

# TEXT MESSAGES

or How I Found Myself  
Time Travelling

Yassin 'Narcy' Alsalman



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*To Sundus, Shams, and Yusra. To Falah,  
Nahla, and Hala. My galaxies of love.  
I do it all for (and from) you.*

نحيا لنا للاهتداء في الجور بالبين  
بمحفن الزمان

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**BISMILLAH  
ALRAHMAN  
ALRAHEEM**

# Introduction

**I**'M ALL OVER THE PLACE. I don't mean this in geographical terms only. I mean it, as Big Pun said, "physically, lyrically, hypothetically, realistically." Let me explain.

Growing up as a hyphenated Arab in North America and spending my formative years between two countries that serve as sterile, cultural "melting pots," I found myself often at a lack of words for explaining myself. My parents shipped us back and forth between Montreal from 1987–1996, Abu Dhabi from 1996–2000, then back to Montreal where I have remained from then until now. My high school years were spent in a segregated, private American school in the middle of a city that was shy of thirty years old. While the city was trying to figure out its place in the world, I was trying to figure out mine. We were growing up in a space where international students floated in a pool of apolitical uncertainty, while the nation itself was subsumed in relationships that further complicated the region. We students were never taught to process and express our thoughts. Living in that situation confused us and stunted our growth as thinkers. This is why I gravitated towards hip-hop and writing verses. We were young and ignorant. Not knowing the power we could possess or harness in writing, using racial slurs without knowing their meaning and origin, emulating gangster themes that we heard not realizing these are realities on the ground that youth our age were victim to. We were privileged in our ignorance. The space hip-hop afforded me allowed me to codify my hybrid culture and to process and express the incongruous reality of being an Iraqi expat walking in huge malls amidst American soldiers on break from war. It also allowed me to rid myself of that ignorance, learn the meaning of those racialized realities, gain knowledge of self and empathy for realities I seldom visit. There were so many times I wanted to lash out, and if it weren't for words, verses, bars, and hooks, I probably would have.



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I carried the discomfort of displacement with me throughout my childhood. Upon returning to Canada at eighteen, I delved deeply into rap. I started using my free time at university to take over studio spaces to record, to master my craft, and to find out just what I wanted the world to know. About a year into my studies, 9/11 reverberated into all our North American lives. Watching buildings crumble as a reflection of a cultural and economic war was not an uncommon sight for my people. As Iraqis, we were used to sitting around a television, watching architecture be blown down by massive explosions. This was different. Masks came off and racists bared their true beliefs about Muslims and immigrants. Their radicalization rose to its peak, not just against me, but against the multitude of communities within the belief system of Islam—the diverse ethnicities of the East were then, as now, often misrepresented as a mythical monolith. A new wave of self-scrutiny and exterior investigation took over our daily lives. I spent the majority of my twenties defending myself, a religion, and a region I was grappling to come to terms with through lyrics and music. This experience echoed my high school days, when we were highly politicized and forced to be reactionary in our expression of culture and dystopia. Again, I found myself in a place where I was out of place. This demonization and fear still exist around us immigrants, and it seems like the web has been cast wider as the Internet has become a haven for trolls and racists. There were so many times, again, where I just wanted to lash out. If it weren't for words, verses, bars, and hooks, I probably would have.

I called myself the Narcicyst, a tongue-in-cheek moniker, as a reminder to never get lost in the self-aggrandizing nature of the arts industry and as a finger-pointing commentary on the increasingly narcissistic nature of society. As much as we are aware of the wasteful and destructive way of life we have built for ourselves now, back in the 00s, iPhones and smartphones were already a creeping reality. Due to my cultural mixture, I was forced to almost think ahead of our time. I always saw what was coming. The Iraqi in me—cynical, doom-prone, and conspiracy-driven—was very present in my work. The Canadian in

## Introduction

me—privileged, moderate, removed—was also very present in my early solo work. I used to write everywhere I went—in books, on papers, on laptops, desktops. I had so many bars. As much as it was expressive, it barely touched the surface of something deeper that was brewing in me. I was too bogged down by reactionary spaces, preaching to a choir who felt the same gospel, and internally dismantling a barrage of misrepresentation that had been fed to me since the Raiders of the Lost Arc. I had no role models from our community. Even Iraqis in fiction—like Sayid Jarrah of *Lost* was played by Naveen Andrews who is actually of British and Indian descent. Come on, g! They just didn't know how to represent us anywhere! Saddam was our only reference point for people. Our generation was drafting a blueprint what would come now, creating a template for a generation to follow—the one that Edward Said galvanized in our minds. Our growing hip-hop, film, and arts community was in its infancy.

I was scrambling. It was very difficult to find clarity amidst the psychological warfare during the terror era. Ironically, the only place I could find solace was on airplanes. In those days, up until the moment we boarded airplanes people like me were under watch, under microscopic inspection and questioned because of our religion and culture. It was a relief to be afloat above seas and lands, not bound to borders or harassment from any form of policing. It removed me from the on-the-ground battles we were fighting and gave me a bird's-eye view of the world around me. In those moments, sometimes for hours and hours, I wrote some of the most vivid and introspective works I have written to date. I seldom shared them with the world, except sometimes at shows to gauge if people felt the same way, but rarely on record. This writing experience was personal to me, something I wanted to explore for myself. Rapping was like mining for the gold that was redefinition. That definition became a positive vision of self, untainted by politics and the ways of man—an understanding of the chaos.

I am an anxious flier. I am also a Gemini. I chalk the anxiety up to losing total control. I am not the pilot of the vehicle, nor can I see where I am going. It's nerve-racking, but in a way, it freed

## Text Messages

me up. Most of the writing in this book took place on planes over the course of the last decade. From comic books to short stories to poetry, these narratives and expressions were a therapy I used to cope with the low-level trauma I endured during the ten years of Rap Life I experienced as the Iraqi guy in the room. As much as I tried to tear down barriers, I sometimes built them in self-defense.

I recall running up from opening for Jedi Mind Tricks at Les Foufounes Électriques, a grungy venue in Montreal, to catch one of my rap idols, Raekwon the Chef. My friend Dutch was promoting the show and pulled me backstage. When Rae's team came down they asked for the greenroom to be cleared. Dutch told me to stay put. I was at the doorway of the stage and in comes in a stocky, blunt-smoking brother: hoodie on, looking down, reciting verses. It was Rae. He stood in front of me like a fighter, shadowboxing his verses to himself. He lifted his hoodie and looked me dead in the eye. "Peace Rae, I just want to thank you for. . ." You know, the regular fan talk started spewing out of my heart, as genuine as could be. Rae cut me off and said "Damn shorty, look at the wardrobe, B. Where you from?" I was wearing a military green Sergeant Pepper Lonely Narce Club Band jacket and a sidara, my grandfather's traditional Iraqi hat. I said something I say at least twice a week: "I'm from Iraq, but I grew up here." He looks at his brother and says "Damn, I knew you was one of those EyeRacki Afghani War N-Words (he said the actual word)." Damn. I had a real-life Wu-Tang interlude happen to me. But it was bittersweet. That statement was filled with love and rife with the ills that we hyphenated Muslim/Brown kids face. It was full of the direct American perspective of my culture—a monolith, a Pantone color. It was also a full cultural circle for me, one which hip-hop brought me back to over and over again. Hip-hop was the only place where all my crises met head on and resolved one another in my heart.

There is no vindication in one's search for identity. I have come to terms with the fact that I will always feel in flux. In fact, that is my identity. And as I travelled around the world with my music, from Dubai to Detroit, Toronto to Tripoli,

## Introduction

Beirut to Berlin, I learned that this identity crisis rings true for many of the kids who grew up into the advent of the Internet and in between wars. So many of the same kids I went to high school with were dispersed to universities around the world. Some of the Arab kids I went to eighth grade with ended up enduring the 9/11 experience concurrently with their personal webs of stereotyping, shock, and eventual profiling in their diaspora. Little did I know, the same could be said for my Chinese and Korean friends, my Brazilian and Colombian comrades, African American and continental African classmates. So many of our colonial histories have resurfaced on the coast of the Internet's tide that we surf together. Just as the LGBTQIA communities' struggles have come to light and more clarity is being shed on the diversity, the individuality, and the intrapersonal suffering of marginalized people—we are finding spaces to have uncomfortable conversations about our relationship to both the white savior complexes and the hegemonic orders of European patriarchy on our genetic history. Feels like the time is now, more than ever.

I wrote most of this book on my phone. I hate my phone. It has become the extension of my skin that I never wanted. It gives me anxiety at times; at times it educates me; at times it has made me cry. At most times, it has made me witness to the most vivid of humanity's crimes, deaths, and accidents. Things I never wanted to see. Trauma I never asked for. I liken my iPhone to the Anti-Christ at times—I mean think about it. It has one eye, it lies to you when it tells you the truth, it can bring the moon down to Earth, and if you consider Steve Jobs as its father, it was even born in Syria! Talk about Prophecy at work. But I am also a paranoid Arab boy, so pardon my over-analyzing. It's something to think about though, isn't it? So, though the phone permitted me to write out these thoughts and feelings, it also is something I loathe at times. I need to find a balance with it, and this book is a way of unloading the download, unchaining my algorithm and reconfiguring my personal interface.

This is what Text Messages is to me. It is a diary, and it's something I hope you can see yourself in. I wrote it for you and

## Text Messages

me alike. It is of that infinite search for an identity. It is of flying high in the sky looking for a place to go and belong to. Watch out for turbulent times, stay calm, and land safely.

*With peace,*  
Yassin

Excerpt



**VERSES**

This is a black and white anteroposterior (AP) radiograph of a human skull. The image shows the bony structures of the skull, including the frontal bone, parietal bones, occipital bone, sphenoid bone, and the upper part of the mandible. The nasal cavity and maxillary sinuses are visible. The word "VERSES" is overlaid in the center of the image in a bold, white, serif font. A large, semi-transparent watermark "Excerpt" is also visible, running diagonally across the image from the bottom left towards the top right.

## False Start

False start

Beginnings always dictate endings  
in the memory of the forgotten.  
Like a book in need of mending.

False start

Young boys and girls trapped in Walmarts—  
our consumer interim camps.  
A family-friendly, discounted freedom.  
You don't see what the Internet can't.

Not our land or home.  
Not your mans or holmes.  
Not your towers or domes.  
Not your power or drones.

False start

## Anxious Balloons

Between two eras—  
errors and affirmations—  
the Karma of America  
meets effort.

Confused about where I stand,  
I fall for myself every time.  
Misjudgment of my own eyes.  
I don't see them anymore.

It is quite clear that we were meant to be this way.  
No structure, no sentence bleed, an endless day,  
a sunrise forever.  
A forever set in suns setting.  
We mistook the moon,  
sacrificed our star,  
wasn't even that hard.

Not in the moment anymore,  
we dwell in the past together in regret.  
To a future filled with anxious balloons  
floating.

It is very easy to lose touch when  
you always have something else in your hands.  
Bury the galaxy in your heart. I will follow you there.  
This is love: a present together.



## Self-Censored Phone Chip

Too selfish to believe I stand for the people.  
Too concerned with getting balder than an American eagle.  
I love me a nice textile, wool of the sheeple.  
Pull on a reefer to refuel. Read bulletin previews.

*So nice to Tweet you, he said. Do you mind if I IG?*  
Full of wit and deceit, too, warning signs of the evil.  
You bleed through me like IVs, the nightmare of my dreams.  
I can barely stare at you either, you always make me feel see-  
through,

like doubt to believers.  
Filter my face to your taste.  
You stare back at me with your one eye,  
in pity, tracking my place.  
the light of your dark in my mind  
impossible not to hear you  
erase  
me.

Who knows what you know of my children,  
my family, my thoughts, my preferences and self-references.  
I will not allow myself to fear you.  
Face.  
Weak.

With you, I can reach everything and everyone except,  
myself.  
iRonic. We.



@KhalidAlbain

## Us

I.

I would rather like to ask you a few answers, or questions.  
Do you ever put your phone down after a long day of it  
staring at you and pick it right back up?

I mean, occasionally, while sipping on a single-origin coffee  
in a cup as white as supremacy,  
I catch a twelve-second video of a child suffering on my  
Twitter feed  
and my soul shifts the Wi-Fi grid down to this one bar.

II.

Single-shot latte. Simulation theory singularity.  
Gentrification cortex, Morph X from Winter Rage in GORE-  
TEX,  
back to simpler days before forced debt.  
Baghdad café. Folklore myths.  
Four shores catch your body. For sure, flip.

I would rather like to ask a few answers, or questions.

Do you ever put yourself down after a long day  
of staring at yourself  
and have to pick yourself back up?

