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Encounters on the road to heritage and film in the UAE

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CHAPTER THREE: Nostalgia in the UAE's Post Cinema World

Introduction

When Ghada Rahim, a Palestinian who grew up in Qatar, began her career as a TV producer at Qatar TV in Doha in the late 1980s, she was a fresh graduate from the USA. She was also brought on as CNN's Qatar stringer. A stringer is essentially a reporter on standby in case there should be any news coming from an area where the media organization hasn't placed permanent reporters because of the lack of news being generated from there. Even though Al Jazeera was just a few years from being quietly built downstairs, the Gulf sheikhdoms were indeed a vacuum when it came to news stories, thus CNN had no issues relying on a 21-year old, as they expected to never need Ghada. (Interview, 2018)¹¹⁰ No one could have predicted the changes that would come to the region with the first Gulf War in 1990. Nor could anyone have imagined the advent of satellite TV in 1996—and the launch of the UAE's hyper-reality and its dreams of becoming the Middle East's media capital.

While the focus of this dissertation is the film initiative decade of 2008 to 2018, one cannot look at film without considering television during this same period, the anchor media in identity building of the Gulf, long before the UAE had openly begun its *neoglobal* endeavors. By 2008, in the post cinema world, in the internet and mobile phone savvy UAE, television was a medium on the decline in viewership, as was the case in much of the rest of

¹¹⁰ Interviewed May 8, 2018 in London. I have known Ghada Rahim since the 1990s, as my father was working in Qatar at the time and I would visit him there. We had access to the UAE channels, as well, so I was aware of what they were airing, especially when I later worked at the TV station and we had to be aware of what was playing on the UAE channels.

the world (Punathambekar and Kumar, 2017; Curtin and Shah, 2010; Khalil and Kraidy, 2017; Graeme and Tay, 2009; Olsson and Spigel, 2004).

But the UAE government has not given up on TV. In response to independent productions with a developing online audience interactively discussing the past, government-funded television series have incorporated heritage and identity to match the visual media online.

In this chapter, I look at the fundamental differences and outcomes between government and grassroots response (through independent film and social media) to collective identity and heritage in light of the national anxiety over rapid change. This change has at its heart the loss of locality and has fostered nostalgia in the UAE. I compare television comedies with the nostalgia narratives building on social media and independent documentaries, in order to better determine the diverging and converging roles of television and online visual media in creating a collective memory and a heritage narrative in the UAE.

Television, social media and independent films could be considered at odds with each other. Television has been the medium of shaping heritage in the UAE since nationhood, with the government fully controlling the narrative, unlike today. Social media by its participatory nature challenges authoritarian government control and, as we will see, connects Emiratis to the expat community in the intimate space of cyber chatting and independent filmmaking. Independent film has global ambitions through film festivals and online platforms, while UAE television channels focus on only a local audience, specifically an Arabic-speaking Emirati audience. Television in the Gulf indeed began with the opposite of global ambitions.

The Nation and the TV

Heritage and identity were shaped similarly across the Gulf countries, with TV helping the ruling families become the heart of the nation's heritage narrative. This is a political choice not unique to the UAE. Building on the work of Marita Sturken, Eyal Zandberg notes:

In the process of shaping collective memory—an ongoing process that involves political, cultural, and sociological confrontations as different interpretations compete for their place in history—the media play a distinctive role. On the one hand, they serve as a platform or an arena for the sociocultural struggle; on the other hand, they are also actors in this competition and perceive themselves as the authoritative storytellers of society. (Zandberg, 2014:112).

Sturken's and Zandberg's works are based on media related to the trauma of war and disease (Vietnam War, AIDS and the Holocaust). However, the UAE has a different kind of trauma to be confronted through media: modernity. This is internal, related to rapid change of the landscape and society—and the struggle for identity. Television channels in the UAE are government-owned, thus giving them the authoritative storytelling claim to confront political, social and cultural matters—and even allowing them to become a venue for sociocultural struggle, but with assumed boundaries (censorship and self-censorship) that confirm that they are very much being in control. As Rahim recalls:

My most important job as the youngest producer in the room was to be ready to run downstairs to the live studio with the incoming footage of the Emir's meetings and events that day, as well as that of the other ministers. I had to be ready to roll by the time the nightly news was on air. We would hold up the news with musical

interstitials rather than lead with anything else. It didn't matter what was happening anywhere else in the world—plane crash, earthquake, war—the activities for the rulers took up the first 10 minutes of the program, with the footage running without commentary aside from an explanation from the anchor of who was meeting who (Interview, 2018).

This idea of nothing in the world being more important than the country's rulers was no different in the UAE. Television was the government's communication tool with the public, defining the image of the new nation. In most of the developed world, media was adopted by audiences as it was invented, with newspaper, film, radio and then television appearing in that order. But for the UAE, film production, even newspapers, came after TV. Abu Dhabi TV was the first TV channel, launching in 1969, while the first newspaper, *Al Khaliji*, was born in Sharjah in 1970. In 1977, Dubai launched Dubai 33, an English language channel geared towards expatriates. (Fanack, 2020). The news broadcasts in both Arabic and English always began with the activities of the rulers that day and then followed international news culled from the wires and satellite feeds. Like most of the TV of the region, it was 100% state-controlled, with no pretensions of it being any different. UAE television channels also produce documentaries that glorified the new nation and its leaders. One has to keep in mind that we are talking about the early years of being a nation state, before the arrival of satellite TV, and thus one can understand the control the rulers valued—and saw in TV—as they went from a collection of emirates, merchants, and tribes to a wealthy federated nation state of international interest because of its oil wealth. TV offered the most far reaching media to visualize a heritage and identity amongst rapid change.

Modernity as a Crisis

As anthropologist Sulayman Khalaf puts it, UAE modernization, i.e. life after the discovery of oil, “created a rupture in the life pattern and historical memory of the social self.” (Khalaf, 2002:18). Khalaf was one of the earliest scholars to write about the invention of heritage in the new UAE, including the “poetics and politics” behind the invention of camel racing, a once friendly, occasional competition that began to be formed into a government-supported spectator sport in the early 1990s (Khalaf, 2000). I would add camel racing events, timings and venues catered to what suited television best, thus being one of the earlier examples of visual media being used to create a heritage narrative.

Before going on further with “modernity” and TV, it is useful to define modernity through the three pioneers of sociology that brought the word into dialogue after the Industrial Revolution, a society-changing event that is not so different to what has happened in the UAE in the past four decades. For Karl Marx, modernity was something that in a capitalist society can be bought and sold (*Das Kapital*, 1897); Emile Durkheim believed that society needed to be a cohesive whole, no matter how diverse the population, and that in modernity, with capitalism at its heart, there had to be a conscious effort to make that all come together (*The Divisions of Labor in Society*, 1893); Max Weber claimed modernity is rationalization, first embodied in the Protestant ethic of hard work but later rationalized by the pursuit of wealth (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905). What all these theories share in common is that modernity reconstructs the cohesion of a society, enabling a structure in which power is redefined as money, and he who has it (in the UAE, the ruling families) must manage a fragmented society.

For the UAE, all three thinkers' definitions are relevant to modernity—this is a capitalist-driven country, almost a corporation, yet a rational socialist state when it comes to how it rewards its citizens for their loyalty, but one that struggles for a rational cohesive whole (collective identity) among its citizens amidst the fostered looming threat of expat influence. Indeed, with a fragmented population and a fragmented media landscape, the expats have had since 2008 opportunities for an increasing voice in shaping UAE identity and collective memory, a threat to the homogenized heritage fostered by the government.

The Neighborhood & Anxiety

In 2016, Ahmed Al Rumaithi¹¹¹, a 45-years old civil servant, met a heritage class in which I was assisting New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) professor Robert Parthesius. The students that day were exploring their own neighborhood in a class called “Meeting the Neighbors.” The NYUAD campus is located on Saadiyat Island, which in English means “Happiness Island.” Most visitors to the UAE assume Saadiyat is a reference to the big plans Abu Dhabi announced in 2008 for the island to be the centerpiece of its cultural tourism, built on buying the names and agendas of Western institutions: Saadiyat is home to NYUAD, the Louvre and the future Guggenheim Museum and Zayed National Museum. But Saadiyat has had its name for as long as anyone can remember. Al Rumaithi grew up on the island, but he and his family and neighbors were relocated in the early 1980s, when the government began to reformulate neighborhoods, moving citizens to newer, bigger housing made of concrete, more permanent material than the traditional

¹¹¹ Not his real first name, but he is an Al-Rumaithi. I recorded the interview with his permission when he came to campus and when he took me on a tour of the island that day, April 16, 2016. However, I do not have permission to use his name.

areesh and coral homes, but not that permanent for a nation still reconstructing its cultural landscape.

People driving around Saadiyat today will find themselves either at the new cultural and arts centers or at the luxury hotels that line the beachfront. But that day, Al Rumaithi took a Yemeni student and I through sand dunes and waterways and paths clearly defined for him, but unrecognizable to us as even paths. He began to point out where his house had been, where his family's *majlis* was, the way to school, to the next closest island, how to get off the island, where the small farms had been, where the boats had been. As he described these spaces for us, his eyes teared up and heaviness and nostalgia overtook him. We stayed quiet while he looked across the sand at the strip of luxury hotels and sighed. (Figure 20)

Designed by international luxury brands, like the St. Regis and Park Hyatt, to capture Arabian heritage through Moorish archways, Mughal domes, and Persian wind towers, Saadiyat's hotels did not connect with Al Rumaithi's past. Back on the NYUAD campus, Al Rumaithi mapped out on paper his memories with heavy sighs. But at the same time, Al Rumaithi praised more than once the UAE leadership, thanking them for bringing its citizens into modernity. This praise of the leadership is a constant in Emirati conversation, as anyone engaging with Emiratis will quickly observe, is a common habit among UAE nationals, almost done by rote, although the praise is sincere: It's not unusual to go into people's houses and have portraits of Sheikh Zayed and one or two other rulers as the main artwork on the wall, a sign of gratitude upon which the deep patriotism (not necessarily heritage and identity) of the UAE is built. Al Rumaithi, like others, is stuck somewhere between nostalgia for the past and gratitude for Sheikh Zayed and his sons. Despite the recognition of all that has been given to them, when allowed back into the past,

something is missing for so many Emiratis and long-time expats I have spoken to—and modernity cannot build it or buy it. Or bring it back. As arts anthropologist Beth Harrington writes:

Spaces in the city that project a different past of poverty and lack of contemporaneity must be excised and reshaped for modern culture and a “neater” iteration of heritage and history: one that evokes a noble heritage and nods to the specificity of place so these spaces are ‘sellable’ in a neoliberal globalist vision....the Saadiyat Island project (is) marked by a commodification and elision of the past, replacing undesirable or non-modern images and styles with updated, cosmopolitan ones. This appears most prominently in the project’s articulation of a distinguished and civilized cultural genealogy for Abu Dhabi, constructed through appropriating architectural vernaculars, among other methods. (Harrington, 2013:5)

Those appropriated architectural vernaculars populate the tourism films we looked at in Chapter Two. Indeed, anyone who lived in the UAE from 2008 to 2018 witnessed the ever-expanding architecture of the UAE and how it creates a luxurious Arab Muslim heritage narrative through physical spaces on the landscape, while erasing other narratives, like Al Rumaithi’s. His landscape of humble palm frond houses does not “evoke noble heritage” the UAE is building on the landscape, now increasingly covered with Moorish and Mughal-inspired luxury spots.¹¹² (Figure 21)

¹¹² Homes in the UAE were primarily *areesh*, huts made from palm fronds. In parts of Dubai by the early 20th century they would have also been made from gypsum, particularly with the trading families, and in Ras Al Khaimah would have been made from coral. For more on the structure of UAE homes in the past, see *Traditional Architecture of the Arabian Gulf: Building on Desert Tides* (Hawker, 2009).

In the UAE, there is no recognizable elements of the post oil Gulf built into the new architecture, and it is not culturally linked to the time or space. As we shall see this, has opened the door to critical nostalgia online, particularly with younger Emiratis.

But stories are passed down and not as easily erasable as buildings. In this mode of architecture, the UAE has opened the door to critical nostalgia.

While Al Rumaithi might have no physical proof of his family's existence on Saadiyat, the story still exists. And not just within the former inhabitants of his erased space. For example, an Emirati researcher colleague at NYUAD, Salama Al Qubaisi, from Abu Dhabi's Delma Island, casually mentioned one day, "Saadiyat Island is an Al Rumaithi family island. Everyone knows that." Salma is only 24-years old and her home in Delma is five hours away from Saadiyat by boat and car, and she was born after the shifting of populations had happened. But still the heritage of families and tribes are known to nationals—and were known by locations long before there was a national narrative. While physical spaces have been erased, the mapping of places by family names still remains as a story throughout the citizen population, memory maps which continue despite the physical reproduction of the neighborhoods—but quietly told stories that don't express disappointment with the rulers, despite the rulers' decision to reproduce the neighborhood.

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai states:

Put summarily, as local subjects carry on the continuing task of reproducing their neighborhood, the contingencies of history, environment, and imagination contain the potential for new contexts (material, social, and imaginative) to be produced.

(Appadurai, 1996:185)

In the UAE, the reproducing of neighborhoods is in the hands of the government, which has been actively re-structuring how and where Emiratis live, and it has been felt by all nationalities here. Anna, an Anglo-Canadian, who moved to Ras Al Khaimah with her mother when she was 13-years old in 1997 and still lives in in the UAE, put it this way:

When I was a teenager, so this is late '90s, early 2000s, our school bus would drop off the kids from school. And they were Emirati, they were Arab, they were from everywhere. First when they're dropping kids off they are all in the same neighborhoods together side-by-side. And I sense now, that because of a lot of new suburbs being built for Emiratis...this means, inadvertently, Emiratis are going to be living in these neighborhoods where there won't be that mix, and now the schools are segregated. When I was in school...everybody was together. And the public schools were all mixed; if you spoke Arabic you went to a public school. The housing as well as other social aspects meant that people aren't physically as close together as they were. I feel very sad by that because I think that long term that changes things. Because it's different when as kids you grow up together from a very young age, and it was always that way in the Northern Emirates. You were always growing up together in a mixed neighborhood and that was always the case. It's not just that there's Emirati suburbs, but also in Ras All Khaimah. They also built a great new development south of the town which is the Al Hamra Village and a few other sorts of high-end places. And inadvertently what this means is that the wealthier people have moved out there, so before when I was a kid on a school bus, we didn't know it because we were teenagers, and you don't pay attention to those things as teenagers. But I think we were very close friends to some people who had a

lot of money, and friends with people who didn't. We didn't know because we were all together we didn't have the options of going to other places, by default you were together, and I think, of course I'm biased, but I think this is really good for all of us.

(Interview, 2019)

There was anxiety in Anna's face when she talks about how things used to be, a hyper-anxiety that is the flip side of the hyper-reality. This goes beyond Anna, and is particularly manifest in the younger people (under 35-years old) that I interviewed. For the UAE, the unpredictability of rapid progress has brought with it anxiety, despite having the highest standards of living in the Middle East (Mercer Consulting Report, 2018). This anxiety and entropy in the UAE, I would argue, has come about from the loss of control of space and time for citizens who struggle to feel locally grounded as space is constantly being redefined for them.

For the first generation to grow up as Emirati citizens, the novelty and wealth would have been enough but for younger people the anxiety is more acute, a feeling of never knowing what is next. It has been about losing locality, losing the neighborhood through the physical shifting of populations, and has brought with it issues of materialism, anxiety and depression, a common symptom of postmodernism, particularly with its unrelenting speed in the UAE. Psychologist Justin Thomas in his research on depression and anxiety in the UAE found that it was a big problem, even with older adults, with the highest rate of depression in Dubai (29.5%), where change had been the most rapid, and lowest in areas where less has changed. (Thomas, 2013:102) ¹¹³

¹¹³ Similarly, Sherman & Arthur (2017) have found huge increases in materialism in people aged 24-45, as a response to rapid wealth.

Within the confines of not upsetting the ruling bargain, there have even been public manifestations of the anxiety. An American landscape architect, Art S., told me about an incident that I have heard variations of from others as well:

We were on our way to a new housing development near RAK, and suddenly we found ourselves approaching a group of Emirati men carrying rifles and blocking our path to the housing development. They told us we couldn't come through. There was a lot of posturing and talking with our team leader and then they let us pass.

(Conversation, October 2018)

This stand up by RAK Emiratis to decisions being made by the federal government about the time and space they are to live in may just be posturing, as at the end of the day, the new houses are nicer and are an effort to make these citizens not feel neglected by the government in favor of richer Abu Dhabi. But these stories do not get media coverage because these events are in conflict with the national collective happiness with modernity that the UAE has promoted throughout the country. These new housing spaces were not just about making Emiratis happy—they also decided how national identity would be framed.

The large body of literature on techniques for naming places, for protecting fields, animals, and other reproductive spaces and resources, for marking seasonal change and agricultural rhythms, for properly situating new houses and wells, for appropriately demarcating boundaries (both domestic and communal) is substantially literature documenting the socialization of space and time. (Appadurai, 1996:185)

This is constantly seen in the UAE with the changing of street names, parks and neighborhoods. This even happens within the urbanized areas, in which once upscale neighborhoods become the relatively rundown neighborhoods within decades of their

development. Such is the case of the Tourist Club area of Abu Dhabi, a once vibrant residential and shopping area. Long before the UAE even offered tourist visas, it got its name in the 1970s when the government built a beach in the area for more recreational opportunities for residents. The beach was shut down in the 1990s, and this area certainly wasn't designed like the five-star Orientalist designs of the tourism boom that began in the 2000s. But the name stayed until 2014. Residents from Asia and the Levant are today the main inhabitants of the area, which is now called Al Zahiyah ("colorful" in Arabic), part of government initiative to give Arabic names to areas and streets in order to connect them back to the UAE's culture and identity, particularly the problematic issue of Arabic language as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Additionally, much of Al Zahiyah is now being torn down to widen streets to accommodate traffic jams in Abu Dhabi—and to continue to rebrand the area as new in the capitalist vein of always needing newness, especially as nothing in these 1980s and 1990s constructions speaks of a "noble heritage," i.e. Orientalist Arabesque.¹¹⁴

In the fall of 2018, I gave my class of 10 male students the assignment to work in pairs to produce a short video about the changes happening in the Tourist Club/Al Zahiyah. This is a place many well-off expats and Emiratis used to live until the government relocated the Emiratis to brand new villas outside the city center. The relocation included the families of three of the students in the class. The other students were from other parts of Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Dubai.

My students came back with touching videos about loss, financial problems and desertion, almost as if describing a ghost town, although it is still a busy area. The people

¹¹⁴ For more details about the street name changes, please see The National 03/10/2014

they interviewed mainly were expat shop owners. But the ghost-like quality of the student videos mirrored the collection of horror films in the UAE National Film Library and Archive. As one of the early scholars to look at the role of heritage in film, Frank D. McConnell wrote:

A psychic history of culture...could be written very efficiently from the morphology of its monsters, the history of those personifications of the void which successive generations have selected as their central nightmares. (McConnell, 1975:136)

There are approximately 40 short horror films in the UAE National Film Library and Archive and in nearly all of them, the monster and central nightmare is modernity, symbolized by lifeless towering buildings. In locally award-winning shorts like *Enigma* (2009), *The Signature* (2011), and *The 11th Hour* (2010), they all take place in towers that are haunted, dark, isolated, a place humanity transforms into evil. It is corporate life, whether at school or work, which motivates humans to behave badly or become trapped in a soulless world, haunted by demons. (Yunis, 2014:65) While modernity is the monster, the trace of the past is a ghost that also haunts the definition of a collective memory and heritage. As Avery Gordon explores through storytelling in *Ghostly Matters* (2008), the haunting past controls present life in subtle and more complicated ways than we can imagine and storytelling becomes a means of navigating it. Just as city planning (modernity) is about playing with space and time, film is a narrative that plays with space and time. Visual media is an imagined new context for locality, which can be controlled from the bottom up, as in the students' videos, as well as the top down, particularly when it comes to controlling the *freej*, the heart of Emirati nostalgia. This ends up challenging the balance between gratitude to the leadership and memory. (Figure 22)

Remembering the *Freej*

Whether speaking of the former Tourist Club or the less developed areas of the Northern Emirates, modernity, nostalgia and heritage overlap in the story of locality as a form of nation and heritage building, and all playing with space and time. No other word is more important in this explanation than “freej,” the Arabic word for neighborhood in the Gulf. A *freej* does not have to be tribal. For example, Dubai’s Bastikiya neighborhood introduced in Chapter Two was originally a neighborhood, a *freej*, of Iranian traders.

These *freej* began to disappear with relocation after nationhood. Writing about memory as a “cultural activity,” Scholar Ihab Saloul (2012) notes the origins of the word nostalgia come from “nostos,” Greek for “to return home” and “algos,” Greek for pain. Today in the UAE, we can see a citizen population that longs to go home, but who in reality are at home, but traumatized by its present. The past they long for is not the one before oil—not the camels, sand dunes and palm trees of UAE Bedouin heritage tropes—but the past that disappeared after oil, after modernity. Building on the work of Nanna Verhoeff (2006), Saloul suggests that “rather than perceiving nostalgia as a romantic longing for the past in order to escape the present, one should perceive it as a longing that attempts to deal with a problematic present.” (Saloul, 2012:17). He goes on to note that when trauma is about loss, then we can “assess trauma as a disorder of memory and time.” (Saloul, 2012:21).

In the UAE, trauma is the loss of the *freej*, a trauma of postmodernism and it has begun to be displayed through grassroots visual media. Andrew Higson, who has written extensively on heritage films, recently turned his attention to the role of nostalgia online, noting we are now in a new era of “postmodern nostalgia,” which he calls an “act of imagination:”

The process of remembering in this version of nostalgia is closely attached to a desire to return in thought or in fact to that earlier time – even while it is clear such a return can only be a fantasy. In this process, the past is imagined as a time and place of happiness, a place more perfect and more present; but the longing to return to this fondly remembered or imagined past is tinged with the sense that there is little hope that one might be able to do so. (Higson, 2016:123)

For all the nostalgia that Al Rumaithi expressed, in the UAE, the return to the past is indeed not an option. Nor is nostalgia about the past having been a happier place. The UAE has a Ministry of Happiness to make sure that the present is the happiest place its citizens could be, and the rentier system has given all the gratitude to the leadership, as Al Rumaithi mentioned.

Emirati nostalgia is not for a happier place, but for a smaller place, the *freej*, with the implied safety and comfort of that. In several classes I taught at Zayed University, one of the assignments was for the students to build a video around an oral history, asking someone over 50-years old to tell them a story from the past. In most of the videos, there is inevitably a time when the interviewee waxes nostalgic for the past. The nostalgia is often phrased in a variation of this: “Those were good days. Everyone knew everyone. Now you don’t know anyone.”¹¹⁵

The interviewees’ waxing nostalgic is about the loss of recent past, not the British-inspired heritage loss. But locality—knowing your neighbors, and only them—is something the government had to lose for nation building, as we will see, and to move into a modern economy that would employ Emiratis, rather than expats, which is called Emiratization.

¹¹⁵ I have a personal archive of UAE films I have collected, and this includes 20 of those videos.

Emiratization

Emiratization is a word that has been used since the early days of the nation, but has become a bit of an obsession since 2008, when Abu Dhabi began to announce new non-oil-based economies, like tourism and film. Emiratization is, most importantly, where building national identity and a national workforce come together:

Emiratization is an affirmative action policy of the United Arab Emirates government that gives preferential hiring status to Emiratis over expatriates in order to preserve national identity, economic sustainability, and political stability.

Although the policy has been practiced for a decade, the unemployment problem for Emiratis persists in both the private and public sectors. (Moadress, Ansari, Lockwood, 2013:1)

The employment problems exist because of the rentier system, with young Emiratis all waiting for high paying, comfortable government jobs, not lower paying private sector jobs, in which there is also more pressure to perform. The UAE has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world because expats are only allowed to stay in the country if employed. As such, according to a 2019 Labor Force Survey by Dubai Statistics Centre, Dubai has an overall unemployment rate of 0.5% but Emirati employment is 4% (The National, 2019). However, when looking at the whole UAE, the numbers are more staggering. Even the government-operated *National* newspaper admits that statistics for overall Emirati unemployment are hard to come by, and in 2017 it reported that the rate was 13% in 2011 (*The National*, 2017).

I mention the very complicated economic issue of Emiratization here briefly to note its role in the loss of the *freej*, which in moving the population around replaced locality with national identity, although, as economist Koji Horinuki, notes not always smoothly:

First, it can be said that the Emiratization process is a bargaining process between the government, the business community, and national workers...In this situation, the federal government must reconcile all the interested parties, but the government itself is one of the parties and each of the parties has internal conflicts, as well...In addition, the social structure of the UAE is rigid and is a fundamental issue in Emiratization (Horinuki, 2011:57)

That rigid social structure has now been disrupted for example through delays in marriage, child birth and changing family habitation as people have adopted the contemporary free market lifestyle of having to make money first and having your house furnished and ready before marriage and children, rather than the tribe/*freej* taking care of everyone. Disrupting the tribe and the *freej* has also had to happen to make possible the mobility Emiratization requires. In order to employ its nationals, Emiratization has meant moving people out of the *freej*, particularly those being employed in the military and police, which relies heavily on the less wealthy citizens of the northern Emirates and Fujairah. The rentier system has come into play here, too. The migration of Emiratis to modern, planned spaces has been funded by the government, which gives land or housing to citizens, a generosity at the heart of the political system, and a system that is at the foundation of the new heritage creations—inadvertently producing postmodern nostalgia for the old neighborhood. Consider the story of Hanan, 36, a Sudanese woman born in Fujairah but now living Abu Dhabi, as she recalls her childhood.

Emirati fathers mainly worked in Sharjah, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi. So, they were away for the whole week and they came back on the weekends. These same fathers are still working in Abu Dhabi, not so many have their families in Abu Dhabi with them. They still go back, hence the traffic every weekend with the Land Cruisers and stuff rushing back to Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah and all the other small Emirates. You know the father has been absent for most of the week. Very few fathers have their families here in Abu Dhabi... I also think they depend on their extended family back in the emirate that they are from, to care for the kids. (Interview, 2019)

What Hanan remembered has, in fact, changed: Instead of fathers working far from home with people at home filling in for him during his absence, home is being moved, which has disrupted “the rigid social structure” more than anything. Across the UAE, one sees new neighborhoods, i.e. housing developments, such as Mohamed bin Zayed City, built for Emiratis, all with new homes. You could call these modern *freejs* but they are missing a key element: The neighbors do not know each other. People have moved into what could be called non-places, new spaces with bigger and better houses that are nonetheless cold and segregated, rendering the present confusing and the past something cozier. While similar suburbanization happens around the world today, it is not planned through the machinations of federal relocation programs.

With every house looking like the house next door, everyone is just like their neighbors, but today Emiratis don't know their neighbors. Unlike the *freej*, they are not intimately connected to them through business, family and tribe, and have minimal shared history beyond being Emirati nationals. This new model is not so different from the old tribal model of the leaders deciding how best to care for their people. But tribal rule has

been replaced by national rule, even at the community level. Instead of working for the tribe, Emiratis today work as an employ of a company or government office with strangers with whom they lack a blood connection.

The rentier economy actually created the first step towards Emirati national identity. In his work on suburbanization in Ras Al Khaimah, historian Matthew MacLean notes that this has shifted the identity from tribal or specific emirate or *freej* to a national identity:

UAE nationals encounter each other in neighborhoods, workplaces, and other public and semi-public spaces that could for the first time be imagined as national....modern infrastructure intensified the speed and scale of these encounters. New infrastructure also made possible circulations of ideas and forms associated with being Emirati. Material infrastructures delineated the boundaries of a space within which a politically, economically, and culturally homogenous national identity could be imagined. In other words, a national space is that in which “the national” emerges as category invoked to assert rights to space and a sense of belonging and social cohesion, even if disparate actors do not agree on what constitutes or bounds the “nation”. (MacLean, 2017:157)

MacLean continues with “suburbanization was a precondition for the development of heritage.” But he attributes this movement of people out of their *freej* into new, bigger homes outside the town centers to suburbs, provided by the government under the rentier system, as key to the development of not just a national heritage but local nostalgia. He says that on the one hand, the suburbs symbolize modernity, but on the other hand, they symbolize loss, noting:

Another narrative about suburbanization, just as prominent and more critical to the study of heritage, is that of deep nostalgia. In popular memory as documented in Awwal Menzil¹¹⁶, the *freej* was the spatial embodiment of purity, cultural authenticity, neighborliness, and virtue. The *freej* is almost invariably described as a tight-knit collection of families, whose residents helped raise each other's children, fed each other, and worked together as the fingers of one hand. In memories of childhood, the sakeek (narrow alleyways) of the *freej* were spaces in which children had free rein, but they were not allowed to go beyond the boundaries of the *freej*. (MacLean, 2017:157)

Today, nearly everyone lives beyond the borders of the *freej*, but the remembered coziness of the *freej* lives online and on TV. The *freej* has become the symbol of the more recent past, the nostalgic past and is at the heart of the nostalgia production in TV documentaries and comedies, with the most popular series in the UAE even simply called *Freej*. *Freej*, an animated series, began as a young man's independent production before very wisely being given a platform on government TV in response to nostalgia proliferating online. This online nostalgia, as we will see shortly, is a result of visual media space no longer fully controlled by the government, despite all that the UAE has done to keep control of media through its media zones.

The Fragmented Media Landscape

Not only does the UAE want to equal the USA and the big economies of Asia, it wants to supersede them in technology firsts as much as in hyper-reality firsts, as in funding the first manned flight in space or pioneering electric car. It has also targeted being one of

¹¹⁶ This is a collection of oral histories in RAK, which translated mean "First Houses," and MacLean uses in developing his arguments.

the world's fastest early adapters to online use, including media consumption, which has left traditional TV playing catch up to the online world and to a lesser degree, independent filmmaking.

Social media has become an example of using the latest technology to celebrate the past not only across multiple cultures but also multiple nationalities living in the country, a place to nurture a longing for what can't be reclaimed, indeed how Shohat and Stam describe media as "a laboratory for the safe articulation of identity." (1996:166)

Government-funded television is also trying to fill the nostalgia gap expressed on social media and independent filmmaking, responding one step behind social media to a fragmented media landscape and a fragmented cultural landscape. By a fragmented landscape, I mean that today the UAE official channels are mainly for Emiratis, but beyond its confines there are many YouTube and satellite TV channels that cater to specific other national and socioeconomic groups within the country, such as several Indian language channels, particularly for Keralites. Additionally, grassroots online shows by and for what the Indian government calls NRIs (non-resident Indians), and vlogs from all nationalities, have sprung up online in which the producers question everything in their UAE lives from religion to food, as they too try to find a place in modernity.¹¹⁷

With so many options for storytelling, online productions have become a neighborhood with a seemingly endless buffet. Meanwhile, off screen, the neighborhood has become the heart of the heritage struggle, driven by nostalgia.

¹¹⁷ Leading Malayalam channels (language of Kerala, the Indian state with the largest population in the UAE) include Asianet, Kairali, Amritha TV, Jeevan, India Vision and Jai Hind TV operate from the UAE and create special programs for Keralites in the Gulf. NTV, launched in 2009, is a 24-hour channel produced for Keralites in the Gulf. There are also several channels broadcasting Urdu and Hindi languages, and several YouTube channels where NRI create skits/videos that go viral within the community, as an example this Malayalam video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYehFmAx_fk&feature=emb_logo

The Media Free Zones: Co-Existence of Censorship and Freedom

Al Rumaithi and others who came of age before social media would have grown up watching the national narrative through the limited window of state-run television. But modernity has also meant more layers of media over time, not just in the UAE but around the world. New media have also helped express the national narrative, increasingly allowing it to fall into the hands of residents. A brief overview of media development in the UAE will help further explain the festering of trauma, nostalgia and divisions among the many residents who look at the UAE as home.

Until 1996, each emirate had a government-run Arabic language channel, as well as the Dubai's English-language channel. These were the primary news and entertainment sources, although channels could be picked up from nearby countries, most importantly Kuwait, which was (and still is) the largest producer of TV serials in the Gulf. The majority of the content on the UAE channels was licensed US action adventure series (censored for kisses or any other sexual behavior), local news programs and talk shows. This was a very easy media world to control, something any government dealing with contemporary media could understandably be nostalgic for.

But film and visual media in the Gulf shifted substantially with the launch of Nilesat in 1996, which allowed for the creation of satellite channels accessible worldwide. This completely changed what residents had access to, particularly after the launch of Al Jazeera and other pan-Arab news channels and programming. Now there wasn't one source for news—or stories.

With Nilesat's arrival the UAE could no longer control what its citizens were watching.¹¹⁸ But the UAE found a business savvy solution to this: With the birth of its media free zones, the UAE shifted into a place for the headquarters of many of these new channels and a site of content production, giving it the status today as the major media center in the Middle East. Hosting over 700 television channels, Nilesat is based in Egypt, but many of the programs on its channels are produced in the UAE, specifically in one of the country's five media free zones and particularly in Dubai's Media City (DMC). DMC was founded in 2001 as the first media free zone in the world, located in the city with the most free zones in the world. The country's second biggest media free zone is Abu Dhabi's TwoFour54, which opened in 2008. The media zones provide the required facilities and infrastructure for filming, and have essentially replaced Cairo and London as the major centers for Arab media production. The UAE's media zones, as described by Arab TV scholar Joe Khalil, allow for a particular freedom: Based in media cities, media institutions are enabled to create a web of funding, development, production and distribution vectors that escapes the control of any one particular state. (Khalil, 2013)

This gives the illusion of the UAE being a freethinking media creator, but as Khalil writes, a media free zone is only free within certain confines. For example, DMC has shut down publications and TV channels that its tribunal claims cross cultural lines or interfere with the affairs of another country:

In many ways, DMC has successfully managed to provide an environment where media corporations can enjoy competitive production costs; however, it has yet to

¹¹⁸ Whole networks can be blocked, as are Al Mayadeen (Lebanon) and Al Jazeera (Qatar) in the UAE, but not individual programs on the networks.

provide an adequate framework for exercising unmitigated freedom of expression.

(Khalil, 2013: 203)

The UAE has almost guaranteed itself a problem-free, clean identity through the media zones, maintaining the appearance of supporting free media— if one does not look too closely. The UAE is a media free zone but the news organizations know where they are based. This is not a freedom of speech zone, the dogma of the Western media, but something they overlook in the UAE. While many of the companies based in Dubai are primarily news producers or producers of pan Arab TV reality shows, like *Arab Idol* (MBC), the BBC, Thomson Reuters, and MBC are some of the Western companies based in the DMC. Additionally, CNN has headquartered its Middle East reporting out of Abu Dhabi's TwoFour54 since 2009, unveiling a new state-of-the-art studio in 2016, a far cry from when CNN relied on young stringers in the Gulf. None of these TV channels visualize negative news about the UAE, understanding and not wanting to lose the limits of the generosity of their host, understanding its *neoglobal* limitations. On the contrary, they run a fair amount of positive stories/tourism stories about UAE. For example, in November 2019, Dubai was one of three cities chosen by the BBC for its series *Leading Cities*, with the other two being London (its worldwide headquarters) and Tokyo. In the 30-minute Dubai episode, "Mark Lobel explores some of the extraordinary innovations that have carved a city out of the desert," continuing the Orientalist tale of hyper modernism discussed in Chapter One. Another BBC special episode is dedicated to "Taste of Dubai," a look at the high-end cuisine of the city (BBC website) ¹¹⁹ CNN's Becky Anderson, a tough-talking reporter,

turned into a gushing fan girl during live broadcasts from Abu Dhabi's Formula 1 in 2019, in which she interviewed Emirati spokespeople about the great success of the Special Olympics six months earlier. Anderson normally anchors the news from CNN's new Abu Dhabi studio, paid for by its host country.

The UAE through the free zones can keep control over local production but also can take a stand on regional and international programming, subtly taking control of the TV landscape, with producers understanding the limits of the "free" part of the zone. This has resulted in banality in TV series production in the time frame of 2008 to 2018, a period in which international TV shows elsewhere were experiencing what was dubbed a second Golden Age of TV.¹²⁰ In the Middle East, as more channel options have become available, the quality of programming has gone down.¹²¹ However, there was a time when the staple of Gulf TV, the *musalsal*, offered a "Golden Age" that played out the challenges of modernity and the loss of the *freej*.

Whatever Happened to Good TV?

The *musalsal* is at the mainstay of TV production in the Middle East. *Musalsal* means "series" in Arabic and these productions are limited-run dramas, some comedic, some melodramatic. Most have 28 to 30 episodes because the biggest launch season for the *musalsals* is Ramadan, in which a one-hour or 30-minute episode is released each day of the month, with most today also being available online.

¹²⁰ For more on the second Golden Age of TV, see *Slate* (December 2015)

¹²¹ This definition of downward spiral in programming is based on my analysis of the series (story/writing, camera work, directing acting, themes), as well as living in the reality of when these shows were "must see TV" up until the early 2000s and beyond to a present time when only one or two a year hold the public's interest. This is across the Arab world, but particularly in the Gulf.

Kuwait researcher Faisal Al Qahtani (2013) dubbed the edgy Kuwait comedy *musalsals* of the 1970s and 1980s as “Kuwait’s Golden Age of Television,” and in reality, the Gulf’s.¹²² Before Nile Sat and the free zones, when Kuwait was still considered the most advanced Gulf country, as oil was discovered there 20 years earlier than in the UAE, it was the source of the most *musalsals* in the region. These classic Kuwait satires were set in the present, and negotiated identity in a changing society. They remain today the most beloved TV in the Gulf, part of young Emiratis’ heritage as they are recycled on YouTube¹²³. When I ask young Emiratis (under the age of 30-years old) which *musalsals* they like, they’ve never mentioned any Emirati series, preferring US and Korean shows. But when I have asked them about the old Kuwait series, most smile and talk about how much they love them and enjoy watching them, especially with their grandmothers and mothers, many of whom would be old enough to have seen the original runs.¹²⁴

Not surprisingly, one of the first series was called *Mahkamat Al Freej* (The *Neighborhood Court*, 1967), in which the local judge, before the law became institutionalized, had to decide on matters in *freej* that were changing because of modernity, like women wanting to go to work (Al Qahtani, 2013). The Kuwaiti *musalsals* were indeed about managing rapid modernity, which everyone who has lived in the UAE can understand, including Arabic-speaking expats. During my 2019 interview with a group of Levant women who have lived in the UAE since the mid- 1970s, they all shouted out the names of

¹²² In Kuwait discourse, the 1970s are often referred as its Golden Age, when it was at the peak of success in theatre and the arts, its economy booming and education reaching new heights, before internal troubles, slower oil revenues and the Iraq Iran War would end that. Qahtani (2013) discusses this in detail.

¹²³ The series are not posted by Kuwait TV, but rather by YouTubers with access to copies of the series from home recordings, so the production quality online is not strong.

¹²⁴ For two semesters, I asked students in my media history to do an analysis and report on what they consider the best Gulf *musalsal*. With rare exception, they reported on one of these Kuwaiti satires.

the old Kuwait series when I asked them if they had ever watched a Gulf series.¹²⁵ But they had no interest in any contemporary Emirati series. The series that got the most shout outs was *Khalti Gamasha* (*My Mother-in-Law Gamasha*, 1983). Like many of the series of this era, it starred Kuwaiti actresses Hayat Al Fahad and Suad Abdulla, and framed the changes happening in society through the story of two women. In the case of *Khalti Gamasha*, the title character is a matriarch who wants her sons continuing to live under her roof even after they get married, i.e. not letting go of the notion of the *freej*. Meanwhile, one of her daughters-in-law is a mad scientist trying to balance a brilliant career and traditional domesticity with her husband. The stories play off the confusion of modernity, with the first episode's most famous scene being of Gamasha and her son going to see a man about buying his horse, but he thinks they are offering a price for his daughter, which he finds insulting to her new university-educated status.¹²⁶ In another episode, Gamasha offers her daughter-in-law's father and sister a chance to move to her new house in a new suburb, but the father doesn't want to go to the new government housing and leave his *freej*.¹²⁷ (Figure 23)

Palestinian writer Tareq Othman penned most of the Kuwaiti series of the Golden Age, so unsurprisingly these series did not shy away from including expats, such as young Western women working in the offices and domestic workers who become part of the plotting and counterplotting in the household as the series forged an identity for the post-oil Gulf.

¹²⁵ Interview conducted June 28, 2019 in Abu Dhabi

¹²⁶ To see this episode (no subtitles): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohSHqtKE_DU

¹²⁷ To see highlights of best of *Khalti Gamasha* series: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYDQDRnxAEw>

The story of modernity is still the same today, but not told in *musalsals*. Today, Kuwait still produces *musalsals*, as do all the Gulf countries, including the UAE. But they have become plodding soap operas, often melodramas based on series produced in other countries. Image Nation has even managed to sanitize UAE TV, launching into TV series with *Justice* (2018), a contemporary serial written by two Los Angeles writers but set in the UAE judicial system, in which a young Emirati lawyer and her father fight for justice for all, including maids being abused by their families back home and other Arab women facing tough divorces. Here Emiratis serve as the noble saviors living in perfect houses with perfect families, in a rather lifeless identity, with the most egregious injustice happening to the Emiratis being a son getting ripped off trying to book a popular Middle Eastern singer.¹²⁸

But government TV has also responded to the nostalgia building online. Rather than exploring the disruptions of change, UAE TV instead has become a way for the government to negate the anxiety of modernity. This comes across in the heritage *musalsals* UAE channels have produced: The shows are generally about the charming past, not in conflict with modernity. Rather they serve to create a uniting UAE sanitized heritage. They are either set in pre-oil nomadic world, including one based on the poetry of Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid, or in the post-oil urbanization of the 1960s. Two of these latter series are broad comedies about the characters in a small *freej* pristinely recreated on a sound stage: *A Grain of Sand* (2014) and *Fat Fout* (2018), described by Sama Dubai, the channel on which it aired as:

¹²⁸ Taking American series or using American writers to create TV series has begun in earnest across the Middle East since the arrival of Netflix and similar platforms looking for Arabic language that fits a US model. It is not just in the UAE: The Netflix series *Jinn* (2019), set in Jordan, was the first Arabic Netflix series.

The lives of the "Bu Hilal" family and "Atij" family in the mid-1960s in an old Emirati neighborhood all told through a collection of comic stories from our heritage, related to customs and traditions. The new series abounds with nostalgia for simple life.¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ ¹³¹

As an example, Episode 16 of *Fat Fout* is about a donkey in the *freej* that several men want to claim as their own, and so the donkey gets trotted off by one person after another.

Meanwhile, the young women gather a to watch a film at the *majlis* of the family that has a TV, but when the women don't promptly play the TV for their guest, she leaves them, saying they've probably missed the film. (Figure 24) In *Grain of Sand*, the most watched episode online, Episode 13, is also part of a story arc involving the trading of a donkey, goat and cow in the *freej*. This series has been more popular online as there is more humor about the changes of the future, like trying to understand the new British bosses at the new jobs, learning to count in English, the establishment of local police force. (Figure 25) But there is no trauma to modernity in these series, as expressed by people online. The stories in these series are flat, the characters portrayed in broad strokes. But in keeping up with social media, they give a definition of heritage that is not based on the British tropes.

The main character in these series is in fact the *freej*, with the sets being the most interesting part of the show. Yet the sets are also sterile, similar to the heritage villages that exist as tourist attractions in most of the Emirates—clean, neat, organized. Life wasn't simple then either, except in these TV series in which no one seems to be worn down by the

¹²⁹ Link to *Fat Fout*, Episode 16 on YouTube, which includes description in Arabic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efUFPLhO-Cc>

¹³⁰ Link to *Grain of Sand*, Episode 10: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTZLI4g40qo&pbjreload=10>

¹³¹ Oil would have already been discovered in the 1960s, but its wealth had not yet been shared with the population with the full generosity of the rentier system that would come with nationhood.

hard work of just surviving the landscape, which would have been the reality then. And the characters are all living in clean houses with clean, pressed *kandouras*, with only a handful of characters not wearing it the way that has come to be called national dress. In fact, female clothing is also used a marker of the past, as part of the older generation within the series: For example, the older women in these shows wear the *burqa*, the gold face mask, in public, but the younger women in the series don't, associating the burqa with an older generation in the *freej*. But in the 1960s, women of all ages would have worn the *burqa*, just like today they wear the *abaya* (which was not common before nationhood, as discussed in previous chapters). In this way, the films are similar to the heritage film made during the economic downturn of the 1980s in the UK as Higson describes them:

...At the level of the lovingly created mise-en-scene of the national past, these films seemed to invite a conservative nostalgic gaze which overwhelmed the narrative critique, a loving, desiring gaze that celebrated the vision of the past on offer.

(Higson, 2014:122)

The UAE series indeed offer no critique. They are reminiscent of comedic rags-to-riches stories produced elsewhere, most notably the 1960s US sitcom, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), in which a "redneck" family discovers oil and then moves to a mansion in Los Angeles, bringing their old, backwards ways with them. The UAE series, although more recently made, are also set in the 1960s. However, unlike *The Beverly Hillbillies*, in the case of the UAE, the urbanized city itself was just being built in the 1960s, and these hillbillies weren't moving themselves to an existing big city. The city was being built around them and their *freejs*. The Emiratis in these series are leaving behind their backwards ways, not bringing their old ways with them to the new urbanization that is developing around them.

The message is that the new wealth is the superior option, but it's nostalgically funny to look at how people got there, how cute everyone was when they were joining the rest of the civilized world. As MacLean puts it:

The nostalgia discourse is politically safe and crosses no red lines. It criticizes the faults of contemporary Emirati society while not assigning blame to individuals or government entities. Precisely because it affirms an authentic Emirati cultural identity, local rootedness, and separation from the foreign majority, the nostalgia discourse is an example of nationalism. (MacLean, 2018:167)

This is clearly true of these nostalgic series, in which the expat is the sign of change but doesn't interfere in the Emirati story, unlike in the old Kuwaiti series. Nor do they include any of the biting satire. They sanitize this "nostalgisized" era, which in fact included, as mentioned in Chapter One, conflicts with Arab nationalism and worker rights, fueled by educators coming from other parts of the Arab world.

In these mundane UAE TV series, the trauma around modernity is rendered as fodder for comedy, with broad humor about the *freej*. But nostalgia also dominates TV in the seemingly childlike innocence of animation in the UAE's most successful TV genre. As scholar Omar Ado Sayfo writes on animation in the Arab world, "Animated sitcoms have a greater relative freedom compared to their live counterparts owing to their assumed innocence and fictiveness." (Sayfo, 2015:84)

Animation Barriers

The *freej* is a funny, innocent place in *A Grain of Sand* and *Fat Fout*. Animation is also a funny, innocent form of media, the stuff we think of as made for children. But in the UAE, the *freej* and animation combined have led to rather brilliant satire, animated satire

steeped in nostalgia that began at the grassroots before being co-opted by government TV as a means of driving the nostalgia narrative. In these series, nationalism actually becomes stronger by acknowledging the expat, and nostalgia becomes a way of rewriting identity and heritage by seemingly reviving the *freej*.

UAE animated series are a form of visual storytelling that lament the loss of heritage, but without defining the past as much as manifesting the consequences of modernity. The two series that have done so are *Freej* and *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon*. *Shaabiyat* also means neighborhood, but implies a slightly more urban, rundown neighborhood. *Freej* and *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon* both launched in 2006 on the youth-oriented TV channel Sama Dubai, just as the heritage boom was getting into high gear. They also speak to the UAE's *post cinema* world as they do not follow the time limits of traditional TV, both being 15- to 20-minute episodes, and *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon*, created by Dubai illustrator Mohammed Haider, actually started as 20-second vignettes downloadable to mobile phones in 2003, long before that delivery mechanism was common elsewhere in the world.

Freej is the hugely successful series to which the government has given wings. Directed by Emirati Mohammed Saeed Harib, it has had five seasons, all during the month of Ramadan. The series focuses on four loveable, unrestrained older Emirati women, wearing the *burqa* who gather together in the *freej* to complain about modernity as they cope with the changes to their world they do not understand—from food, to business, to the behavior of their children to the Dubai skyscrapers surrounding and making nearly invisible their *freej*, as seen in the opening credits. The women represent the sacred but irreverent grandmother world that, as we will see in Chapter Four, has become the staple of heritage and nostalgia. The women are defined as being part of the living past through the burqa,

which few women under 60-years old would wear today. But these grandmothers aren't so simple. They are quite complex reflections of UAE heritage and identity, hiding under both the purity (tradition) represented by these grandmothers and childlikeness of the animation. They speak of the loss and confusion for all the Emiratis, who have been quieted by the benefits of the rentier state.

In Chapter Four, we will discuss the concept of unified Emirati Arabic, but *Freej* does not indulge in that. In every episode, the women gather in the majlis of Um Said, the main grandmother. Each grandmother represents a different definition of Emirati, rather than the unified heritage discourse. The grandmothers are as follows:

- Um Said, the lead grandmother, the one who usually interferes to solve the problem, speaks with a Bedouin accent and loves to recite Nabati poetry.
- Um Allawi, whose Arabic has a Farsi accent, indicating her Ajami background, not to mention “Allawi” is not an Arabic name. She is interested in money and stocks, standing in for the Ajami community, who are known to be traders and businessmen.¹³²
- Um Khamis, whose darker skin implies an African background, which likely also means a slave background. She dabbles in “Zar,” in which magic potions and rituals help cure illnesses and take away *djinn* (evil spirits) from the body. This also has its origins in East Africa, where most of the slaves came from. Today, it is not

¹³² In Arabic culture, women and men are often called by the name of their oldest son: a woman called “Um Allawi” would mean that her son’s name is Allawi, a name which has a Shiite/Persian connotation. Um Saeed’s name then would be the mother of Saeed, a very common Arabic name, although also used by Iranians.

encouraged in the UAE, but still practiced particularly amongst Emiratis of Omani origin, regardless of skin color. ¹³³

- Um Saloom, like Um Saeed, has an Arab Bedouin accent but doesn't show Bedouin behaviors such as reciting poetry, implying she is of an Arab background that was less nomadic, perhaps from Yemen or Oman. Um Saloom's trademark is that she is forgetful.

Forgetfulness is at the heart of the series, with the grandmothers not lamenting their own forgetfulness, but those of younger people who don't remember how things were in the past, who have lost vision of their heritage. The series doesn't shy away from coming into conflict with the expats and even highlights the hierarchy within the expat communities, in which Westerners are held in higher regard than non-Emirati Arabs and South Asians. In one episode (Season 4, Episode 9), the grandmothers decide to go to a fancy French restaurant, in which they are offended by the prices, the small proportions, the alcohol being served, and particularly the waiter that keeps talking to them in French. When the waiter hears them complaining that he can't even speak English, let alone he can't even speak their own language, the waiter happily switches to Arabic. It turns out he is Lebanese, hired to give the place a French authenticity. The loss of heritage comes through when the grandmothers grill him about his family, to see if anyone is French and demand to know why he thought it was ok to speak to them in French when he's not French, but Arab like them. The grannies want to eat Emirati food, defined as Levant origin foods like tabouli and

¹³³ In 2010, I had a student that fainted in class. When we revived her, she said that she must have been affected by some of Zar that had been practiced in the house the night before to make her brother well, as he was acting possessed. How she described her brother's situation to me sounded like the onset of schizophrenia, but mental illnesses are still barely recognized or acknowledged in the UAE, and certainly not in 2010. This student is not of African descent, but is of Omani origin, where this practice is still common. For more on mental illness in the Gulf, see Justin Thomas (2013).

hummus, and the Parsi origin biryani. As none of these things are on the menu, they decide to go into the kitchen and make biryani for themselves. The waiter stops them, telling them they can't go in the kitchen, to which Um Saloom tells him, "Serving alcohol is ok, but going into the kitchen isn't?" and pushes him aside. In the kitchen, all the men cooking the French food are Indian workers. None of the characters remark on this, because it is such a given in the UAE, but the episode visualizes it very cleverly..¹³⁴ (Figure 26)

For all the upheaval the show portrays and for showing that Emiratis are not ethnically homogenous, it is not as subversive a show as the biting humor might sometimes indicate. In reality, it covers up deep divides. For example, in 2017 some students and I were interviewed a middle-aged Emirati woman living on Delma Island, a part of Abu Dhabi that was once a vital center of the pearl trade. The island has only a limited fishing economy today so it mostly depopulated. The woman we interviewed said that she didn't mind that "certain people" had left. "Mostly the Iranians are gone, like the Al-Hosani family. Good riddance." The Al-Hosani family are Ajamis, and one of the students doing the interviews was an 18-year old Al Hosani from Sharjah. "But Auntie, I'm an Al Hosani, and I'm Emirati," the girl said, smiling, using her generation's Emirati Arabic. The middle-aged woman quickly recovered, saying, "Yes, of course you are. I didn't mean all the Al Hosani." (Interview, 2018)

But in *Freej*, Um Allawi's Ajami background is never an issue, which in reality it would have been, as the above-mentioned interview indicates. These women in all likelihood would not have been living in the same *freej* and certainly not been hanging out together.

¹³⁴ To see *Freej*, Season 4, Episode 9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABFVZHx4SeQ>

In fact, the series further strengthens Emirati collective identity and the role of the state in trying to preserve it. In Season 3, Episode 10, the grandmothers are livid when another woman in the *freej* rents out her house to a single man from an unnamed Asian country who doesn't have any respect for them. When they cannot convince the woman that she is making a mistake, Um Saeed calls in the police, who explain to the woman that it is illegal to rent a house to a single man. She should rent to a family. But most importantly, the policeman tells the grandmothers that they shouldn't be renting to people who aren't the same "kind of people" as the rest of the *freej*, in other words not Emiratis. He tells Um Saeed that it is the job of the police/government to protect the *freej*—all the *freejs*— and the culture of it.¹³⁵

The government has moved most people out of the *freej* to newer, nicer neighborhoods, but the idea that it is preserving the *freej*, at least in a show steeped in nostalgia, implies that the government is the authority in keeping Emirateness intact, not individual *freejs*. This is in fact what the new housing developments do—the relocations force Emiratis of different backgrounds to become homogenized, at least on the surface.¹³⁶

Notably, the *majlis* in which the women gather is that of Um Saeed, placing the Arab Bedouin at the heart of Emirati identity, just as the *majlis* itself is at the heart of Emirati identity. The show plays with time and space, creating a past in which the *freej* was multiethnic. In reality, different ethnic groups didn't live in the same *freej*, but on TV they do, getting along with each other and each having a vital purpose to the story and to

¹³⁵ To see Freej, Season 3, Episode 10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ct-YUvON2o>

¹³⁶ It is important to note that while the government provides housing for all Emiratis, wealthier Emiratis can take out loans or pay for their own piece of land and build their own houses, leading to mansions in certain areas where wealthy Emirati families, those close to the ruling families, tend to congregate, like the Bateen neighborhood in Abu Dhabi and Jumeriah in Dubai.

preserving Emirati heritage and identity from the outside forces of modernity, including the expat trying to move into their *freej*.

While *Freej* is a highly entertaining series for anyone who has lived in the UAE, it is also a government approved portrait of UAE nostalgia—there is no nostalgia for prior political systems, like tribes, and the nostalgia it longs for can still be found within the walls of modern homes, in memories and stories, in that haunting trace of the past, even if the *freej* itself is gone. This is actually a safe show for the government. Locality messes with the national agenda of homogeneity, but the government can still offer a TV series about it: There is no fear of anyone trying to recreate the *freej*—the physical space isn't there anymore, as witnessed with Al Rumaithi's trip around Saadiyat Island.

Nostalgia for the *freej* is a safe space. But the actual loss of *freej* has been beneficial to the government, as the *freej* breeds conversation and that could breed questions, something to be avoided since the 2008 financial crisis and Arab Spring.

As such, it is not surprising that *Freej* received its initial funding of AED 3 million (approximately \$817,000) in 2005 from the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leaders, and has continued to have the approval of the government to tap into the national anxiety about rapid change. The grandmothers now have their own merchandise line and have been the stars of a safety video for Fly Dubai and appear at local theme parks and heritage festivals, so even they have joined the hyper-reality.

The high quality of the animation, although done in India, also works with the UAE's successful efforts to be the media capital of the Middle East. Unlike other UAE series, DVD sets of *Freej* come with English subtitles. It also makes Emiratis look like a united group for expat viewers. For non-Emiratis, even those fluent in Arabic, the

differences in accents between the four grannies is not clear, thus making the Emiratis a unified whole to even most non-Emirati Arabic speakers.¹³⁷ However, more importantly, given the popularity of the show, one can conclude that Emirati viewers are willing to accept that this sanitization of relationships between different ethnic groups in the country, despite, this not being the reality on the ground. There is a belief in a united multicultural UAE identity amongst Emiratis, specifically when confronted with the expat.

Shaabiyat Al Cartoon (Cartoon of the Neighborhood), meanwhile, includes a large ensemble of expats and locals, interacting as they try to navigate modern Dubai, with the expat and the Emirati being in it together, despite implied class differences shown through the housing primarily. Many of the stories revolve around Shambee, a working class Iranian national who has lived in Dubai most of his life. The series pokes fun at the commodification of what is Emirati, including the assumed Bedouin heritage. In one of the episodes, Shambee feels that people turn against him when they hear his Iranian-sounding family name and he therefore decides to change his name to a “proper” Emirati name. However, he can’t convincingly act as a Bedouin and turns out to be a terrible Bedouin poet and gives up. In making it one big multicultural happy country, the series also assumes the old *freejs* and mixed neighborhoods still exist, with Emiratis being part of the neighborhood and mixing with the expats without a sense of hierarchy, which is not reality in the present, as anyone will observe in the country and which I discuss further in the next chapter. But to *Shabiyaat*’s credit, it shows that even long-time expats are just as confused about how to navigate the modern Dubai’s identity or lack of. For example, in another episode Shambee is left out because he doesn’t speak English—even the dog in the episode can speak English

¹³⁷ I would not have known the origins of the grannies, if Emiratis had not told me.

(Season 12, Episode 1) (Figure 27). Many of the episodes are moral lessons dealing with modernity, like the need to manage money. In one episode, kids go around collecting their Eid money from neighbors, expecting very high amounts to be given out and disappointed with the low results. Like this money episode, the episodes mostly evolve into moral lessons on how to deal with Dubai's modern issues and are now sponsored on TV by semi-governmental organizations, like local phone company, DU, another example of government coopting the identity narratives, putting them under its control.¹³⁸

The Social Media Nostalgia Machine: A Place for Expats

Humor, in both the animation and comedy series, reinforces social connections and stress over modernity, and through laughter the audience is able to dismiss it as not such a big deal. As Kant said, "Laughter is an effect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." (Kant, 1951:177).

However, state-supported nostalgia and grassroots nostalgia hit a fork in the road because grassroots nostalgia doesn't dismiss the impact of losing locality, the safety of the small neighborhood, as merely comedy and satire. Unlike the Kuwaiti series, in the Emirati TV series, with the exception of *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon*, expats tend the scapegoat, the crack in Emirati perfection, the flawed people, the ones who bring trouble.

But social media is changing how nostalgia is narrated: It provides a space and time for Emiratis and expats to come together in looking at UAE heritage, a heritage many long-time expats feel a part of, rather than the problem.

¹³⁸ To see *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon*, Season 12, Episode 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMETWBIX3a4> Unlike *Freej*, the series does not come with subtitles, and therefore is not accessible to non-Arab speakers

Locals

In the UAE, in conversations between and amongst Emiratis and expats of all backgrounds, the citizens of this country, the Emirati is referred to as a “local,” as in “Is he a local or a foreigner?” In this decade of study, it was used more often than “Emirati.” Even amongst Emiratis, they ask each other in Arabic, “Is he a national (*muwatan*)?” which translates into “citizen” or drop in the English word “local,” even when speaking in Arabic. The description of Emiratis as “local,” rather than citizen, speaks of a nationalism in which the citizen can claim the space by the implied ownership of being from it—and with the implied privileges that it brings. This word “local” is powerful and exclusive and not to be used lightly. For example, there is a very small number of Emirati citizens that are not local, in that they came here as expats, primarily from the Levant and Sudan, but because of their closeness to the rulers in the 1960s and 1970s, they were given citizenship.¹³⁹ Despite their wealth and long time in the country, they are not referred to in conversation as “locals” but as “imgeniseen,” an Arabic word that means essentially “naturalized citizens,” with the implication that they do not have an intrinsic claim to the land, never mind the *freej*. While UAE citizens have come together in the workplace and been pulled out the *freej* into a national identity, they have come further excluded from expats. With a few exceptions, in the new neighborhoods, expats are less likely to be their neighbors, ironically as the expat numbers have increased in modernity.

¹³⁹ Probably the best-known example of this is Palestinian-born Zaki Nusseibeh, currently a Minister of State, who was Sheikh Zayed’s translator for many decades. From conversations I have had with Emiratis and naturalized Emiratis, the passport has made international travel easier for them and given them permanent residency but they are not considered Emirati culturally, nor do they mix with Emiratis any more than any other expat who has lived here for a long time, nor do they reap the benefits of the rentier state. The high profile of Nusseibeh family is a rare exception.

As established earlier, it would be too simple, not to mention incorrect, to say there was a singular one UAE past—a nomadic people roaming the desert. There are many heritages in the UAE, including those of the expats. The expat community is not a monolithic entity. Expats can be divided into different ethnic, geographical and religious groups, not to mention generational groups. By generational groups, I do not just mean different age groups, but also by how long one has been in the country. I have observed that expats tend to form social groups around nationality but also around how long a person has lived here. For example, I tend to have friends that have been here roughly as long as I have, although I might not have met them as soon as I arrived.

Many expats also mourn a UAE past. In July 2019, an American student and a Pakistani student and I went to the Salted Fish Festival in Dibba Hisn, a small fishing town outside of Fujairah. The older Emirati women I interviewed while they showed people how to cook with the dried fish gave the usual answers about the past having been a lovely place and thanking the wise leadership for today's benefits. From my experience interviewing locals over the years, I have come to view this version of nostalgia for the past like a staged, looped reel that provides little information about the heritage of the place. In contrast, As we were heading back to the car, we met Mohamed Basheer, a 21-year old Bangladeshi who has lived in Dibba Hisn with his parents for 12 years and asked him for an interview. Dibba Hisn was left mostly undeveloped until the Arab Spring. In the old part, it still has the old lower-income mixed neighborhood feel of *Shaabiyat Al Cartoon*. But Mohamed could feel it disappearing. "When I used to look out my window, I would see the beach. So much beach, and we would go there for free. But now I see roads." He quickly added that the roads were perfect, clean, organized, and he praised the government. But perfection has

brought the erasure of the local, even for expats who are almost erased from the landscape. In fact, the government banned the hiring of new Bangladeshi workers in 2012, and those residing in the UAE are not allowed to change jobs, ostensibly because of a peak in Bangladeshi worker crimes. As of this writing, the ban is expected to be lifted soon. Without blaming the government, Mohamed lamented the situation, saying “It’s not fair that one or two spoil it for the rest of the group.” (Interview, 2019)¹⁴⁰

Changing the mix of expats also helps keep the Emirati identity dominant. Time and politics have placed and displaced and replaced expat groups, making some in and out fashion with the government. This became particularly apparent with the start of the Arab Spring, especially when things heated up in Bahrain. While the protests in Bahrain were framed as a Shiite rebellion against the Sunni rule, an issue the UAE does not have as it is a mainly Sunni nation, the Bahraini revolt was in reality an economic issue. The relatively poorer Shiites were demanding the government share its wealth. Bahrain’s situation underscored the UAE’s relatively poorer northern emirates in infrastructure investment there, despite the objections mentioned earlier.

The Arab Spring did bring change to the UAE’s expat mix, most clearly seen in Middle Eastern restaurants. In the UAE, the majority of the casual restaurants tend to be Indian or Lebanese. In 2008, if you were stop for a shawarma, a sweating Lebanese or Syrian man in a stained white apron would carve up the meat for you. But by 2012, this was

¹⁴⁰ For more on the Bangladeshi worker ban, see “UAE ban on Bangladeshi workers to be lifted,” *The National*, May 18, 2017.

a rare sight. The owner of the Lebanese Mill, a Lebanese restaurant that has been in Abu Dhabi since the 1980s, said one day in 2013 when I asked where all the old staff had gone, “I can’t bring them anymore, and many of them had families that have been depending on the money they send home for years.” (Conversation, 2013). The Levant and Egyptian men had been replaced by Filipinos primarily, dressed in smart uniforms. The majority of the Levant restaurant workforce were Egyptians and Levant Shiites, but in the wake of the Muslim Brotherhood take over in Egypt and civil war in Syria and consequent rising tensions with Iran’s support of the Syrian government (and the Houthis in Yemen), the government increased visa restrictions on them by 2011. Indeed, one way to avoid expat influence is to limit the number of any one nationality, particularly Muslim and Arab expats, who might bring with them Islamic nation and pan-Arab nationalism values with them. Thus, expats are also struggling with the consequences of rapid modernity combined with geopolitics.

Since the Arab Spring, this has become more evident. For example, most Egyptians in the UAE stood with their fellow citizens cheering the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak, an ally of the UAE. At that point, the UAE government banned the hiring of any Egyptians. When General Sisi, a strong UAE ally, became president after the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown, Egyptians began to be rehired. These are stories that go unreported by media.

These changes are visible in other sectors as well. For example, transportation -- reflected in who drives taxis in the UAE. The stereotype of the Indian taxi driver -- which would have been largely true up until 2011 -- as of this writing, is fading. Taxi drivers are just as likely to be from Uganda or Nepal. In 2015, there was a contingent of taxi drivers

from Albania, Christians coming from predominately Muslim country. I sat next to one of these Albanians on a flight to the UAE from Istanbul in 2016 and he said the recruiting agency in Albania had specifically asked they not be Muslim Albanians. Housemaids also come in and out fashion based on nationality. With financial changes after 2008, the white-collar expat mix has shifted to an increasing number of South Africans and Europeans from the Balkans, for whom the salaries are still hugely competitive, while they have become less so for the formerly dominant British and Americans. But the expats who survive or ride the waves of rapid change in the UAE's modernity, also end up with nostalgia for times gone.

Shared Landscapes Outside the Freej

In 2016, the South Asian-run convenience stores along all city streets, known for their ragtag, random signage and names, were all required have the exact same green, black and yellow sign reading "Baqala," above their entrances, the local word for convenience store, sanitizing the look of the streets.

This homogenization that is deleting identity and character has disturbed expats' heritage, too. They share the urbanized landscape with Emiratis, being just as local in their sense of loss of the recent past through postmodernity. For them, the workplace is often the focus of collective identity, as work was the primary motive for coming to the UAE. In February 2019, British geologist and former British Petroleum consultant David Heard asked NYUAD heritage professor Robert Parthesius and I to take him on a road trip to Taif, the oil camp to which he had first arrived in the UAE in 1956. Heard and his wife, historian Frauke Heard-Bey, both in their mid-80s, have lived in the UAE ever since then, and two of their children still live in the UAE with their families.

We travelled along a plush desert highway which had opened only two years earlier. A couple of signs pointed to exits to Taif, but they led us back onto the highway or a military base. We soon realized the military base is what is now called Taif. Using memory, Heard led us off road, overlooking the Gulf, until we happened upon the remains of a swimming pool. “This is it,” Heard said excitedly. “This was the camp pool.” But as he got out of the car, his elated mood shifted. The camp was literally gone with no sign marking its previous existence. The only sign of any kind was one on a radio tower warning of radioactive emissions. Under the sign among the debris, we made a grand discovery: some whale bones. Heard almost cried at the sight of the bones. The bones were one of the great mysteries of the camp, always there, right in front of the sleeping accommodations, he told us, but no one knew why. We began to wonder how such a rare thing as whale bones in the desert have been so carelessly left behind. Heard looked towards the sea, where only a few contemporary vacation villas are the only things on the beach. (Figure 28)

We used to walk down to the beach where there was a barber, a tailor shop and a canteen. The barber charged half price if you went down to him to get haircut. If you paid an extra five rupees, the barber would come up to give you the haircut. But then I discovered in Bahrain it was only 2.5 rupees for the same service, so I bargained down the barber. (Interview, 2019)

Heard pointed out where the Emirati workers, the first generation to work in the oil industry, used to live during the week, revealing the Emirati separation from the rest of the population since the oil pumping began. According to Heard, the Emiratis would go home during the weekends, he said, while the foreigners would stay and partake of the Friday curry made by the camp’s Goan chef. Sometimes there were movies, Westerns from Hollywood.

For Heard, this was like discovering the ruins of Pompeii. Indeed, it provided me with an insight into life during the early oil days that one could not have read in any book. This is where heritage becomes generational. There have been no recorded heritage stories related to this “post-oil discovery” heritage, as if there is one UAE heritage frozen in undefinable time, as in the tourist videos. But not when nostalgia enters.

Heritage Generations

Common ground in the UAE is nostalgia, although everyone’s nostalgia may be different, depending on their age, nationality and how long they have looked at the UAE as home. Higson’s exploration of postmodern nostalgia sheds light on the role of the internet.

The modern, temporal version of nostalgia is founded on the unattainable distance between the past and the present; the postmodern, a temporal version erases this sense of distance. Central to the modern concept of nostalgia is the experience of wistfulness, a hopeless longing for something lost and irrecoverable. But for post-modern nostalgia, the irrecoverable is now attainable, the difference between past and present flattened out. This is partly because postmodern nostalgia recycles images, objects and styles associated with the relatively recent past, a prime site of such re-cycling being the internet. (Higson, 2014:120)

Keeping in mind the high usage of the internet in the UAE, as discussed in Chapter 1, social media has indeed fostered the appetite for postmodern nostalgia, one that includes both Emiratis and expats. David Heard, for example, takes part in one of several online nostalgia

groups recycling UAE images. These groups are spearheaded by younger generations in the UAE, but participants are of all ages.¹⁴¹

In these member-only online nostalgia groups, the Emirati-expat divide is bridged and heritage and identity beyond the Arab Bedouin one is explore. On Facebook, the private groups “Dubai, The Good Old Days” has nearly 20,000 members and “Abu Dhabi, The Good Old Days” has nearly 8,000 members (Facebook, 2020). On both, Emiratis and expats originating from everywhere post photos from their own albums or those they find elsewhere, predominately from the 1970s and 80s but covering all decades. Reactions to the stories are strong. For example, on the Abu Dhabi page, a photo of Corniche Hospital posted on Nov. 9, 2019 caused 164 comments within a week, from people talking about everything from working there, to having their children there, to enjoying the nearby beach or the fish and chips in the cafeteria. Among the most popular UAE Instagram accounts is “The Zay Initiative,” founded by Reem El Metwalli, the UAE-born Iraqi clothing historian. She posts old photos of Emirati women wearing traditional dresses and burqas and has nearly 33,000 followers as of this writing. On YouTube, one expat group wrote a song/music video called “Life in the Emirates,” recalling good times from 1979 to 1980 across the UAE with photos.¹⁴²

These examples of postmodern nostalgia rely on a more recent past, the post-oil period, a past that is alive as nostalgia for even people in their 20s. It does not rely on the colonial tropes of falcons or the quaint TV *musalsals*. More importantly, these examples do

¹⁴¹ For the purposes of this research, I joined these groups. One must request permission from the group administrator to join and permission is given after one lets the administrator how long she/he lived in the UAE and when. Links to them are in bibliography

¹⁴² Life in the Emirates song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjYGI3coO6g>

not rely on the deletion of locality and separation of the expats. And the imagery quickly creates a social media buzz, as Higson underscores:

In the contemporary period, nostalgia is a heavily mediated experience, manifested in the intense public recycling of narratives, images, sounds, characters and styles associated with the often recent past. This nostalgic recycling has been massively encouraged and enabled by the participatory convergence culture of the twenty-first century and the possibilities of digital media, and especially the internet, as a showcase for a whole plethora of nostalgic activity. (Higson, 2014:121)

Thus, while the UAE government recycles heritage narratives and images with the British provided tropes of the Trucial era, social media is allowing for the recycling of other images that evoke nostalgia. As an example, construction has increasingly eliminated even landmarks from the 1980s, like the picnic shelters along the Salam Street Corniche in Abu Dhabi, which were torn down in 2018. When the picnic shelters came down, people took to social media: On Twitter, a 20-something Emirati called “Mayed” tweeted a photo of one of the shelters before and after it was torn down, with quick responses from followers bemoaning their childhood icons and asking why with broken heart emojis. The “why” was very simple—there was too much traffic and the road needed to be made bigger, but it fueled the anxiety of change in young adults. (Figure 29)

This collective outrage at change did not happen in the past, at least not publicly, partly because there was no social media, and I would argue partly because people hadn’t yet become anxious over the increasing speed of rapid change, and partly because a thing that is mourned as lost heritage, like the Corniche picnic shelters, is mostly mourned by people whose childhood (or time in the UAE) it represents. The turnover of landscape has

been so rapid in the past two decades that what a 20-year old and 35-year old saw at say age 15 is not the same—even the same landmark would have been surrounded by different things or perhaps nothing.

UAE heritage and memory are about space and place, not time. No physical feature has caused more nostalgia than the Volcano. In 2004, to expand the Corniche, Abu Dhabi tore down the 80-foot fountain, built in the 1980s and the most famous landmark in the city. In the pre-heritage boom, there was no public outcry at the time, with the *Khaleej Times*, one of the UAE's English-language newspapers, writing:

Once the entire upgrading and beautification of the corniche is over, visitors will see more spectacular surroundings running from the Sheraton to the Hilton and are sure to forget the Volcano fountain. (*Khaleej Times*, 2004)

But the newspaper was very wrong. The Volcano has now become the centerpiece of nostalgia and identity for those who grew up in the country in the 1970s to 1990s and has fueled the longing for heritage visuals.¹⁴³ As Qatari artist Sophia Al Maria, born in 1983, wrote in a 2011 blog of her childhood in Abu Dhabi:

Back in 1988, the Abu Dhabi Volcano Fountain rose out of the Corniche like Triton's head. It burst out of the boardwalk like a long-submerged alien ship rising from the sea. Its scented water cascaded down through the prongs of a turret-like crown. That cement halo still floats sovereign over all my childhood memories of Abu Dhabi. (Sophia Al Maria blog, 2011)

¹⁴³ The Volcano also has its own fan page on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B8%D8%A8%D9%8A-Volcano-Fountain-Abu-Dhabi-167970019934872/about/?ref=page_internal

Her blog entry includes a photo of her and her sister in front of the Volcano, as well as two frames from a home video of the volcano. (Figure 30)

Traffic flow indeed becomes a vital player in the deconstruction of contemporary heritage. Al Maria further wrote:

...and many other places have been either earmarked or already transformed because they do not match the obsessive-compulsive reordering of street maps, the aesthetic fascism of matching glass towers or 'heritage' style or as in the case of the area where I grew up, fall under the cement flab of a desperately needed parking lot.

(Sophia Al Maria blog, 2011)

Al Maria implies her heritage, the Volcano, is the real heritage, removed in favor of the construction of new sanitized heritage. These are the early rumblings for alternative narratives.

The Volcano came up in several interviews I did, but while people of different nationalities share the same nostalgia for the Volcano, they would not be communicating if not for the shared platform of online nostalgia. For example, Reema, a Syrian born in Abu Dhabi in 1971, noted that her strongest memory of Abu Dhabi landmarks is the Volcano. When I asked her how many Emirati friends she has, she does not know any Emiratis, even though she shares memories of them in the same online space.

How sad to think I have never had an Emirati friend and I have lived here all my life.

When my boys were in high school, they had a different experience. Emiratis mix with others in school today, but we didn't have that. I've tried to reach out to some of the mothers of my sons' Emirati friends, invite them for coffee, but they always have an excuse. I've never met any of their mothers. (Reema, 2019)

Perhaps in the future, going to school together, like Reema's children do, will create stronger bonds between the higher income expat and Emirati families, the English speakers who send their children to private schools.¹⁴⁴ For example, Hanan (mentioned above) says she did have Emirati friends as a kid, but they didn't last.

In primary school, I had a couple of Emirati friends but when we went to secondary school, the Emiratis usually went back to public Emirati schools and we continued with our private education, so that's why then we got cut off in a way. (Interview, 2019)

This runs within expat groups as well. Hanan noted that her family only mixed with other Sudanese families. This came through in most interviews I did. As another example, Ahmed, 43, from Kerala, Indian, who works at a hardware shop across from the fisherman's cooperative in Ajman, put it this way:

If it is about business, then I talk to people when they come in shop. Otherwise, why would I talk to people from other countries? No reason. (Ahmed, 2019)

As this statement implies, work defines social space for expats. But no matter the nationality—none of the long serving expats I interviewed wanted to leave, no matter how much they complained about cost of living or the lack of connection with the citizen population. The group of Levant Arabs mentioned above, who have been in the UAE since the early 1970s, when asked if they could live anywhere in the world, where would they choose, they all responded “here” in unison, despite just a half hour earlier belittling the lack of heritage in UAE.

¹⁴⁴ In the future, this could be a study about whether people will align by nationality or income.

As Hanan put it: “What else do I know? I go to Sudan for vacation every year for a month, but this is where I have had my life.” (Interview, 2019)

Despite having no rights to citizenship, many longstanding expat families still feel a belonging here, the UAE is part of their identity, although living in different *freej* than the Emiratis, without in many cases even knowing a word of Arabic, let alone the word *freej*. These expats are creating heritage narratives that circulate in conversations but also on the more viral social media. When the stories about the UAE grow, they become part of the government narrative: For example, around the same time as the nostalgia cycling began, *The National* newspaper and other government media have begun doing stories on the Volcano, responding to social media heritage and nostalgia narratives, rather than creating it. This indicates the government’s awareness of nostalgia cycling and that it too needs to be incorporated, sanitized and approved, rather than left to run defiantly. Thus, the sanitized TV comedies, like *Fat Fout*, border closer to the hyperreal than heritage: They create simulacra that glosses over what stories could be behind the closed doors of the palm frond houses on the sets.¹⁴⁵

Documentaries technically do not rely on simulacra. It’s a TV genre that can tell “true” stories as it does not, generally speaking, use sets. But on government-sponsored television, the real lacks depth, perhaps because a deep look at the past creates nostalgia that is less manageable in a post cinema world.

TV Documentary and the Freej

Nostalgia, as we have seen, is documented through old photos and videos, making it come closer to documentary. In fact, more than comedy/fiction, UAE television revolves

¹⁴⁵ To see what a search on the National website will produce for the volcano: <https://www.thenational.ae/search?q=The+Volcano+Corniche>

around news, talk shows and documentary series. The traditional definition of documentary was developed by the first feature documentary filmmaker, John Grierson, who defined the genre as “the creative treatment of actuality.” (Grierson, 1933) His ethnographic films, like *Nanook of the North* (1922), came under controversy for staging some of the actions of the people in the film for the sake of compelling, creative visuals. That has not been a problem for the UAE in general. The creative part has been largely missing from TV documentaries, which have been primarily about Sheikh Zayed, the founding of the nation and heritage locations, such as Qasr al Hosn, with the staging not being done by the filmmaker but by the subject of the film. These types of documentaries appear regularly on the UAE TV channels. Not surprisingly, Image Nation’s handful of documentaries from 2008 to 2018 have been mostly public relations vehicles, such as a film about UAE efforts to eradicate polio in Pakistan (*Every Last Child*, 2014) or to help save Oryx in Chad (*Back to the Wild*, 2018). A slight exception is *Lights of Rome* (2016): While not creative, it did at least highlight a piece of relatively unknown history, the first UAE soccer team to make it to the World Cup in 1989—but also serves as a public relation vehicle.

Below the facts, documentaries can subtly create layers of heritage subtly. Nujoom Alghanem is one of the independent filmmakers who has done this in the UAE, working between TV and the film festival circuit. She is the country’s only feature-length documentary filmmaker, and her films are a mix of her background in both poetry and journalism, and she has the largest body of feature films of any Emirati director, most films done since 2008.

Alghanem’s films are about fading traditions, such as fishing, camel raising, beekeeping and herbal medicine. Three of her films actually use heritage festivals as sets in

the structuring of the stories or are where she got the ideas for the films. Her film *Nearby Sky* (*Al Sama Al Qariba*, 2014) has had the most TV play of any of her films. It is about Fatema Al Hameli, a widow who decides to enter her camels in the UAE's annual camel beauty competition, the first woman to do so, much to the amusement and frustration of others. It is also one of the rare UAE films where we know the person's family name, not surprising since the Al Hamelis are an Arab Bedouin tribe with close ties to the ruling families and of the pure Arab tribe narrative. This documentary has also played abroad more than Alghanem's other films, perhaps because it fulfills expectations of what a UAE film is supposed be—camels, sand dunes, women struggling against a patriarchal society. Her narrative is also something UAE tourism values: Al Hameli is also the subject of a short Abu Dhabi tourism video, as mentioned in Chapter Two.

Alghanem's *Hamama* (2010) has also had much local play. The film's title character, a 90-year old healer, refuses to move, even though a road is planned to run right through her home in her abandoned *freej* in Sharjah. Nearly blind, she still wants to keep on working, ignoring the road, and ignoring the fact that she's not independent—she relies on her grandson to come visit and help every day while she continues to heal patients who still come to visit her for her potions and *hajama* (cupping). (Figure 31) Emirati youth responded very favorably to Hamama, the noble grandmother, with most of the student groups I watched it with saying that she reminded them of their grandmothers. As 22-year old Salama summarized in a paper for class:

Hamama is familiar to me. She reminds me of my grandmother and old women we know when she talks about her life in the past and way she lived before, making butter and *chami*, and using the traditional way of treatments and healings.

The grandmothers, Hamama and Fatema, become symbols of all that is good in the past. Although the younger viewers grasped the warmth of a grandmother, they did not absorb the loneliness and loss that the film also represents, the darker side of heritage and nostalgia, emotions that are perhaps the reason Alghanem's other films have not made it to TV. Alghanem herself explain to me that *Nearby Sky* was the easiest film to make because Fatema Al Hameli had limited layers to explore. Indeed, Al Hameli does embrace all the heritage tropes without questions. But the film, like the character, lacks the nuance of Alghanem's other films, where people are less concerned with displaying patriotism, but rather negotiating the past. Her films do not fear discussing the expat, nostalgia, modernity or the loss of locality and the *freej*.¹⁴⁶

Fit for TV or Not?

For most of Alghanem's characters, unappreciated or unexpected change in the *freej* comes with acceptance of the higher power of God's will, with religion making change acceptable, as is the case for Hamama—appreciation of Sheikh Zayed and the leadership. That makes both *Nearby Sky* and *Hamama* fit for TV, as much as the comedy *musalsals*.

But when we look at Alghanem's films collectively, the other feature films that did not make it to TV, the common themes are aging, lost love, and the determination to not lose the present or the recent past because of other people's plans for the future. All these things together speak to a subtle but profound loneliness in the UAE. However, in the films, loneliness is not only a sorrow but also a virtue, a reminder of what we give up without our heritage to cling to, not only as a nation but also as individuals. Loneliness in her body of work becomes part of the UAE's collective memory—it's personal but it is also national.

¹⁴⁶ I interviewed Alghanem at length in July 2017 for a chapter in Arab Documentary (Ed: Viola Shafik, University of Cairo Press, forthcoming 2020)

And her films show that this is felt across generations, saved from the pain of irretrievable loss through kindness between generations and to a lesser degree, between different nationalities. For example, in *Honey, Rain & Dust* (2016), elderly Ayesha, a beekeeper, waits for the long absent rain to arrive as a pack of expat bikers ride by her farm. “Look at the dust they are bringing. But what can we say. We should be nice to outsiders. That is our way.” She keeps her Emirati hospitality trope just as she keeps trying to make honey, despite environmental changes that have not made it possible to sustain, despite living in the same house she has known most of her life, refusing to move to the city, where her children live. In *Sounds of the Sea* (2014), a younger man tries to coach music out of the nearly toothless mouth of the fisherman who once sang the best love songs, while a group of elderly men try to keep the fishing heritage alive. Both these films celebrate and mourn lost heritage at a very personal level, which eliminates sanitation of memory.

Alghanem often explores heritage as having generational layers, as in two other films made about artists. In *Red Blue Yellow* (2013), Najat Makki, a pioneer in the contemporary visual arts in the UAE, carries on living on her own despite being the last Emirati in her faded Dubai neighborhood because without this family house, she would really be alone as an unmarried woman who has lost both her parents.¹⁴⁷ In *Amal* (2011), the title character, a Syrian actress living in Dubai, struggles with her conflicted feelings about living away from home and in a new neighborhood. *Amal* is the only UAE feature film with a fully developed expat character.

For nearly all Alghanem’s characters, the present is a place with absences—of a romantic partner, children—or friendly neighbors. These things are all part of the past for

¹⁴⁷ This would not have been a freej, but part of urbanization of Dubai in the 1970s.

them, absent from the present loneliness. Loneliness becomes a choice, a determination not to give in to modernization, escaping modernity anxiety with solitude.

This desire for the freedom to choose both the past and the future runs through all Alghanem's films, even when talking to a modern artist. Alghanem's *Sharp Tools* (2017) is about the late Hassan Sharaf, the UAE's first and most well-known Emirati contemporary artist. Filmed while he was dying, his story is also about freedom to escape heritage expectations, the decision to escape the confines of society to pursue modern art, a completely alien concept in the UAE when he began in the 1970s. Ironically, pursuing modern art becomes an act of defiance against modernity: His conceptual art used raw materials from the sea and sand.

International attention gave Sharaf recognition at the governmental level, and one of his works hangs in the modern art section of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. But Sharaf didn't wear the *kandoura*, lived alone with his cats, and in the film, talks openly about loneliness and solitude. In a film course I taught at Zayed University, I tested out the first 10-minutes of the film on one male class and one female class in May 2018: The students universally disliked him and were happy when I turned it off. "That's not art" and "He's not really Emirati" were the general comments. Sharaf is indeed of Iranian descent and the students picked it up in his accent, with even the Ajami students in the class disapproving. I would add that the fact that he led such an untraditional life as a loner also fit with the happy Emirati identity of the present. The grandmother figure of Hamama struggles with sadness and loss, too, but within the confines of missing what is traditional, which is acceptable.

Sharaf doesn't come in a grandmother package that is viewed as the respectable representation nation and nostalgia.¹⁴⁸

Sharaf's interpretation of time and space didn't suit the youth's national narrative. They viewed his behavior as that of a foreigner. Without the Emirati tropes of the grandmotherly Fatema Al Hameli and her camels or the grandmotherly Hamama and her old medicines, he doesn't sit so comfortably with the narrow window of national heritage and identity. And yet at the very same time, these are the youth following nostalgia and heritage sites online, which step out of the sanitized tropes¹⁴⁹.

It is as if there is a public heritage, which is acceptable for tourism films and TV comedies and TV documentaries, and then there is nostalgia. But emotions of displacement and loneliness are still uncomfortable parts of modern heritage, unless in funny animation or spunky grandmothers. It is a case of structure of affect, in which Emiratis know how to deal with nostalgia as a response to modernity when it comes from a funny, elderly grandmother—that is endearing. But when sorrow comes from a nonconformist, someone far from a Bedouin, they do not know how to respond, or rather respond by rejecting the nonconformity.

¹⁴⁸ I did not have the rights to show the full film, but I wanted to confirm my expectations about how they would react to calling a man not wearing a kandoura, with an Ajami accent, and living in solitude as Emirati.

¹⁴⁹ Sharaf is considered the first UAE artist to pursue modern art, not the first artist. That would be Rais Qadar, an Emirati who grew up between Kuwait and the UAE, and gained regional recognition for his portraits of daily life in the UAE, life in the freej painted with nostalgia and sadness. But in the 1970s, with nation building, his work shifted to portraits of the Palestinian revolution, what I call the Arab world's "safe tragedy" to explore, detached from the nation but officially having its sympathy. By the 1990s, Qadar had begun painting works that were odes to Islam and the nation, and he became very popular, promoted in as the UAE's first painter, joining the ranks of the UAE's ever popular firsts, with no one mentioning his Ajami background as a detriment. Art doesn't have anywhere near the reach of mass media, but the evolution of Rais' art reflects the way recognition and reward comes to those that follow the national narrative, don't question modernity, and in a *post cinema* world, revere the past but not mourn the loss of locality and identity on social media.

Conclusion

In the UAE, heritage acceptance is still a work in progress. By heritage acceptance, I mean finding a balance with the heritage given to you by the nation's authority figures but also with localized memory, including that of the long serving expats, available to all on social media platforms.

Nostalgia is outwardly not subversive, although it can be. Nostalgia allows people to be free to find the overlaps and differences with others in exploring the challenges of heritage and identity in the UAE. It creates a sadness that can be viewed as subversion. This is perhaps why the UAE government has produced TV shows that eliminate the subversion of nostalgia and instead sanitize it, whether through *musalsals* or animation. Animation is able to carry more layers of safe heritage than the *musalsals*, which come off as more contrived than the animation, perhaps because the sanitization lacks resonance –and conflict, which is needed for good storytelling, unlike the TV animations. TV documentaries, meanwhile, have been largely functional, retelling the heritage narrative with the British heritage tropes. These are all safe discourses. The few that are different, the majority of films of Nujoom Alghanem, do not end up on TV.

But with social media and independent films available on various online platforms, TV is not the main source of entertainment and information anymore. In fact, when doing my research, I didn't know the English translation for *Fat Fout*. I assumed it was an Emirati colloquialism. I went to the office next door, where several Emirati women in their late 20s to early 30s share a workspace. They told me it meant "Little Pieces" and then asked me why I wanted to know. I said, "I'm writing about the TV series *Fat Fout*." They told me they had never heard of it. I asked about *Grain of Sand*, and they said the same. "Nobody

watches local TV anymore,” one said. (Conversation, November 2019). For people from their generation, this seems to be true: Even though series are also available online, they are still products of local TV, which is out of fashion. The Kuwaiti serials of the past were not only bolder, they had a captive audience across Arabic-speaking demographics that doesn't exist today.

But almost everyone is on social media in the UAE, as earlier stated in the Northwestern Qatar study, which provides a synergy in exploring identity and the past not offered on the highly segmented traditional TV, where Emirati shows do not have English subtitles, making them inaccessible to the majority of the population, and where English and Hindi and Urdu speakers can find their own channels to watch, including shows produced for web series. Additionally, this is unlike popular social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, which have built-in translation features.

Visual media, with the many platforms available to it, can capture locality through nostalgia and thereby interpret heritage and identity and the fear of modernity at a grassroots level as Alghanem's films and the horror films in the UAE National Film Library do. Social media nostalgia becomes a *freej* of its own, a shared time and space, a place of something stronger than the Year of Tolerance: acceptance of others, at least in sharing the recent past.

Going back to this dissertation's main research question, nostalgia could be a unifier within the country and within different Emirati communities and expat groups that live separate lives today. They might not share a great deal of the same past but they share a nostalgia for a past. That past took place in various spaces and times but shares in common the idea that safety and comfort have been lost in the present.

This isn't the same unification the government seeks. This shared nostalgia isn't in keeping with the government's modernization and relocation of people from the *freej*; the building of a new collective memory amongst Emiratis in the workplace; and its reliance on the divisions between local and other.

The government heritage narrative is not the same as the trauma of modernity that appears in independent filmmaking and social media. But modernity is also a positive in the UAE: It has brought education, wealth and being part of the rest of the world, something that is recognized in the high praise the citizens give to their rulers, which is not the case in other places. As Higson writes about the United Kingdom:

The longed-for past, however, is marked as a place of satisfying plenitude, where little is lacking and where the prevailing values and sentiments are to be applauded. It is precisely these positive values and sentiments associated with the past that are presumed to be lacking in the present. (Higson, 2014: 124)

Much of the nostalgia Higson's mentions above resulted in Brexit. In an odd comparison, Brexit shares something in common with the UAE's relationship to its expats. Part of Brexit's rhetoric was that foreigners (immigrants) have taken British people's jobs. This is the same way that the UAE has pushed Emiratization: If you don't do the job, foreigners (expats), who don't care about the culture or future, will do it. But while nostalgia might have fostered Brexit, it has had the opposite effect in the UAE. Nostalgia has brought nationals and expats together.

New visual media options have forced the government to acknowledge different narratives—and if possible sanitize them before they go viral in directions it doesn't like, like questioning some of the choices the government has made during modernization.

Ironically, it is the UAE government's desire to be at the front of technology and all that is modern that has made it such a social media savvy culture. In a time of anxiety over modernity, the online world has allowed nostalgia and heritage narrative building at the grassroots, organically-grown collective memory that, now includes the post-oil discovery era.

This social media nostalgia reflects a post cinema world, but there is still something about the big screen, including its bigness, something in creating a national cinema, that social media, with its intimacy and attention to detail rather than the bigger picture, cannot do all on its own and in a way that is consumable internationally. Thus, the next chapter explores efforts to create a national cinema