub’s History’ (X & Haley 1992, pp.190-194). First, he explains, the moon separated from the earth, then the first people were created, who were Black. They were the ‘Original Man’ and the ‘Nation of Islam’, founders of the Holy City of Mecca. Among them was the powerful Tribe of Shabazz, from which the African-Americans descended. ‘More than anywhere else in the story, the purpose here was to invent a mythical past that would appeal to African-Americans more than tales of African savagery and American bondage that many believed to be their sole roots’ (Clegg 2007, p.45). Six-thousand-six-hundred years ago, thirty per cent of these original people became dissatisfied with their civilisation. Among them was a scientist named Yacub, who was born to create trouble, break the peace and to kill. He was described as having an unusually big head and had excelled in the civilisation’s best schools and colleges. He came to the attention of authorities after preaching in the streets of Mecca and building up a host of followers. Finally, Yacub and 59,999 of his followers were exiled to the Island of Patmos. Narrator Malcolm X states that, ‘Though he was a black man, Mr. Yacub, embittered toward Allah now, decided, as revenge, to create upon the earth a devil race – a bleached-out, white race of people’ (1992, p.191). Yacub was privy to a black and brown germ that resided within the original Black man, as narrator Malcolm X further explains: ‘Mr. Yacub, to upset the law of nature, conceived the idea of employing what we today know as recessive gene structure, to separate from each other the two germs, black and brown, and then grafting the brown germ to progressively light, weaker stages. The humans resulting, he knew, would be, as they became lighter, and weaker, progressively also more susceptible to wickedness and evil’ (1992, p.191). When Mr. Yacub died at the age of one-
hundred-and-fifty-two he left laws in place so that his assistants would carry out his objective of creating a bleached-out devil race. After one thousand years of this practice, brown, red and yellow races of people emerged and dispersed, until finally, all that was left on the Island of Patmos was Yacub’s ultimate vision: ‘blond, pale-skinned, cold-blue-eyed devils – savages, nude and shameless; hairy, like animals, they walked on all fours and they lived in trees’ (X & Haley 1992, p.192). This race became the natural enemy of the righteous Tribe of Shabazz. They returned to the mainland, creating mischief and conflict between the Black tribes. But the Black people realised that their conflict stemmed from this White-devil, so they rounded them up and sent them across the Arabian Desert to the caves of Europe. As centuries passed by, Allah sent prophets to this White race of devils to help correct their ways. First, Allah sent the biblical prophet Moses, called Musa by the Muslims, who led the devil White race of Hebrews and taught them civilisation. It was believed by the NOI that after the White devils had ruled the world for six thousand years, down to the late nineteenth century, the Black original race would give birth to a divine leader (X & Haley 1992, pp.192-193). ‘Elijah Muhammad teaches that the greatest and mightiest God who appeared on the earth was Master W. D. Fard … Master W. D. Fard gave Elijah Muhammad Allah’s message, and Allah’s divine guidance, to save the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, the so-called Negroes, here in “this wilderness of North America”’ (X & Haley 1992, p.193).

The narrator Malcolm X describes the impact that this story had when his sister told it to him: ‘When my sister, Hilda, had finished telling me this “Yucub’s History,” she left. I don’t know if I was able to open my mouth and say good-bye’ (1992, p.194). Malcolm Little was convinced of the truth of the story, and it gave him a new and shocking perspective of the world he once knew.

In An Original Man, Clegg further explains some of the details of ‘Yacub’s History’, extending the NOI’s distance from orthodox Islam. God had sent a second prophet, Jesus, to the White devil. While Moses was mulatto in complexion, which explained the origins of Fard Muhammad’s own light complexion, Jesus was an entirely Black prophet. The White people killed Jesus out of fear of his message of peace and righteousness. They then went on to re-write the teachings of Jesus, in what became the Bible and the basis of the religion of Christianity (2007, pp.54-55). After Jesus, a third prophet was sent to the White people, Muhammad Ibn Abdulla, in the seventh century, to reintroduce Islam and dispel the falsehoods of Christianity.
In orthodox Islam Muhammad Ibn Abdullah is more commonly known as The Prophet Muhammad, The Messenger of Allah and The Last Prophet. This is one of the principal differences between the Islam of the East and the Islam of the NOI in North America. The NOI did not believe The Prophet Muhammad was Allah’s final messenger, or that he was the most important one. According to Clegg, ‘Fard reserved those distinctions for himself and later for Elijah Muhammad’ (2007, p.57).

The narrator Malcolm X was under the spell of these teachings when he first shared them with Alex Haley, but through the technique of foreshadowing, The Autobiography is also able to reflect on Elijah Muhammad’s teachings through the voice of an older Malcolm X figure: ‘I was to learn later that Elijah Muhammad’s tales, like this one of “Yacub,” infuriated the Muslims of the East’ (1992, p.194). This literary technique reveals some clues about the story we are to hear. Malcolm Little was later confronted with an opposing set of Islamic values and beliefs. He refers to ‘Yacub’s History’ as a ‘tale’, which implies that at some point he no longer saw it as ‘The Truth’. Will he adopt a different form of Islam? Will he come into conflict with his new leader? We are encouraged to ask such questions as we read on.

The Autobiography’s foreshadowing technique also helps establish that Elijah Muhammad’s opponents were not only White supremacists and Black integrationists; there was strong opposition from other Muslims too. Herbert Berg mentions some of these Muslim opponents in a biography on Elijah Muhammad from a series called Makers of the Muslim World (2013). They included African-American Orthodox Muslim converts and Muslim immigrants from the Arab Middle East such as Talib Ahmad Dawud, Jamil Daib and Ahmadiyya Adib Nuru-din. Between 1959 and 1962 each of these men argued that Elijah Muhammad was a fake, that his teachings were absurd, and that his movement was not a part of Islam. During his public debates with these critics, Elijah Muhammad is said to have often moved the argument from the theological to the personal. For example, he claimed that Dawud’s wife, who was a singer, dressed immodestly and shared with the world her filthy blues (Berg 2013, p.121, 123). Berg offers a simple explanation as to why Elijah Muhammad responded in this way:

Elijah Muhammad may have relied heavily on personal attacks because these Muslim critics had centuries of traditional Islamic doctrine on their side. In many cases they knew the Qur’an better than he, and no doubt surpassed his knowledge of
the Sunna and the sira. And his usual trump card, his unique access to Allah, held no value with these opponents (2013, p.123).

Although *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* does not identify the opponents of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI as specifically as Berg, the narrator Malcolm X does recount his early confrontations with orthodox Muslims in America. He claims that after he left jail and became a minister and spokesperson for the NOI, he often encountered a number of ‘true’ Muslims who challenged the authenticity of his religious beliefs. Within the Black civil rights context and within the black-and-white motif established in Malcolm X’s autobiography, these Muslims seem to have been neither ‘Black’ nor ‘White’ – they were Arabs.

At one or another college or university, usually in the informal gatherings after I had spoken, perhaps a dozen generally white-complexioned people would come up to me, identifying themselves as Arabian, Middle Eastern or North African Muslims who happened to be visiting, studying or living in the United States. They had said to me that, my white-indicting statements notwithstanding, they felt I was sincere in considering myself a Muslim – and they felt if I was exposed to what they called ‘true Islam,’ I would ‘understand it, and embrace it’ (1992, p.366).

The first and most fundamental pillar of orthodox Islam is the *Shahadat*, a declaration which states, ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God’. The first section of this, that there is no god but God, rejects both the Christian doctrine of God as man (Jesus Christ) and ancient polytheistic idolatries, which avow that God and gods can be represented through statues, images and objects. In an attempt to prevent the future worship of men and idols, these beliefs also resulted in a strict culture of aniconism – a complete prohibition on visual representations of Allah, Muhammad and a number of other spiritual figures in Islam. The second section of the *Shahadat*, ‘That Muhammad is the Messenger of God’, is a proclamation that following from the lineage of Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, who was born in 570 AD, was Allah’s final messenger and following from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the Qur’an was Allah’s final message. The *Shahadat* alone made it easy for orthodox Muslims to dismiss the beliefs of the NOI, since Fard Muhammad could not claim to be Allah,
and Elijah Muhammad could not claim to be a messenger of Allah under traditional Islamic doctrine. Nevertheless, we can understand why the beliefs of the NOI were originally more suited to the character of Malcolm Little than orthodox Islam was. As already noted with my reference to Clegg (2007), Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad’s hybrid Islam was specifically designed to empower the oppressed Black masses – to encourage them to unlearn, resist and reject White supremacist ideologies.

In *The Autobiography*, the narrator Malcolm X explains that the dominant US religion, Christianity, was inherently racist and White supremacist: ‘The teachings of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been “whitened” – when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out’ (1992, p.201). Malcolm Little first identified this pattern by deconstructing the classic renaissance portrayals of Jesus, in which he was painted as a blond-haired, blue-eyed, white-skinned man. He began to contest the ‘whitening’ of history in debates about the complexion of Jesus during his final years in prison, offering one example where he had come up against a tall, blond, blued-eyed Harvard Seminary student who lectured in Bible class.

I stood up and asked, ‘What color was Paul?’ And I kept talking, with pauses, ‘He had to be black … because he was a Hebrew … and the original Hebrews were black … weren’t they?’ He started flushing red. You know the way white people do. He said ‘Yes.’ I wasn’t through yet. ‘What colour was Jesus … he was Hebrew, too … wasn’t he?’ Both the Negro and the white convicts had sat bolt upright. I don’t care how tough the convict, be he brainwashed black Christian, or a ‘devil’ white Christian, neither of them is ready to hear anybody saying Jesus wasn’t white (1992, p.219).

Through this interaction we can see how adopting Islam, orthodox or unorthodox, was a potent political gesture for African-Americans. Rather than rejecting Jesus, Malcolm Little and the Black Muslims could use Islam to access Jesus in a new way.

In order to appreciate the liberating force that ‘Islam’ had presented for Black people in the United States, one needs to recognise the impact that a White Jesus had had on the Black psyche. In the early chapters of *The Autobiography* we learn about
the physical attempts that Malcolm Little and other Black people made at
‘whitening’ themselves. Narrator Malcolm X describes the details involved in
‘conking’ his hair while he was a ‘Homeboy’ on the streets of Harlem. Conking was
the act of ‘relaxing’ a Black person’s thick curly hair to straighten like a White
person’s hair, and was achieved by applying burning chemicals such as lye to the
scalp. When Malcolm Little first began this practice, his best friend Shorty said,
‘Damn right it’s hot, that’s the lye … So you know it’s going to burn when I comb it
in – it burns bad. But the longer you can stand it, the straighter the hair’ (X & Haley
1992, p.63). Black men and women would let their heads burn for as long as
possible, trying to get it straight. Narrator Malcolm X describes this as though it was
an act of torture: ‘I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table
together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off’ (1992, p.63). What drives a
person to such self-inflicted violence? Malcolm X and Alex Haley use their
retrospective points of view in The Autobiography of Malcolm X to offer the
following answer:

This was the first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all that
pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined
that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into
believing that the black people are ‘inferior’ – and white people ‘superior’ – that
they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try and look ‘pretty’
by white standards (1992, p.64).

The practice of conking or ‘whitening’ one’s hair was part of the broader
ideology that black was not beautiful. This condition of thinking was reinforced
through the representation of Jesus (God) as a White male. God, as humanity’s most
divine and sacred being, sets a standard for what we should all aspire to be and to
have, including His straight golden hair.

There are many factors within the orthodox Islamic religion that counteract
the Western and American representations of Jesus/God as a White male. In Islam
Jesus is believed to be the prophet of God, not God or the Son of God, and since
prophets from Abraham to Moses to Jesus to Muhammad had originated from Arabia
and Africa, there was no debate among Muslims that these men were the same in
appearance as any other Arab and African men. Most importantly, Islam as a religion
steeped in aniconism, forbade the representation of any of the prophets and of God, including Jesus, to prevent the worship of men, images and idols. In recent years, support for offensive depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in the cartoons created by a Danish cartoonist in 2005, in the low budget internet film/trailer *Innocence of Muslims* in 2012 and in *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 have revealed that it is very difficult for many Westerners to understand aniconism as anything but an infringement on freedom (specifically the freedom of speech). However, in this case we see how aniconism may offer alternative forms of freedom. For Malcolm Little and thousands of other Afro-Americans, adopting some of the principal philosophies of Islam was an empowering and liberating reaction to the dominant religion of White Americans and more importantly, to White supremacist propaganda which had been effectively used against them for hundreds of years.

In a rap song called ‘I ain’t mad at ya’, Tupac sings about the reformatory effects that Islam had had on one of his African-American male peers. He begins the song with the following statement: ‘Change, shit, I guess change is good for any of us. Whatever it take for ye’all niggas to get up out the hood, shit I’m wid ya …’ He then goes on to sing:

Collect calls to the tip sayin how ya changed,
You a Muslim now, no more dope games.
Heard you might be coming home, just got bail,
Wonna go to the mosque, don’t wanna chase tails.

This kind of conversion-to-Islam-while-in-jail narrative parallels the Malcolm X story and is indeed a common narrative within African-American popular culture. While Tupac’s lyrics illuminate the transformative power that Islam can have on ‘ghettoised Black men’ in the United States, the story of disenfranchised Black men reforming through Islam is also, but less noticeably, an empowering and uplifting experience for those who are born Muslim, who identify with Islam as part of their historical and cultural identities. It gives young Arab-Australian Muslim men a sense of value and self-worth – a sense that our religion leads to their empowerment as much as their civil rights struggle leads to our empowerment.

Thus, the religion of Islam, when one considers its many formations, reveals itself as a cosmopolitan force for marginalised voices, and promotes a symbolic
relationship between Arab identities, African-American identities and Arab-Australian identities. ‘Black Freedom beyond America and the Muslim International’ is the subject of Sohail Daulatzai’s *Black Star, Crescent Moon* (2012). The title for this book draws an emblematic link between African-Americans in the United States of America, represented by a black star, and Arabs in the East, represented by a crescent moon. Daulatzai lists prominent African-American musicians of the late 80s and early 90s who converted to Islam to illustrate the influence that Islam has had on African-American hip-hop:

‘The golden age’ (roughly 1986–94) is often referred to in nostalgic ways as a time when hip hop was at its creative and political peak. And with few exceptions, the era’s most significant artists embraced Islam, deeply influencing the rest of hip hop history as well so that the vast canon of songs expresses the relationship between Blackness and Islam, including Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, X-Clan, Rakim Allah, Public Enemy, Ice Cube, Gang Starr, Big Daddy Kane, the Wu Tang Clan, Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth … as well as many others (2012, p.109).

The dates listed here reveal the links between the period when Islam began to influence African-American communities and prominent African-American figures such as Malcolm X and heavyweight champion boxer Muhammad Ali, the period when the African-American hip-hop movement had erupted, and the later period when African-American popular culture began to influence the behaviour of young Arab-Australian Muslim men. As I have already noted, young Arab-Australian Muslim males from Western Sydney adopted African-American subaltern trends from movies, music, and famous Black athletes and civil rights leaders, which inspired Arab-Australian art (hip-hop music, films, books), dress, modes of language and communication, and most importantly their response to the ‘White nation fantasy’ context in which they lived. Paralleling this Arab-Australian identification with contemporary notions of African-Americanness, in this chapter we discover that many African-Americans identify with historical notions of Arabness, particularly through the adoption of the religion of Islam. In converting to Islam, many African-Americans have embraced the teachings of the Arab prophet, Muhammad, visited the sacred Islamic sites in the Arab world and learned the Arabic language in order to pray, recite the Qur’an and respectfully engage with their fellow Muslims. They have
also adopted traditional Arab customs, modifying their social interactions, altering their hygiene rituals and hanging up their Western hip-hop attire for classical Arabian and African dress and appearance – they have grown long beards considered to be Sunnah (the way of the Prophet) and they wear *galabias* (loosely-hooded robes) and *taqiyahs* (short rounded skullcaps), as was the style adopted by African-American rapper Napoleon when he visited Australia in 2007 to consult with disenfranchised young Arab-Australian Muslim males (*Insight, ‘True Colours’, SBS 2007*).

By the time Malcolm Little had been released from prison he had taught himself to read and write and had converted to the NOI version of Islam, which included praying and abstaining from pig meat, alcohol, gambling and fornication (X & Haley 1992). We can clearly recognise the significant impact that the teachings of Elijah Muhammad had had on the character Malcolm Little and the narrator Malcolm X, but it is equally important to recognise the impact of the physical presence and man known as The Honourable Elijah Muhammad, which brings me to the third and final attribute which I believe inspired the transformation of Malcolm Little into the autobiographical figure known as Malcolm X. When viewed through a literary lens, this reminds us that direct contact with living figures, thinking and breathing beings, develops the central character as much as, and in many cases even more than, contact with ideologies and teachings.

For several years Malcolm Little had come to know Elijah Muhammad entirely through letters and pictures from inside a prison cell. Then finally he found himself a free man, watching ‘The Messenger’ make his way up to a podium for the first time. Narrator Malcolm X describes the experience:

> From the rear of Temple Number Two, he came toward the platform. The small, sensitive, gentle, brown face that I had studied in photographs, until I had dreamed about it, was fixed straight ahead as the Messenger strode, encircled by the marching, strapping Fruit of Islam guards. The Messenger, compared to them, seemed fragile, almost tiny. He and the Fruit of Islam were dressed in dark suits, white shirts, and bow ties. The Messenger wore a gold embroidered fez. I stared at the great man who had taken the time to write to me when I was a convict whom he knew nothing about. He was the man whom I had been told spent years of his life in
suffering and sacrifice to lead us, the black people, because he loved us so much. And then, hearing his voice, I sat leaning forward, riveted upon his words (1992, p.226).

The narrative voice dramatically slows down here. Narrator Malcolm X leaves a lasting first impression of Elijah Muhammad by literally making this first impression last, prolonging the description. This sets up a stark contrast between the way the narrator Malcolm X sees Elijah Muhammad – loving, humble, divine, unique, incomprehensible; and the way the narrator Malcolm X sees Malcolm Little – ‘uneducated, unskilled at anything honourable, nervy and cunning, and able to exploit any prey that presented itself’ (1992, p.125).

While the narrator Malcolm X seems to describe his first impression of Elijah Muhammad as unforgettable, biographers such as Clegg describe first impressions of Elijah Muhammad as completely unremarkable. Ironically, this is achieved by comparing the impression Elijah Muhammad made to the striking impression one may have had of the great civil rights figure known to the world as ‘Malcolm X’.

Unlike Malcolm, Muhammad was not charismatic in the conventional sense and had neither a flair for dynamic oratory nor an impressive command of the English language. In appearance he was an unimposing man, standing five and a half feet tall and weighing less than 150 pounds. Balding, the leader was a fair-skinned man with a disarming gentleness. His slender body was almost delicate in form and, according to a contemporary, appeared ‘tiny and transparent and breakable as a china doll.’ Like his slow gait, his countenance complemented his small stature. To some, Muhammad’s thin lips, pronounced cheekbones, and deep-set brown eyes were reminiscent of Oriental features (Clegg 2007, p.117).

The impact Elijah Muhammad had on Malcolm Little as described by narrator Malcolm X, in spite of the physical flaws that Clegg seems to recognise so easily, raises the question, what was so attractive about Elijah Muhammad to a character like Malcolm Little?

Up until he discovered Elijah Muhammad, the narrator Malcolm X explains that he had only ever known about hustles, scams, pimping, drug-dealing and theft, that he had lost both his parents, and that he had been rejected by teachers, the government, law enforcement and even other Black people like West Indian Archie,
who had plotted to kill him (1992, pp.144-145). For this young man, Elijah Muhammad became more than a leader; he became a father. ‘The paternal, custodial role of Muhammad in the organisation appealed to many blacks who sought order and a system of authority in which they could believe’ (Clegg 2007, p.118). This can be seen in The Autobiography’s narrative thread. Malcolm is a fatherless child from chapter one, driven by crime and ignorance until Elijah Muhammad comes to mentor and nurture him. What we cannot learn so easily from the narrator Malcolm X, however, is how Elijah Muhammad assumed this paternal role with Malcolm X and with so many other young Black men, including arguably one of the most famous persons that ever lived, three-time heavyweight world champion boxer, Muhammad Ali. In order to answer this question, we must consider Elijah Muhammad’s perspective.

In An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad, Clegg explains that after Fard Muhammad had disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad was left with the responsibility of leading the NOI. This was not an easy task – there was contestation and competition for leadership throughout the next decade and the controversial Black organisation had drawn the attention of government law enforcement, particularly because members were evading war on religious grounds (2007, p.73). In this context, Elijah Muhammad’s prison sentence on eight counts of sedition was a blessing in disguise.

Four years in jail and prisons did more toward consolidating his authority over the Nation of Islam than a decade of bickering, purges, and wandering could ever have done. The FBI had, in fact, enhanced his power rather than diminish it. During the period between 1931 and 1942, he was simply the embattled Supreme Minister of a schismatic movement that had too many conflicting and ambitious personalities disputing his claim to the messengership. After 1942 and especially following his release from prison, he had unquestionably become the premier martyr of the Muslims – their ‘little lamb’ and saintly ‘Messenger of Allah’ (Clegg 2007, p.97).

Clegg goes on to argue that Elijah Muhammad’s sacrifice for the African-American people enabled followers to reimagine his physical characteristics.
His petiteness was part of his charm and underscored the meekness and humility of Allah’s chosen one as an example of God’s humility and humbleness that his chosen messenger would be so unexpected … His public demeanour tended to emphasize strength, as did the dark suits he wore, the oversize Qur’an he often carried, and his calculated approach to the podium. If nothing else, his lean physique and pleasant face attracted attention and sympathy of many African-Americans who found the tremendous message of the small Messenger of Allah irresistible (2007, p.117).

The ‘new light’ in which Elijah Muhammad’s followers could perceive him is the same light that narrator Malcolm X claims to have first seen in Elijah Muhammad. In The Autobiography, Malcolm quotes from one of the speeches he had given about his ‘Messenger of Allah’.

‘This little, gentle, sweet man! The Honourable Elijah Muhammad who is at this very hour teaching our brothers and sisters over there in Chicago! Allah’s Messenger – which makes him the most powerful black man in America! For you and me, he has sacrificed seven years on the run from filthy hypocrites, he spent another three and a half years in a prison cage! He was put there by the devil white man!’ (1992, p.241).

Here the words ‘little’, ‘gentle’ and ‘sweet’ from Malcolm X’s perspective are counterpoints to the words ‘breakable’, ‘transparent’ and ‘not charismatic’ in Clegg’s description. Judgements about the extent of Elijah Muhammad’s power and authority depended entirely on perspective. This reaffirms the notion of ‘truth’ in autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature as a fluid concept: there is not an inherently ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ version of the African-American Muslim male narrative, or of the Arab-Australian Muslim male narrative; there are simply perspectives, though one perspective may be more complex than another.

The narrator Malcolm X charts his rise to the position of Minister within the NOI while under the spell and guidance of Elijah Muhammad. He explains why he changes his last name from ‘Little’ to ‘X’ – ‘Little’ is a slave name that actually belonged to the White family who owned his ancestors during their slavery, and ‘X’ symbolises the unknown because his real name had been lost when his ancestors were kidnapped in Africa (1992, p.229). The narrator Malcolm X, who as we move
toward the time period in which the autobiography was written is gradually beginning to merge with the character Malcolm X, also explains in his original speeches, interviews and debates that the White man had committed the greatest crime in human history: the slavery, rape and murder of 160 million Africans, and that the only solution to Black suffering in the United States was a complete separation from the White man:

The Honourable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that as long as our people here in America are dependent upon the white man, we will always be begging him for jobs, food, clothing, and housing. And he will always control our lives, regulate our lives, and have the power to segregate us. The Negro here in America has been treated like a child. A child stays within a mother until the time of birth! When the time of birth arrives, the child must be separated, or it will destroy its mother and itself (1992, p.283).

The use of poetic metaphors and rhetoric here reveals that *The Autobiography* is more than just a political and historical document; it is a literary document. The analogy between Black independence and mother and child transforms the racial being into the human being, and broadens the scope of the reader across social and cultural boundaries. Meanwhile, more complex literary devices continue to draw the narrator and main character together:

One particular university’s ‘token-integrated’ black Ph.D. associate professor I never will forget; he got me so mad I couldn’t see straight … He was ranting about what a ‘divisive demagogue’ and what a ‘reverse racist’ I was. I was racking my head, to spear the fool; finally I held up my hand, and he stopped. ‘Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D’s?’ … And I laid the word down on him loud: ‘Nigger!’ (1992, p.327).

Here, the narrator Malcolm X establishes how the character Malcolm X is perceived, or more precisely how he believes he is perceived, by opposing Black civil rights movements and White power structures. Both character and narrator embrace the ‘divisive demagogue’ and ‘reverse racist’ persona; one is demagogue enough to use the word ‘nigger’ and the other is demagogue enough to recount and defend its use. As the narrator Malcolm X moves closer and closer toward the
character Malcolm X however, foreshadowing techniques reveal that the trajectory of the narrative is inevitably going to shift: ‘In the years to come, I was going to have to face a psychological and spiritual crisis’ (1992, p.242). This crisis reveals itself in the final chapters of the autobiography, when in 1963 Elijah Muhammad is the centre of a tremendous controversy. He is accused of fathering the four children of his two former secretaries. When the character Malcolm X confronts Elijah Muhammad about the allegations, he is told that like David with his adultery and Noah with his drunkenness, this is the Messenger’s test and fulfilment of prophecy (1992, p.345). This exposes the ultimate distinction that the narrator Malcolm X makes between his own character and that of his leader:

What began to break my faith was that, try as I might, I couldn’t hide, I couldn’t evade, that Mr. Muhammad, instead of facing what he had done before his followers, as a human or as fulfilment of prophecy – which I sincerely believe that Muslims would have understood, or at least they would have accepted – Mr. Muhammad had, instead, been willing to hide, to cover up what he had done (1992, p.353).

This passage is pivotal in the development of the story: up until now Malcolm X has been a man who sees himself as being in debt to Elijah Muhammad. ‘When I was a foul, vicious convict, so evil other convicts had called me Satan, this man had rescued me’ (1992, p.344). Elijah Muhammad was a figure of purity and integrity in Malcolm’s narrative. Then suddenly, as Malcolm’s faith is broken, the debt is cleared and Malcolm is released. ‘That was how I first began to realize that I had believed in Mr. Muhammad more than he believed in himself” (1992, p.353). The narrator Malcolm X now places himself in a higher moral position than the character Elijah Muhammad. So where can he possibly go from here?

From this point onwards the Malcolm X narrator and the Malcolm X character exist within the same timeline as Malcolm X, living out the ‘true-to-life’ events. He describes a plot to silence, discredit and even assassinate him in order to conceal the sins of the father. He is forced to leave the NOI and he establishes his own organisation, Muslim Mosque, Inc. This coincides with a trip to Mecca, where he undertakes the Muslim pilgrimage known as Hajj and adopts orthodox Islam.
the autobiography, this new metamorphosis is conveyed through a letter Malcolm X has sent from Mecca to his family and followers.

Here is what I wrote … from my heart: ‘Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colours’ (1992, p.390).

In this recitation, we can feel the character Malcolm X’s shift in consciousness. His repetition of the term ‘all colours’ indicates that he no longer sees Black people and White people as inherent enemies or as inherently good and evil. This also begins to shift the black-and-white motif in the autobiography. ‘All’ is written in italics at the end of the excerpt to stress the importance of his realisation, and to distance himself from his former beliefs and former master. That Malcolm X has been left ‘spellbound’ and ‘speechless’ by the generosity of ‘all’ races is unique in his case because up until now, we’ve only known the character he has developed for himself, and the narrator’s portrayal of himself, as outspoken and opinionated, a man who claimed to have learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things (1992, p.11). His silence indicates that he must rethink his original views, and that he is coming to terms with yet another way of perceiving the world. He returns to America with a new understanding of Islam and a rapidly evolving political ideology.

In Black Star, Crescent Moon, Dualatzai argues that the point at which Malcolm X split from Elijah Muhammad and converted to orthodox Islam, spawned by his pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, transformed his national struggle for African-American freedom and justice against White supremacy and racist culture in the United States into an international struggle against the White supremacy and racism endured by the third world and most people of colour.

For Malcolm then, Islam was not only the link between Africa and Asia but also what connected black Muslims in the United States to the broader Muslim Third
World, linking their struggles through the Muslim International and revealing it to be a space for overlapping diasporas and shared histories of struggle (2012, p.6).

I have already argued in previous chapters that the ways in which African-American subaltern culture produced a sense of cosmopolitanism, of connection and belonging across ethnic boundaries, caught the imagination of young Arab-Australian Muslim men. Now in Dualatzai’s passage we see how Islam gave a similar sense of cosmopolitanism, of a greater belonging across ethnic boundaries, to African-American communities. Malcolm X moved from being an African-American civil rights leader to being the voice of a global struggle – he became the ‘Muslim International’. This sense of belonging recognises that while there are unique attributes to the African-American struggle, it was part of the larger struggle of ‘people of colour’ across the majority third world. While Islam is not a religion exclusive to ‘people of colour’, and certainly while not all ‘people of colour’ are Muslim, adopting the Muslim religion enabled Malcolm X to recognise and embody the cultural and historical connections between African-Americans, Arabs, Africans and Asians. This also connects the inspiration that Arab-Australian Muslims drew from notions of African-Americanness to the inspiration that African-American Muslims drew from Arab-Muslims in what I am calling the ‘latest phase’ in the ‘Black Star’ and ‘Crescent Moon’ discourse. The latest phase is integral to the development of complex and nuanced Arab-Australian literature. The ‘Lebs’ are not just copying popular Black culture, as the Australian media would have it; rather, they are interacting with a web of interconnected histories and identities that form and shape their own unique position in the world. Noble et al. call this strategic hybridity – the sense of self that the ‘Lebs’ fashion in response to different contexts, reflecting a high degree of plurality (1999, p.39).

As The Autobiography of Malcolm X reaches its final chapters, the narrator Malcolm X begins to set the theme of his life story, what he calls a chronology of changes (1992, p.390). And truly, this has been a story about changes, from foster child, to pimp and hustler, to convicted felon, to Minister of the Nation of Islam, to Hajj, to leader of Muslim Mosque, Inc. It is here that The Autobiography comes to an end, as Malcolm X is growing increasingly paranoid that members of the NOI are planning his assassination, former brothers who would attempt to make heroes of themselves.
and get into Elijah Muhammad’s good graces (X & Haley 1992, p.365). The fear of assassination is very present to the historical figure we know as Malcolm X while the autobiography is being completed and even begins to drive the story as though it has been ordained:

When I am dead – I say it that way because from the things I know, I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form – I want you to just watch and see if I’m not right when I say: that the white man in his press is going to identify me with ‘hate’ (1992, p.439).

By the time the autobiography reaches its final paragraph, there is a growing sense of despair in the tone of the narrator and character Malcolm X:

Yes, I have cherished my ‘demagogue’ role. I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America – then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine (1992, p.440).

Here, the narrative voice represents a calmer, almost resigned Malcolm X, someone who sounds like he has given in to the vision of death. This is perhaps the most shocking literary twist in The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Malcolm has told us that by the time this very book we are reading is in our hands he will be dead. All of a sudden, the narrator and the character Malcolm X are making a prophecy and speaking to us from beyond the grave. This reinforces the literary approach that suggests that any voice is made up of multiple voices, and that the inherent voice of any author or poet is always phantasmagorical, ghostly and in itself always haunted (Bennett & Royle 2004, p.75).

At this point The Autobiography of Malcolm X becomes both a biography of Malcolm X, as Alex Haley continues to explain the events after Malcolm X’s assassination, and an autobiography of Alex Haley, as Haley charts in the first-person his affiliation with Malcolm X and his affiliation with the text itself. Haley’s insights appear as the ‘Epilogue’ in the 1992 Ballantine Edition of The Autobiography but can also be found as the ‘Foreword’ in other editions, such as the
2001 Penguin Classics Edition. In the final chapter of this exegesis, I will closely examine Alex Haley’s contribution to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, his presence in the epilogue/foreword and in the book as a whole. I will measure and compare this contribution with the contribution of the character and narrator of the text, Malcolm X. This will inform a broader discussion about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a literary document, a work of creative autobiographical fiction that can introduce specific literary techniques and devices to the development of Arab-Australian autobiographical and semi-autobiographical literature from Western Sydney.
Chapter 6: Malcolmites and Muhammadans: Part 2

‘How is it possible to write one’s autobiography in a world so fast-changing as this?’ (Rickford 2003, p.175). This is the question Malcolm X asked after he split from the Nation of Islam. At first glance it merely addresses the shifting nature of Malcolm X’s own life during the years that he had been producing the autobiography, but more broadly it supports my claim that reality and truth in human experience are shaped by perspective. Malcolm X as a narrator does not simply head toward a single truth as the story of his life unfolds; he weaves multiple truths through one another as revelations in his ‘real’ life force him to continually revise and reconsider the life of the person on the page. This situates *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a work of literature – a work of language, creativity and subjectivity. With a particular focus on the role of the biographer Alex Haley, in this final chapter of this exegesis I continue to unpack some of the devices and techniques applied to that literature, and how they might inform and complement literary projects of the kind undertaken in the creative part of this thesis.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* relies heavily on the narrator’s use of metaphor and allegory to convey imagery and meaning to the reader, and to establish motifs that run through the text as a whole. In the early chapters of the autobiography the narrator Malcolm X explains how as a young boy he’d cry when things weren’t going his way: ‘I had learned that if you want something, you better make some noise’ (1992, p.11). This personality trait in the first stage of the story establishes a link between the act of literally crying out because you want something, and the metaphorical crying out that the character Malcolm X engages in for the rest of his life as a Black civil rights leader. In fact the narrator Malcolm X’s allegorical language becomes a distinct characteristic of his personality. He constantly presents his views through figurative comparisons, always trying to help his reader/listener to understand a situation by comparing it to another. For example, in the chapter ‘Mascot’, the narrator Malcolm X describes what it was like to have been separated
from his mother and siblings as a child and placed in the care of a White family. He says that the White family treated him and spoke to him as though he were an animal: ‘They would talk about anything and everything with me standing right there hearing them, the same way people would talk freely in front of a pet canary … what I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn’t a pet, but a human being’ (1992, p.32). This is a complex metaphor because as Malcolm X is comparing himself to the way a pet might be treated, he is also giving the impression that the family he lived with, and White people at large, literally saw him and Black people in general as animals.

One of Malcolm X’s most famous figurative comparisons occurred after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, in a comment that made headlines all over the United States of America. As narrator Malcolm X recounts in the autobiography:

> Without a second thought, I said what I honestly felt – that it was, as I saw it, a case of ‘the chickens coming home to roost’ … I said that the hate of white men had not stopped with the killing of defenceless black people, but that hate, allowed to spread unchecked, finally had struck down the country’s Chief of State (1992, p.347).

Narrator Malcolm X goes on to explain how he was silenced and suspended for ninety days after the ‘chickens coming home to roost’ comment by Elijah Muhammad, who had instructed him earlier not to discuss the JFK assassination with the press or the public in any way whatsoever. Although Elijah Muhammad may have been genuinely frustrated with Malcolm X’s comments and the negative press it brought the NOI, the narrator Malcolm X suggests that the suspension was actually because he had begun to pose a real threat to Elijah Muhammad, since he was unwilling to dismiss the leader’s infidelity. He writes that, ‘I hadn’t hustled in the streets for years for nothing. I knew when I was being set up’ (1992, p.349). This quote reveals the character that the narrator Malcolm X builds for himself – the development of ‘street hustler’ in the early stages of the autobiography informs Malcolm X’s suspicions and insights as a civil rights leader in the final stages. Furthermore, this quote reveals a tension that is building within the narrative arc of the autobiography, a mysterious plot leading to Malcolm’s inevitable demise as though he is the ghost narrator of a crime novel.
The metaphors in Malcolm X’s autobiography also seem to go beyond the tendency to simply compare objects and incidents. They take on a deeper, prophetic quality, capturing a version of reality and relocating it into another realm, the past or the future, beyond the physical and into the spiritual, drawing from sacred histories and scriptures. Take for example the chapter in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* called ‘Icarus’.

Awareness came surging up in me – how deeply the religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been: a dead criminal in a grave, or, if still alive, a flint-hard bitter, thirty-seven-year-old convict in some penitentiary, or insane asylum… But Allah had blessed me to learn about the religion of Islam, which had enabled me to lift myself up from the muck and the mire of this rotting world… A story that I read in prison when I was reading a lot of Greek mythology flicked into my head… Icarus’ father made some wings that he fastened with wax. ‘Never fly but so high with these wings,’ the father said. But soaring around, this way, that way, Icarus’ flying pleased him so that he began thinking he was flying on his own merit. Higher he flew – higher – until the heat of the sun melted the wax holding those wings. And down came Icarus – tumbling… I silently vowed to Allah that I never would forget that any wings I wore had been put on by the religion of Islam (1992, p.331).

In this passage narrator Malcolm X appropriates from multiple cultural and religious histories, Islamic and Greek, to convey a worldview specific to the African-American experience. He guides the reader toward his mental and emotional state both at the time that he stood before Alex Haley and at the time that he had first reflected on his journey from hustler and pimp to critically conscious civil rights advocate and enlightened witness. The boy Icarus in his story becomes symbolic of Malcolm X himself; the wings are Malcolm X’s labours, the height of his flight is his success, and Allah is his limit. Prophecy and mythology in Ancient Greek tradition and the divine intervention of Allah’s will within Islamic tradition transform the Malcolm X character within the African-American civil rights struggle into a spiritual being that exists outside of the physical world.

Some scholars describe *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a ‘conversion narrative’ because the story is shaped by a series of changes throughout the characterisation of Malcolm X’s life. ‘The protagonist in this sub-genre of
autobiographical writing undergoes one or several fundamental change(s), so-called conversions, within his life and personality’ (Oehl 2006, p.85). This can easily be recognised in the chronological order of the autobiography, from Malcolm’s experiences at school, to his time on the streets, to his incarceration, to his rise in the NOI, to his split from Elijah Muhammad, and then to his pilgrimage in Mecca, all of which are accompanied by a radical shift in the consciousness of both the character and the narrator. Others have labelled the text an ‘education narrative’. This is described by Oehl as a ‘sub-genre’ of conversion narrative that attributes the conversions in one’s life to a specific improvement in education (2006, p.86). Based on the work of bell hooks and comparative readings on the Prophet Muhammad, I have already argued that this is one of the most important interpretations of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as a story about reinvention through ‘reading’ and ‘understanding’. However, while autobiographer Malcolm X applies literary traditions and techniques to discuss his life, biographer Alex Haley, whose presence in the Malcolm X part of the text is almost entirely unnoticed, uses the life of Malcolm X to discuss literary techniques in his epilogue. As Oehl notes, ‘The “Epilogue” is especially remarkable for its disclosure of the problems of writing an account of someone’s life and further helps us to understand the role Alex Haley had in the writing about the life of one of the most important African-Americans of all time’ (2006, p.89).

One particular insight we gather from the epilogue is the autobiography’s complex use of ‘voice’. Bennett and Royle argue that, ‘Literature encourages us to think about the idea that there may in fact be no such thing as a voice, a single, unified voice (whether that of an author, a narrator, a reader or anyone else). Rather there is difference and multiplicity within every voice’ (2004, p.75). This multiplicity can be identified through the many layers of voice operating simultaneously in The Autobiography of Malcolm X. When the ‘real-life’ man known as Malcolm X first began to create his autobiography he did so while still under the servitude of the NOI and as such, reserved his highest praise for The Honourable Elijah Muhammad. By the time he completed the autobiography however, the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X had separated from the NOI and had even begun receiving death threats from Elijah Muhammad’s followers. This was not only going to have serious consequences for the trajectory of the Malcolm X narrative, but also for the story that had been told so far. Haley explains that ‘real-life’ Malcolm X had begun to revise the entire book
after his split with the NOI, and was planning to present a new version of truth based on new revelations, especially those concerning his father-son relationship with Elijah Muhammad. Haley’s response here was not based on a judgement about which was the more moral or truthful account, but rather on how each account would impact the autobiography as literature: ‘I stressed that if those chapters contained such telegraphing to readers of what would lie ahead, then the book would automatically be robbed of some of its building suspense and drama’ (X & Haley 1992, p.467). This situation creates a series of alternative realities for an autobiography on the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X: had the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X begun the autobiography at a later stage in his life, he would never have spoken so highly of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI. Had the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X finished the autobiography before his split with the NOI, his account would only have offered the ‘adoration’ and ‘surrender’ that initially characterised his relationship with his leader. If Haley had allowed the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X to re-write the entire story after the split had taken place, there would now be an account in which the character and narrator Malcolm X are critical of Elijah Muhammad at the same time that he was being ‘saved’ by Elijah Muhammad. Each of these possibilities could be considered a morally accurate and truthful account on and of ‘real-life’ Malcolm X – they are all realities, and they all run through the same time and space; they simply belong to different perspectives. In the end, Haley claims to have fought for the account that he believed would sustain the greatest sense of drama and suspense. This reminds us that ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are fluid concepts in language and literature. It is not a question of whether the authors Alex Haley and Malcolm X must tell lies because they are more interesting than the truth; rather they must decide which truth is deemed the best for their purposes. For my own creative work, this of course raises the question, what truths are best suited to the new Arab-Australian autobiographical account? It is not that texts such as The Combination (2009) and Cedar Boys (2009) are lacking in truth, or that they offer truths unworthy of representation; it is that new Arab-Australian literature, and new literature in general, should demand more than its predecessors; it should challenge us to examine and re-examine the culture around us and it should propose new ways of seeing and experiencing that culture.

Haley explains that he successfully persuaded the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X to preserve the original chapters they had created prior to his split with the NOI. As a result, one can now identify two distinct voices in the text, the ‘pre-NOI voice’ and
the ‘post-NOI voice’ (Oehl 2006, p.92). The pre-NOI voice of the character and narrator Malcolm X is voluntarily submissive, worshipful and hopeful. It has faith in the future and in itself because it lives through a physical and single ‘truth’ – the truth of The Honourable Elijah Muhammad:

My adoration of Mr. Muhammad grew, in the sense of the Latin root word, _adorare_. It means much more than our ‘adoration’ or ‘adore.’ It means that my worship of him was so awesome that he was the first man whom I’d ever feared – not fear such as of a man with a gun, but the fear such as one has of the power of the sun (1992, p.244).

Here, the narrator Malcolm X constructs Elijah Muhammad as god-like in presence, possessing the majestic ability to bring light and life. His fear of Elijah Muhammad is born out of love and respect. The post-NOI voice, by contrast, presents a narrator that is in pain, betrayed and confused, but also in the process of transformation, enlightened and self-aware, reinventing and reimagining itself once more, liberating itself yet again from the prison of the mind:

From their own mouths, I heard their stories of who had fathered their children. And from their own mouths I heard that Elijah Muhammad had told them I was the best, the greatest minister he ever had, but that someday I would leave him, turn against him – so I was ‘dangerous.’ I learned from these former secretaries of Mr. Muhammad that while he was praising me to my face, he was tearing me apart behind my back. That deeply hurt me (1992, pp.342-343).

When the pre-NOI and post-NOI voices are juxtaposed, one can hear the shift in the Malcolm X consciousness, presenting the crucial challenge in writing an autobiography in a world which is ‘fast-changing’. On the one hand, if Haley had allowed for the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X to re-write the autobiography entirely through the post-NOI voice, the text would have offered a limited and single voice from start to finish which left out ‘truths’ Malcolm X felt for Elijah Muhammad at one stage in their relationship. On the other hand, to sustain the pre-NOI voice up until Malcolm’s split with Elijah Muhammad is to deliberately construct the pre-NOI narrator as ignorant, even though the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X had become enlightened
halfway through the writing of the autobiography and understood new truths. To resolve this, authors Alex Haley and Malcolm X developed the literary device that Oehl has called ‘foreshadowing’. Rather than re-writing the book from his post-NOI perspective, ‘real-life’ Malcolm X simply inserts phrases such as ‘I was later to learn’ after sections he believed at the time but had reconsidered in light of new information and circumstances (Oehl 2006, p.93). For example, in the chapter called ‘Satan’ Malcolm X explains Elijah Muhammad’s teachings on ‘Yacub’s History’ (1992, pp.187-193). At no point in this explanation does the narrator Malcolm X express doubt about the beliefs he describes, and this gives us the impression that he believed in ‘Yacub’s History’ at the time that he first explained it to Alex Haley for the autobiography. The chapter finishes however, with the narrator Malcolm X rethinking this position: ‘I was to learn that Elijah Muhammad’s tales, like this one of “Yacub,” infuriated Muslims of the East. While at Mecca, I reminded them that it was their fault, since they themselves hadn’t done enough to make real Islam known in the West’ (1992, p.194). Here, we are introduced to the future Malcolm X narrator, who has returned to challenge and correct the views of his former self. We now hear the post-NOI and pre-NOI voices working side-by-side, instead of what could have been the deliberately ignorant pre-NOI voice until halfway through the narrative, or the all-encompassing post-NOI voice throughout.

The distinct nature of the post-NOI and pre-NOI voices in The Autobiography of Malcolm X gives us an overall sense of the power of voice as a literary tool. bell hooks defines the notion of ‘voice’ as embodying the distinctive expression of an individual writer – what a writer/narrator sounds like (1989, p.11). In the case of the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X, his post-NOI voice sounds different to his pre-NOI voice, and so we hear one man from two presents – the present in which he told the story and the present in which he re-thought the story – as though he has become two men. This is because voice, as a device, can create multiple tenses, multiple perspectives and multiple characters within a central narrator, as recognised by Bennett and Royle (2004, p.75).

The simultaneous presence of a past and present narrator in The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a technique that I believe can serve the development of new Arab-Australian literature. While the first-person, present-tense perspectives of young Arab-Australian Muslim males from Western Sydney within a post-9/11 context might give us insights into their direct experiences and identities, a
perspective and voice that is what hooks calls ‘critically conscious’ (1989, p.14) can help readers contextualise much of the often sexist, racist, homophobic and violent scenarios that played out during these turbulent years in Australia. The Lebs’ older, critically conscious voices will be able to rethink and reimagine the views they had as boys without affecting the dramatic tension in the stories told by these boys.

When it comes to ‘voice’, no text seems to speak louder than The Autobiography of Malcolm X. We are constantly reminded that ‘real-life’ Malcolm X is literally speaking his story to Alex Haley, which has the effect of him speaking directly to the reader. This can be categorised as what Bennett and Royle refer to as the ‘speaking voice’.

We are drawn away by what we might call the ‘reality effect’ of a speaking voice that is produced in part through the conversational language – the lexical items and syntax, the topic, use of the present tense, repetition – and in part through the explicit reference to the fact that the narrator is speaking and ‘telling’ us something (2004, p.71).

One aspect of the ‘speaking voice’ that gives the ‘reality effect’ in The Autobiography can be seen in the narrator Malcolm X’s use of the word, ‘why’, which emphasises his conviction as he builds on his arguments. For example, in the chapter ‘Icarus’, the narrator Malcolm X explains his quarrels with integration:

The black masses prefer the company of their own kind. Why, even these fancy bourgeois Negroes – when they get back home from the fancy ‘integrated’ cocktail parties, what do they do but kick off their shoes and talk about those white liberals they just left as if the liberals were dogs (1992, p.314).

Much like the entire chapter, here the narrator Malcolm X adds little to the account of events in his life. Rather, this sounds like one of his ‘real-life’ speeches as a civil rights leader. The use of the word ‘why’ propels this sense of oration; it expresses the character’s vernacular, and more broadly, the vernacular of his communities. ‘Why’ also slows the pace of the narrator, pushing the words off the page so that we can hear the famous orator known as Malcolm X.
As I suggested in the previous chapter, the spoken-word form in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* evokes recitation and oral storytelling techniques that scholars recognise in Arab literary traditions:

From as early as the 5th Century BCE, the Arabs, originally a largely illiterate people who were proud of their tribal genealogies and histories, developed an incredibly descriptive and rhythmic language. This was achieved mostly through the custom of memorising oral narratives from generation to generation. As ancient nomadic cultural traditions were lost as a result of urban settlement, they were recaptured in the collective consciousness through the art of poetry and story-telling (Bokhari and Seddon 2009, p.15).

Perhaps the most significant example of the oral transmission of text from the Arab world is the ‘miraculous’ development of The Holy Qur’an. Although the word ‘scripture’ has historically referred to written text, Bokhari and Seddon argue that this definition cannot be strictly applied to the Qur’an because its original transmission was oral – spoken-word revelations from Allah to Gibreel to Muhammad to the people of Mecca and beyond (2009, p.36). In fact, in Arabic the word ‘Qur’an’ literally means ‘to recite’. As Bokhari and Seddon point out, preserving Muhammad’s recitations was indeed a priority to him and his early followers, but it must be understood that this was not an impossible task in a society that had a developed oral tradition (2009, p.36). This explains why the earliest known parchment from the Qur’an, discovered at Birmingham University library in 2015, which carbon dating suggests could be as old as the date that Muhammad received the revelations (some sceptics claiming even older than when he received them), contains revelations identical to sections of the written and spoken recitations in the Qur’an today (Kennedy 2015). Alongside the documentation of Muhammad’s revelations in the ‘memories of men’, parts were written on parchment, stone, palm leaves and the shoulder blades of camels (Bilefsky 2015). While such ‘parts’ reveal that written transmissions of the Qur’an were not completely absent during the accumulation of Muhammad’s revelations, we are able to use the Birmingham parchment to recognise the consistency between oral transmission, which was the primary way in which the Qur’an had been documented and preserved, and the written transmission, among a small percentage of educated individuals, that had
emerged from the Arab-Muslim world as early as 610AD. Paralleling these oral traditions from the ancient Arab poets and the ancient Muslim prophets are the oral storytelling techniques used to create *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm X, a historical figure whom we know was influenced by The Holy Qur’an from the time he had entered prison through to his assassination in 1965, stood before Alex Haley and recited the events of his life as well as his ideological views on politics, religion, race, class and gender. Meanwhile, Alex Haley sat at a typewriter and transcribed his words (X & Haley 1992, pp.443-446).

Since both ‘Arab’ and ‘African-American’ identities resonate with a contemporary Arab-Australian Muslim male identity, as a symbolic extension I believe that the oral storytelling modes that can be found within ancient Arab and modern African-American literature could resonate in Arab-Australian writing, capturing forms of repetition, rhythm, metaphor, voice and vernacular that can be found in the hybrid identities that Noble and Tabar recognise as ‘Lebanese-ness’ (2002, p.139) and which I have called ‘Leb’. However, to offer a full-length narrative that can be *heard* as well as read would require a literary form that is somewhere between the length of a story and a novel, a text that could be read aloud in a single, but extensive session. This is why I believe the short novel form called the ‘novella’ is strongly suited for this kind of writing. Novellas work as both standalone pieces that can be recited in their entirety in one feature-length reading and, where they are interconnected, they can also be brought together as a complete novel for extended periods of reading. By no means would this be an original format for the Arab-Australian novel, but rather an extension of the history of the Arabic novel. As argued by Allen, while the term ‘novella’ is not established in the Arabic language, there is in modern Arabic fiction a canon of literature that may be designated as long short stories and short novels (1995, p.6). Most notably this would include the many stories which came together and are now known as the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, which are recognised by Allen as a collection developed for oral performance: ‘One might surmise that any written versions that existed were intended as mnemonics for the storytellers themselves rather than written versions for a wider readership (which, due to levels of literacy, did not exist in any case)’ (1995, p.12). The stories that can be found in the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* highlight the long short story form common in the ancient and modern Arab canon (as well as the Persian and Indian canons from which many
of the stories also originate), with examples such as ‘Sinbad the Sailor’, ‘The Hunchback’, ‘The Fisherman and the Jinee’ and of course, ‘Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp’ (Dawood 1973, pp.7-11).

The collaborative process between Malcolm X and Alex Haley raises perhaps the most important literary question in The Autobiography of Malcolm X: Who wrote the book? The 1992 Ballantine edition of the autobiography is titled, The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley. Other editions, such as the 2001 Penguin Modern Classics edition, have the title The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley. These varying titles attempt to properly identify how the autobiography was created, which influences one’s impression of the text even before one begins to read. ‘Assistance from Alex Haley’ implies a balanced collaboration between X and Haley – it implies that Haley may have played a vital role in developing and presenting the Malcolm X narrative. ‘As told to Alex Haley’, on the other hand, seems to suggest that the book is entirely the work of Malcolm X, which Haley had merely heard and dictated. In Jack Barnes’ Malcolm X, Black Liberation and the Road to Workers Power, Malcolm’s autobiography is described as having been completed with the ‘help of Alex Haley’ (2010, p.86). In Barnes’ index under ‘Autobiography’, he places the name ‘Haley’ in brackets, which seems to suggest that Haley is the sole author of The Autobiography (2010, p.395). Talking Back by bell hooks, names only Malcolm X as the author, with no mention of Alex Haley whatsoever (1989, p.184), and in Peter Dailey’s essay, ‘Truth or Myth’, he refers to The Autobiography of Malcolm X as ‘Alex Haley’s account’ (2009, p.124), which implies that the book is Haley’s story about Malcolm X, not Malcolm X’s story about himself. These few examples, and there are many others, reveal that the correct title for the book and the true author(s) are easily contestable and fundamentally unclear.

One way we can begin to decipher the role of each author, however, is to refer back to the epilogue, which was written by Alex Haley after Malcolm X’s assassination. While many epilogues, afterwords, forewords and introductions offer some thoughts and insights on the text by an outside eye, the epilogue in The Autobiography of Malcolm X comes from the inside eye – it is not about the autobiography, it is part of the autobiography. We can consider for example the book’s dedication, which is officially made out to Malcolm X’s family: ‘This book I
dedicate to my beloved wife Betty and to our children whose understanding and whose sacrifices made it possible for me to do my work.’ Nonetheless, in Haley’s epilogue he explains that at the beginning of the project Malcolm X had written his original dedication to The Honourable Elijah Muhammad (1992, p.445). It is not uncommon in autobiographical writing that the events unfolding in an author’s present life influence them to re-write what has already been written, in which case it is certainly not strange that ‘real-life’ Malcolm X reconsidered his dedication. However, what is unique in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is that we read the book as it is and then afterwards, due to Haley’s epilogue, we also read the book for what it could have been. We realise multiple dedications based on multiple versions of the Malcolm X reality. Furthermore, the official dedication pays tribute to figures external to the narrative, thanking those who helped Malcolm along his way, while also being the first line in a sub-narrative about Malcolm X and his journey to decide whether he would dedicate his book to Elijah Muhammad or his wife and children. It is as though we are reading two stories at the same time: one is the story of ‘Malcolm X’, which the ‘real-life’ Malcolm X had told to Alex Haley, and the other is the story of the autobiography, which Alex Haley has told to the reader.

In the story of the autobiography, Haley claims that at first Malcolm X was more interested in arguing his political agenda and great love for his leader than in telling the personal events of his life. ‘My notebook contained almost nothing but Black Muslim philosophy, praise of Mr. Muhammad, and the “evils” of the “white devil”’ (1992, p.447). This forces Haley to develop a number of approaches to working with Malcolm X, demonstrating that *The Autobiography* is an inherently creative document, a work of literature. For example, Haley claims to have discovered that Malcolm had been jotting down notes on bits of scrap paper, napkins and newspaper margins for his speeches, debates and interviews during their consultations (1992, p.447). One time Haley discovered a note Malcolm had left concerning the nature of women, which led him to finally enquire about his mother. ‘Abruptly he quit pacing, and the look he shot at me made me sense that somehow the chance question had hit home’ (1992, p.449). This becomes the basis for the first two chapters of *The Autobiography*, ‘Nightmare’ and ‘Mascot’, which both concern Malcolm’s early childhood. The opening line of the autobiography responds implicitly to Haley’s question: ‘When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha,
Nebraska, one night’ (1992, p.3). Here, the narrator Malcolm X speaks to us from within the womb, which places an immediate significance on the position of the mother. Her unique perspective is a violent memory that throws the reader into the geographical, racial and political context for the autobiography. Haley’s breakthrough question raises all kinds of revelations about the process of producing *The Autobiography*. It would have been a very different autobiography were Malcolm X telling it to someone else, or maybe not an autobiography at all had the editor/writer not been skilled enough to make this breakthrough with his ‘subject’. Haley even admits that at times he began leaving two napkins where Malcolm X would sit in the hope that he would write down some notes and leave them behind (1992, p.447). In many ways we could argue that Haley was not working *with* Malcolm X, he was working *on* Malcolm X.

Oehl argues that, ‘Alex Haley’s conscious leaving of napkins for Malcolm to scribble on and the surprise question about his mother are both crucial for understanding the editor’s role in the autobiographical process’ (2006, p.91). While this might certainly be true, the manipulation it involves introduces some serious questions about the book’s merits, particularly in relation to its focus. Some have argued that the autobiography, and later the famous Spike Lee film based on the autobiography, fail to thoroughly explore the most significant chapter of Malcolm X’s personal and political life. Jack Barnes explains that the popular Malcolm X narratives...

freeze Malcolm’s political trajectory in April 1964 when he made the hajj to Mecca, only a month after his public break with the Nation of Islam. Everything after that pilgrimage gets short shrift in both autobiography and film. But Malcolm’s experiences and the political conclusions he drew didn’t stop there. In fact, he had barely begun (2010, p.20).

Barnes further complicates the matter by pointing out that Malcolm X did not play a part in producing the final parts of the autobiography because of his assassination:

In reading the *Autobiography*, we should always keep two things in mind. First, that the interviews were begun while Malcolm was still in the Nation, with Elijah
Muhammad’s approval. And second, that Malcolm was denied the opportunity to review and edit the final draft, or bring it in line with his views at that time (2010, p.86).

These factors establish what I have argued to be the most significant aspect of The Autobiography of Malcolm X – that it is but one version among many possible versions of the historical figure known as Malcolm X. More generally, I am arguing that all autobiographical works, whether they are African-American, Arab-Australian, or of any other origin, offer one among many possible versions of any ‘real-life’ author. Therefore, rather than discussing the worthiness of autobiographical and biographical literature on the basis of its accuracy, we should focus our attention on what the author/s are attempting to say and why.

To explore what Haley was attempting to say and why, we can cross-reference some of the details in his account on Malcolm X with autobiographical and biographical narratives that parallel The Autobiography of Malcolm X. One such text is a biography of Malcolm X’s wife called Betty Shabazz, Surviving Malcolm X by Russell J. Rickford (2003). This text details the life and times of Betty Shabazz before, during and after the assassination of Malcolm X. It provides an essential reminder that Betty’s life had to go on beyond Malcolm X as she strived to raise their six daughters without him and continue his legacy and struggle for Black civil rights.

In the biography Betty claims that ‘Haley didn’t get any big secrets’ when creating her husband’s autobiography (2003, p.205). She also suggests that the autobiography ‘diluted Malcolm because Haley tended to glean “safe passages” from the minister’s dictations’ (2003, p.205). These revelations are also alluded to in Peter Dailey’s essay on ‘Truth and Myth’, in which he argues that The Autobiography told a lighter version of Malcolm X’s years as a hustler and a pimp. ‘Especially provocative is the disclosure that as a young man one of the expedients to which Malcolm turned was homosexual prostitution’ (Dailey 2009, p.126). Having left this element out of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, either because Malcolm X chose not to share it with Haley or because Haley chose not to include it, Haley leaves us with a glamourised depiction of Malcolm X’s days on the streets – a version where dealing drugs, carrying guns and handling prostitutes is more exciting than dangerous, and more a consequence of choice than circumstances. It is a worthy version to some, and
certainly it has had its appeal as a book and a film over the decades, but to others it is a version lacking in potential, capacity, trajectory, accuracy and truth.

‘Does the truth about Malcolm X in fact matter?’ This is the question that Peter Dailey asks in his essay, ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X: Truth or Myth’. ‘For those to whom Malcolm is less a historical figure than a mythic presence, it has become irrelevant’ (Dailey 2009, p.127). I agree that the man known as Malcolm X now exists for some as a mythic presence rather than a historical figure. However, throughout the past two chapters of this exegesis I have argued that the truth about Malcolm X, so far as it is presented in the literature by and about him, not only matters, but that it matters precisely because it has transformed a historical being into a mythical one. In The Autobiography of Malcolm X, the truth is revealed to be fluid and continually shaped and re-shaped by perspective, imagination and interpretation. This is the basis of my reasoning for the development of my creative thesis: my aim is not to tell the ‘truth’ about young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney in contrast to a series of ‘untruthful’ or ‘less truthful’ accounts, but simply to tell a new truth, a truth that belongs to the page, about the ever evolving strategic and hybrid formation called ‘Leb’.
Conclusion: ‘Jesus and Tupac are Muslim’

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks argues that challenging representations of race is not just about evaluating and criticising the current situation: ‘It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews’ (1992, p.4). In the creative component of this thesis, a work of fiction titled ‘The Lebs’, I have attempted to offer a new and alternative understanding of a complex, misrepresented and unique identity in response to the simplistic and mostly negative stereotypes that have constructed the Arab-Australian Muslim male persona from Western Sydney in mainstream media, politics, film and literature. This has been based on a critical response to the construction of the Arab-Australian Muslim male as a local ethnic menace in the context of a ‘White nation fantasy’ and as a global threatening other within an orientalist, imperialist and White-supremacist discourse. In contrasting the current images to the lived experiences of young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney, I focus on characters, and their stories and language, to reveal a multifaceted, hybridised and intersectional version of the identity that came to be known as ‘Leb’, based on the young men at Punchbowl Boys High School of Arab and/or Muslim heritage leading up to, during and shortly after the 2001 September 11 attacks on New York City. While the term ‘Leb’ is literally short for the cultural identity ‘Lebanese’, the category known as ‘Leb’ in Australia between the years 1998 and 2004 more broadly came to represent any young men (and women) from Arab and/or Muslim background and/or appearance from Western Sydney. It was used by both members of the identity and people outside the identity. In naming my creative thesis ‘The Lebs’, I seek to claim the term as an official marker of a unique and new Australian identity which is worthy of its own voice, space, understanding and appreciation within the milieu of Australian literature. I also hope to highlight the term as distinct from simplistic and interchangeable categories that have been used to identify the
young men in mainstream Australian film, television, literature and media such as ‘Lebanese’, ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Middle Eastern’ and ‘Middle Eastern appearance’.

The narrative of my creative thesis follows on from my first work of fiction, *The Tribe* (Ahmad 2014). The original child narrator in *The Tribe*, Bani Adam, is now a teenager studying at Punchbowl Boys, a high school in Sydney’s west which is predominantly made up of young men from Arab and/or Muslim backgrounds at a time when Arab and Muslim men are regularly appearing in the mainstream Australian news media in relation to drive-by shootings and gang affiliations, drug-dealings, the 2000 Skaf gang rapes and the 2001 September 11 attacks on New York City. In this climate Punchbowl Boys High School was transformed into a prison-like institution, surrounded by barbed wire and cameras, with teachers who behaved more like prison guards than educators. The students came from cultural and religious minorities and low socio-economic backgrounds, and they rejected academic learning, and enacted physical, verbal, emotional and sexual violence against one another and against people from the outside world, especially young women and homosexuals they encountered within their community, whom they often subjected to sexist, misogynistic and homophobic abuse. Whilst on the surface these images are not much different from the media and political constructions of the Arab-Muslim male identity in Australia and around the world, I attempt to distinguish my creative work from many mainstream representations by conveying the underlying struggles the Lebs faced between 1998 and 2006 while living with the memories and traumas of their parents’ displacement from Arab and Muslim lands due to Western foreign policies and invasions, and while living in impoverished households and communities, which were often subject to cycles of violence. The Lebs studied at an underfunded school with underqualified teachers and limited resources, and experienced cultural rejection and racial discrimination from local authorities, including school teachers, police officers and transit officers who actively targeted and prosecuted young men of ‘Middle eastern appearance’.

In the face of racial and religious alienation and socio-economic disadvantage, the Lebs begin to ‘throw-back’ at the White dominated society which has constructed them as both the local ethnic menace and as international terrorist suspects in three ways. First, they identify with a romantic, asymmetrical, and fundamentalist sense of their Arab and Muslim history and culture, which they see as superior to White culture and as key to their salvation, especially in the aftermath of
9/11. Second, they appropriate, and identify with, African-American popular culture, which articulates to them a parallel sense of discrimination and marginalisation faced and fought by Black men in White America, particularly through the music of gangsta rappers of the late 90s such as Tupac, Biggie and Ice Cube. And thirdly, there is a blurred identification between the first and second ways, in which ‘Black Muslim’ figures such as civil rights leader Malcolm X provide a sense of international unity among Muslims and people of colour against ‘White’ and ‘Western’ forces. The combination of these three factors, blended with the Lebs’ sense of underclass masculine Australianness, evokes character traits which include ways of talking, dressing and interacting with young women and people perceived as ‘White Australian’. One example in my fiction, which I believe encapsulates the complexity of Arab-Australian Muslim male hybridity and its reduction through categorisation, is based on an etching on a desk at Punchbowl Boys High School which read, ‘Jesus & Tupac R Muslim’. When I first spotted this etching as a student at Punchbowl Boys over fifteen years ago, it immediately expressed to me the remarkable forms of resilience, irony, pride and joy that young Arab-Australian Muslim males in Western Sydney had extracted from their sense of, and identification with, Arabness, Muslimness and Blackness.

Within this hybrid identity, I also attempt to reveal what Noble and Tabar call ‘strategic Lebanese-ness’ (2002, p.139) in my fiction. Unlike representations of Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney in Australian film and literature such as The Combination (2009), Cedar Boys (2009), East West 101 (2003-2005), Underbelly: The Golden Mile (2010) and Evil in the Suburbs (2010), in which Australian Muslim men are portrayed through the one-dimensional stereotype of ‘dangerous and angry criminals and gangsters’, I attempt to convey a multilayered reality in which the Lebs actively and consciously perform being ‘dangerous and angry criminals and gangsters’, with reference to both their sense of Muslimness and their sense of racial difference, because it is empowering, pleasurable, amusing, entertaining and a form of defence for racialised minorities to evoke fear in a dominant cultural group, especially as bell hooks puts it, ‘in White folks’ (2004, p.49). In this way, the young Lebs in my creative work reject the stereotypes that are propagated about them in the mass media and by politicians, precisely by embracing the stereotypes, using them strategically and ironically to survive in a terrain which attempts to keep them behind barbed wire and under video surveillance.
One central area in my creative work in which I attempt to convey the complexity of Arab-Australian Muslim male identity is in relation to women. Firstly, regarding the representations of Arab-Australian Muslim women in general, I wanted to give a portrayal which acknowledged the role that some of the women played in the domestic space of their families, such as Bani Adam’s mother, but unlike The Combination and Cedar Boys, I did not want to restrict the characterisation of the Arab-Australian Muslim woman to this space. In particular, Bani Adam’s infatuation with his English teacher, Mrs Leila Haimi, in the first two novellas, seeks to depict an Arab-Australian Muslim female presence as a role model and teacher for Arab-Australian Muslim males, and to portray an educated and intellectual Arab and Arab-Australian Muslim woman who is well-read, critical, and feminist in terms of her education and career, even though she holds traditional values about marriage and having children. She is also just as strategic as her Arab and Arab-Australian Muslim male counterparts when negotiating her racial, cultural and religious identity, and her sexuality and gender within contemporary multicultural Australia.

I was also concerned with the engagement of the young Lebs with young women from predominantly Anglo-Australian backgrounds, in order to examine their sexual attitudes and relations as young men of colour from low socio-economic backgrounds studying at a disadvantaged single sex high school. On the one hand I did not want to reinforce the image of the Arab-Muslim male as inherently sexist, misogynistic and patriarchal that is propagated in mainstream Australian news media and literature, for example in the many Daily Telegraph articles written by Miranda Devine between 2000 and 2014 or in Wockner and Porta’s Evil in the Suburbs in relation to the Skaf gang rapes, and in the hundreds of Hollywood films analysed by Shaheen in Reel Bad Arabs. On the other hand, I did not want to overlook or downplay the severity of sexist, misogynist and patriarchal behaviour demonstrated by the Lebs at Punchbowl Boys. In particular, I did not want to downplay this behaviour given the climate of the gang rapes which none of the Lebs in my stories are implicated in, but which they all internalise as members of the same cultural and religious background as the rapists. Such behaviour has been found to be common among men of all cultures and religious identities, especially in underclass communities. To balance these opposing circumstances, I attempt to develop a tableau of interactions between the Lebs and young women of predominantly (but not only) Anglo-Australian background, to reveal the ways that each gender identity
absorbed and responded to the stereotypes and expectations about one another during the media documentation of the gang rapes. In my first novella, ‘Drug-Dealers and Drive-Bys’, for example, I recount an incident in which a Leb at Punchbowl Boys records a girl ‘consenting’ to give him and his friends ‘head jobs’ because he believes that Anglo-Australian girls were making up stories about Lebs raping them and because he believes that such a recording would be proof of consent. I believe that depictions of this kind of incident reveal the interconnected relationships between poor sex education, identities projected by the media, and the sexist, misogynistic and patriarchal behaviour that some of these young men enacted (and which some of these young women were subjected to), without stereotyping the Arab-Australian Muslim male as a sexual predator engaged in overt criminal activities.

Through incident and reflection, the decision to focus on the development of Bani Adam as a central character and the first-person narrator in my creative work offers the perspective of one who is both an insider and an outsider. Bani Adam calls himself a ‘Leb’ like most other students at Punchbowl Boys, as the child of Lebanese-Syrian Muslim-Alawite immigrants. However, he sees himself as different and superior to his peers – he behaves in class, reads literature and discusses it with his teachers (who single him out and praise him over the other students), and he aspires to be a writer and performance artist instead of ‘a plumber, builder, drug-dealer, dole bludger or backstabber’. Bani also sees his attitude towards, and relationships with, women as superior to those of the other Lebs at Punchbowl Boys, though he struggles to understand why some women prefer his peers to him. Alongside the tableau of sexual incidents between the Lebs and the young women they encounter (on the internet, at train stations and at dance parties), is the primary romantic relationship arc in the second and largest novella, called ‘Gang Rape’. This relationship is between Bani Adam and his first girlfriend Banika. Bani believes he can provide Banika with the loving, nurturing, honest and poetic relationship that he has seen on Hollywood ‘chick flicks’ and from a misreading of Nabokov’s Lolita, as well as from his understanding of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s ‘A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings’ and Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet. Unfortunately, the ‘honest’ and ‘innocent’ girl of his fantasies does not match the only girl willing to date him, Banika, who also dates, and cheats on him with, other Lebs, leaving behind a trail of
humiliation for Bani which results in him questioning his attitude towards women and relationships.

At the core of Bani’s engagement with other Lebs, women and literature in the first two novellas, ‘Drug-Dealers and Drive-Bys’ and ‘Gang Rape’, is his unrelenting assumption that Arab-Muslim values, culture and people are inferior to White values, culture and people. Bani believes that he has the emotional and intellectual intelligence to move from the former identity to the latter. However, in the final novella, ‘War On Terror’, when Bani is invited to participate in a creative development workshop with a group of ‘White middle class performance artists’ from Sydney’s inner west, which is mostly made up of gay women, he is confronted with the reality that has been looming over him since his first days as a Punchbowl Boy: regardless of how different he is, or imagines himself to be, from the Lebs, even the ‘progressive’ and ‘open-minded’ left of White Australia will not let him live down the stereotype and construction of what it means to be an Arab-Australian Muslim male living within a ‘White nation fantasy’ (Hage 2000, p.18).

While the narrative in ‘The Lebs’ attempts to convey the complex social and cultural dynamics which define the hybrid and strategic identity of young Arab-Australian Muslim men from Western Sydney, it is the language features and literary techniques in my fiction which I hope contribute to what I have called ‘the development of a new autobiographical literature’. This is firstly categorised by my understanding of autobiography as a literary form. Although ‘The Lebs’ is an autobiographical account, with fictionalised elements, of my experiences as a young ‘Leb’ between the years 1998 and 2004, throughout this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that there is little real difference between what we understand to be ‘autobiographical fiction’ and ‘autobiography’. This has been based primarily on my analysis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which I have used to argue that autobiography can work in similar ways to fiction – as singular versions of truth which offer us a unique perspective on the individual creators of the text. Using the same principle, I seek to present ‘The Lebs’ as one version of the many truths about my identity that I take upon myself to reclaim and represent in my own way. This stance draws on bell hooks’ arguments on the importance of literacy, and critical consciousness, as individuals from minorities not only criticise the social structures around them, but also redefine and re-write those structures as an act of empowerment and
transformation. In the case of Malcolm X, it is not only that his autobiography articulates the struggle for Black civil rights; it is also a narrative about how he came to enlightenment and empowerment within the struggle through literacy development and the religion of Islam. In my own case, I see ‘The Lebs’ as not only articulating the social and cultural position of an Arab-Australian Muslim male from Western Sydney, but also as showing how Bani, as in a sense my fictional surrogate, found his voice and place within that culture through his identification with a hybrid and strategic sense of Australianness. As I have demonstrated in this exegesis, this new kind of Arab-Australian Muslim male narrative can symbolically link-up with the Arab-Muslim narrative of the Prophet Muhammad and the African-American narrative of Malcolm X because some African-Americans identify with notions of ancient Arab-Muslim identity and some Arab-Australian Muslims identify with notions of contemporary African-American identity.

One of the primary issues Malcolm X and Alex Haley faced in developing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was the way in which events in Malcolm’s life had constantly pressured him to redefine and re-write what he understood to be the ‘truth’ about the African-American struggle, about Islam, and about his relationship with Elijah Muhammad, resulting in what Oehl called the ‘post-NOI’ and ‘pre-NOI’ voices (2006, p.92). In ‘The Lebs’, I attempt to convey two distinct voices in a similar vein, revealing an immediate and present-tense atmosphere in which the teenager known as Bani Adam exists and makes sense of his world as it is unfolding before him, while at the same time offering an older narrator that can look back on his attitudes and actions, and contextualise them as particular moments during his journey toward greater awareness.

In a symbolic exchange between the oral traditions in ancient Islamic and Arab literature, modern African-American Muslim literature and the development of new Arab-Australian Muslim literature, ‘The Lebs’ attempts to reveal the voice and vernacular of young men who form a hybrid identity of Arabness, Muslimness, Blackness and underclass Australianness which was distinct to some Western Sydney communities between the years 1998 and 2005. For this reason, I chose to write ‘The Lebs’ as a series of spoken-word monologues. I chose to write novellas to convey the spoken-word form, so that each component in the creative work can function as a standalone piece, which can be read or recited in one reading. Each novella is also interconnected with the other two to form a single body of work.
Though the novella form is not common in Arab-Muslim, African-American-Muslim or Arab-Australian-Muslim literature, my interest in the form has drawn on the novella-like narratives in the Arab-Muslim literary tradition of long short stories developed for oral transmission in such works as the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*.

The following three novellas offer an autobiographical portrait of the ‘Leb’ told over a period of six years. Bani Adam struggles to find his place between the intersections of race, religion, class, gender and sexuality. It is my hope, however, that from Bani Adam’s confusion will emerge some clarity about this unique identity called Leb, as we move towards a period where the Arab-Australian Muslim male from Western Sydney plays a more significant role in shaping contemporary Australian culture and society.
Pages 123-273

These pages have been intentionally removed from the thesis owing to an embargo of the creative component of the thesis.
REFERENCES


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