

**“When’s the *Tolbeh*?!” Negotiating Arab-Muslim American Identity Through Heterosexual
Relationship-Making Culture in Dearborn, Michigan**

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“Easier, she thinks, to remember nothing, to enter a world already changed, than to have it transform before your eyes. In the palaces, the grandparents must sit in their extravagant rooms, remembering sand.”

— Hala Alyan, *Salt Houses*

“Words and stories washed ashore on that ancient way of the sea, and we made of them new songs. The sun came again, casting shadows that we peeled off the street to make of them new clothes.”

– Susan Abulhawa, *The Blue Between Sky and Water*

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Abstract

Arab-Muslim American Women (AMAW) are placed at a complex intersection of identities as they attempt to make sense of two worlds that are seemingly constructed against one another. In response to perceived threats of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim agendas in the US, oppositional nationalist identities in the diaspora are constructed through ideals of what Nadine Naber calls the “good Arab girl” and “good Arab family.” Cultural politics of respectability, belonging, and authenticity that center on these ideals are complicated by the complex reality that culture is an ever-changing entity. Through 14 in-depth interviews with AMAW from Dearborn, Michigan, I attempt to shed light on the complexities of cultural authenticity in a dynamic relationship-making landscape. I encapsulate the reinvention of marital traditions and the production of community through this investigation.

Glossary

Invented Tradition: A set of practices, usually of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate values and norms of behavior by repetition. These practices seek to establish continuity between an uncertain present and a carefully circumscribed image of the past.

Halal (*hah-lal*): lawful or permitted by Islamic law.

Haram (*huh-rham*): forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law.

Katb Kitab (*kat-eb ik-teb*): the Islamic marriage ceremony. Alternatively termed *nikah* in South Asian Muslim cultures. This ceremony is independent from obtaining a state marriage license, which could occur at any point in the marriage process.

English translation: “Sign Marriage Contract”

Khalto (*khahl-toe*): Maternal aunt

Orientalism: scholarship which proceeds from a viewpoint that understands “the East” or “the Orient” as culturally, economically, politically and ontologically distinct from “the West” or “the Occident.” Now often used to indicate a colonialist bias underlying and reinforced by such scholarship.

Tolbeh (*tul-beh*): An event where a potential groom and his family formally request a bride’s hand in marriage from her family. The first formal step of the marriage process in Arab cultures.

Tolbeh is Levantine Arabic slang for the term *tatlub yadaha* (English translation: “Ask for her hand.”) It is used throughout the Levant countries (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan). Variations of the term exist across different religious and ethnic communities in the Middle East, representing the same or homologous events (Yemeni Muslims – *khutba*; Chaldeans [Iraqi Catholic Ethnoreligious group] – *tenetha*.)

Introduction

My mother, sister, grandparents, and I sat on plastic-covered couches counting up the members of my family and my sister's *friend's* family. Eighty people would be invited to this event; in contrast, my grandmother had 8 at hers. My grandmother's basement was warm and filled with cigarette smoke. She sighed and poured me a coffee, complaining about my generation as grandmothers do. My mom suggested putting the event off and my grandmother gasps, "it's already been months!" It's been *months* since my twin sister, Mariam, met her "friend," Ali, and decided that they were going to get married. It's been *years* since they knew they would get married, but no one besides the couple and I know when they actually met.

When I was a sophomore in high school, my sister drove us to Famous Hamburger in West Dearborn. On our way back to the parking structure, we saw Ali drift away from his friends and approach Mariam. My sister had been babysitting Ali's first cousin for years at this point. She knew exactly who he was, he knew exactly who she was. This is Dearborn, everyone knows everyone. As if it wasn't a freezing November evening in Michigan, they spoke until our curfew approached while I stood idly by. I nodded and laughed at his jokes, but I knew I was a supporting actress performing a friendly encounter and not a romantic pursuit. At the time, there would be nothing tackier than being caught on a date in West Dearborn. Standing right outside of the Starbucks known for initiating more marriages than study sessions, I kept my eyes peeled for any of our *khaltos* and prepared a quick exit strategy.

I would wake up to their facetime calls for years until I moved away for college, help Mariam find cool restaurants 45 minutes outside of the city, and treat him like a stranger when I saw him at the mosque on Fridays. I would aid and abet as we both knew it was more convenient

for my sister to “meet” her “friend” right after he was accepted into medical school. We knew what it would take for his parents to approach a *tolbeh* seriously.

When I was 8, I went to my aunt’s *tolbeh*, which translates to “asking,” as in asking for a woman’s hand in marriage. It was the same 10 people my grandmother invited over for Sunday barbeque and then 10 people from my aunt’s new husband’s side. We wore formal clothing; there was a small cake, chai, and a plate of baklava. The whole event was over in an hour, exactly as the older generations in my family remembered them. Now my sister and mother are meeting with caterers and renting pavilions. The *tolbeh* is still taking place soon after my parents met his parents, but unlike the usual meeting, it was initiated by Mariam and Ali rather than their mothers. Ali and Mariam were both born in America but expressed thoroughly how important it was to them to follow traditions, as much as they could at least.

In the Arab community of Dearborn, Michigan, my sister is no outlier. *Tolbehs* of couples who have been together for years pop up left and right. Its official purpose (where a man’s father asks a woman’s father for his daughter’s hand in marriage with his son) has become obscured for many people. Traditionally, it takes place in the small window of time after meeting one’s significant other and before legally marrying them (Hammer, 2015). This contrasts with the American dating culture by which Arab-Americans are surrounded, where the dating period can go on for years before marriage is brought up; if at all. In setting a date for a *tolbeh*, there are other factors like prioritizing a career or completing a degree that can lead to a later rather than an earlier marriage (Mir, 2016). There is also the addition of technology allowing space for Arab Americans to meet one another independently of their parent’s intervention. Therefore, the ability to get to know one another is no longer complicated by alleged temptations of physical

interaction, differentiating Arab-Muslim Americans' marriage experiences within the last ten years from those over 10 years old (Rochadiat et al., 2018).

Formally, I had been taught that the *tolbeh* was when a man's father meets with a woman's father to ask for his permission for his son to get to know the woman and potentially get married. It was only then that the couple would begin spending more time with each other and ultimately decide whether they should move forward with the marriage (specifically the Islamic marriage, the *katb kitab*.) When I asked participants what they were taught about the *tolbeh* growing up, their descriptions were nearly identical to this idea. This is also consistent with definitions provided in similar literature surrounding the marriage process in Arab-Muslim Diaspora (Othman, 2020). This research project was inspired by my own confusion with the *tolbeh*, an event whose celebration seemed uncoupled from its verbal definition in Dearborn. I intended to explore the internal and external factors that went into having a *tolbeh* for Arab-Muslim American women living in Dearborn. However, the questions that I asked in interviews to build the preliminary context of their relationships and of the participant's ethnic identity ended up taking precedence in the conversations we had. By the time we reached the part of the interview meant to focus on the *tolbeh*, I found that most of my questions had already been answered.

What looked like a small event that a community has leaned on to maintain their cultural roots unraveled as a complex negotiation with relationship formation. As the paternal role in the relationship making process has been slowly omitted and private relationships have been prioritized, the *tolbeh* acts as a compensation for patriarchal gender performances. These relationship making processes are a complex negotiation of family, marriage and identity. As the realities of time and cultural change intervene on the socialized idea of the traditional

“Arab-Muslim Woman,” cultural identity is complicated through the marriage process. In response to historical and political pressures to diminish Arab and Muslim ideals from American society, negotiations are made with this idealized identity to establish nationalism with one’s origin country. In such disagreements, heteronormative politics of cultural authenticity, respectability, and marriageability are upheld and maintained.

The focus of my thesis is to investigate the external and internal negotiations of cultural identity within the marriage experiences of Arab-Muslim American Women (AMAW) in tightly concentrated Arab American communities. In doing so, I hope to articulate the dynamic cultural niche produced in these communities that attempts to satisfy two imagined opposites (American Culture and Arab Culture). In communities of the American diaspora, cultural practices are often adapted and adjusted to maintain cultural continuity between the perception of one’s *current* American reality and the reality of their *former* country of origin (Mir, 2016). As time progresses, the gap between one’s imagined country of origin and the current reality increases. To make sense of continuously changing social normalcy in both settings, the Arab diaspora negotiates new social rules that abide by a carefully constructed idea of the past (Serhan, 2008). In opposition to the idea that Arab-American acculturation occurs through two opposing forces, I hypothesize a careful negotiation of cultural identity that satisfies social standards that continually manifest in the Arab-American community in Dearborn. These standards exist under heteronormative and patriarchal influences from both American and Arab cultures but are uniquely reinforced, policed, and negotiated within communities like Dearborn (Aboulhassan, 2019). I examine this system through the *tolbeh* and the relationship-making experiences before the *tolbeh*.

How second-generation Arab American women negotiate both Arab and American courtship cultures can help understand the subculture that has manifested in a way that bends the expectations of both. All in all, I question whether the traditional request of hand known as a *tolbeh* has changed cross-generationally in first to second-generation Arab-Muslim Americans, and if so, why? How are these changes perceived by women of either generation?

These questions interest me because courtship practices amongst Arab-Americans bring light to the internal and external navigation of closely-knit diasporic communities. In my conversations with Arab students at the University of Michigan that grew up in Dearborn, I found that the consensus amongst us was clear: we didn't realize how *weird* Dearborn was until we left. But being dropped on a different planet, 45 minutes down I-94, made all the difference. There was a whole list of social expectations that non-Arab Americans would never understand, but Arabs from Dearborn (like myself) would have the privilege to investigate. Growing up with a verbal description of the *tolbeh* that contradicted the visual representation of the *tolbeh* that I saw in my generation, I was intrigued by the new relevance placed on it. By investigating the experiences of Arab-Muslim American women in Dearborn, we can better contextualize courtship practices in diasporic communities.

Articulating these processes offers important insight into how culture is produced, inherited, and changed over time. Such articulation requires a critical eye capable of balancing two lenses: one that does not undermine the ability of Arab-Muslim women to negotiate within social structures; yet one that also recognizes that the decision-making processes take place at an intersection of social, political, and historical contexts. With this in mind, we can also evaluate how these diasporic courtship practices have the potential to uphold patriarchal and heteronormative notions of marriageability, respectability, and endogamy. In doing so, the

gendered experiences of AMAW pursuing marriage and relationship-making in Dearborn offer a unique landscape to investigate.

To encapsulate the experiences of Arab-Muslim American women (AMAW) through this research, I conducted one on one interviews. The analysis I present will be comparing marriages that have taken place in the last ten years (whom I will refer to as the second generation diaspora) and those that have taken place before that (whom I will refer to as the first generation diaspora). I interviewed in three areas: the pre-marriage relationship-making, the internal planning for a *tolbeh*, and the external nature of the event itself. In doing so, I delineate meaningful negotiations with gendered expectations and performances that differ cross-generationally.

Review of Literature

Negotiating Arab-Muslim American identity is believed by many to exist on a binary of “traditional” to “American-ized.” This notion is limiting to the realities of Arab-Muslims, particularly those who live within communities of other Arab-Muslim Americans, such as South East Michigan. Similar communities of Muslim Arab Americans in New Jersey and Milwaukee offer important discourse to build background on how the Arab American experience is uniquely produced cross-generationally. Marriage and marital traditions serve as an important site of gendered cultural development (Othman, 2019). For this reason, exploring gendered expectations of Arab-Muslim American Women (AMAW) is obligatory to this investigation of marriage traditions. Social and familial obligations to maintain cultural “purity” within a community can enforce social control through gossip or shame. This social control is inherently gendered, where being caught in a *haram* (forbidden by Islamic Law) relationship reflects very poorly on young

women and their families (Aboulhassan S., & Brumley, K. M., 2019). The repercussions are not considered to have the same magnitude for men (Aboulhassan S., & Brumley, K. M., 2019). Complying with social expectations, women often maintain an “undercover” nature in the navigation of relationships. That’s to say the path leading to a tolbeh and beginning the marital process in Arab-American culture is increasingly obscured for the sake of communal optics. Yet, the events themselves are exaggerated through greater-sized events and ritualized acts within them. Building an understanding of invented tradition allows us to build a framework for how unique cultural experiences manifest. This is fundamental to deconstructing the cultural binary within which Arab-Muslim American Women are expected to exist.

Arab-Muslim American Diaspora and Inventing Tradition

When I was 6, my family and I sat on the couch with Nina’s dad and youngest brother. Nina, my classmate and family friend, and the rest of her family went to Lebanon this summer to visit their family. Our dads both immigrated from Lebanon at the same time in the 80s, where they moved to the south end of Dearborn and their fathers went to work at the Ford Factory. Nina’s family has always been a part of my life because her dad was a part of the “South End Boys.” This is the name of the WhatsApp group chat that houses my dad’s network of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian childhood friends. This group of Arab immigrants has stuck together like glue to this day. Bound by their common histories, language, and low household incomes, they built a niche in the Dearborn community that has continually protected and supported them and their families. Their kids are the network I grew up with so closely that it was a shock to me when I learned I wasn’t actually related to them. After the 9/11 terrorist attack and the subsequent Islamophobic attacks on Muslim Americans, they organized New Years, holidays and

birthday parties in the safety of whichever house could fit the most folding chairs. In doing so, these parties became traditions that characterized the majority of my childhood.

I sat there on that couch, watching the news in Arabic that I didn't understand and English subtitles that were too fast for me to read. I remember nothing but scenes of the Metro Detroit airport full of people waiting in customs. I know now that what I saw was news reporters interviewing the Lebanese American survivors of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. But I mostly remember seeing Nina beside her mom on the screen, looking distraught and exhausted against the wall of the airport. I was too young at the time to fully understand the importance of this day, let alone how it would change my community. I only knew that my friend was there. In the long history of the United States' imperialism and colonial interventions, this was the first event that touched my life.

As I worked through the literature surrounding this community that has been an integral part of my life, I was reminded of these experiences. For years on I would know "Summer '06" meant something entirely different from the summer before the first grade. I characterize this as a minute example of how something I hardly remember occurring persisted as a political factor that changed the nature of the community. Things like lectures in the local mosque, conversations over chai with my grandparents, and New Year's Eve taking place in my basement despite it being one of the most lively nights of the year quite literally everywhere but Dearborn. These are just small ways that Dearborn has continually been environmentally changed by the political and historical tensions in my own experience.

Immigrating to a new country presumes many decisions for adaptation. On one hand, immigrants feel the pressure of assimilation to succeed in their new home. On the other, there is a cultural, political, and religious obligation to maintain values from one's homeland as a

minority in the United States. As time goes on, compromises are made within communities to adapt. Overwhelmingly, research on Arab Americans focuses on the acculturation of individuals from their immigrant or native culture alongside the western culture to which they migrate. Assuming that acculturation is solely a matter of migrant culture and American culture fusing or fading into one another provides a troublesome framework. Naber (2018) argues that relying on the idea of a dominant culture of the environment and minority culture restrain our understanding of acculturation. Comparison of culture in the Arab world against current American culture relies on the assumption that Arab culture is static, unchanging, and alien to us. Furthermore, it homogenizes the cultural experience of 26 countries within the region despite the existence of their unique social and political histories.

Most importantly, this understanding of acculturation reinforces essentialist traditional values of the “Arab family” assuming that the solution to these cultural conflicts is an individual's integration into American culture (Naber, 2018). When the concept of the “traditional Arab family” is deployed, it leans on an ahistorical and orientalist image to characterize Arab American acculturation. Furthermore, it accepts an ethnocentric lens that situates American culture as modernized (and superior) and Arab culture as a traditionalist one (and inferior.) Furthermore, it places the “Arab family” as a barrier to be overcome rather than a functional unit within the community that can produce, reinforce and negotiate with the ongoing culture. Using families and family dynamics to study acculturation can be productive so long as the circumstances of power dynamics are analyzed in the process (Naber 2018). Moreover, it prevents researchers from erasing or invalidating experiences that are not presented along this binary. It is even important to consider that when Arab Americans themselves define their

experiences in the context of the “traditional Arab Family,” it is still imperative to explore the historical factors that produced these articulations.

Instead, Naber advises the feminist postcolonial diaspora studies approach that asserts all social categories to be constructed out of multiple historical and political conditions and relations of power. To employ this kind of lens through my research, it is important to first understand some of the historical and political factors that bear consequences on the Arab diaspora, particularly the Arab American diaspora in Dearborn, Michigan. While the reality of acculturation is unlikely to be similar across all second-generation Arab American Muslim women, we can begin characterizing the political landscape that has implicated Arab American communities over the past few decades.

The political and historical environment that defines the experiences of the Arab American diaspora is effectively represented by what Nadine Naber terms “Diaspora of the Empire.” I find this articulation to be an effective way to describe the implications that U. S. Imperialism, colonialism, and intervention in the Middle East have affected the processes of displacement and assimilation within the United States. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States' support for the establishment of Israel, and the United States-backed Arab-Israeli war of 1967 all characterized American attitudes toward the Middle East. US media, news outlets, and politicians molded and normalized a racialized representation of Arabs. These representations relied on the Orientalization of the Arab world.

Edward Said argued that Orientalism is a Western-produced concept that is shaped by European imperialist attitudes toward the “East.” He proposes that Eastern cultures are treated as essentialist and static, in a manner that is not reflective of the political and social histories of these countries. It homogenizes the Arab world into one traditionalist culture that is riddled with

immorality, backwardness, and most notably to this research, oppressive against women. The racial formation of Arabs through orientalism creates a distinct separation between the morally superior “us” (the Western world) and the dangerous “them” (the Eastern world). Such distinctions act as justification for Imperial expansion and military intervention. Western interventions in the Middle East played a fundamental role in destabilizing the governments and economies of Arab countries which subsequently led to the plight of Arab immigrants and refugees to the United States for safety. Yet these implications were not limited to the Arab world, and the United States' imperialist agendas became a driving force behind the racial formation of Arab Americans.

The 1990s Gulf War marked the most widespread periods of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim violence in the United States at that point. These numerous attacks on Arab Americans, as well as the representations of these treatments in the news and media, exacerbated orientalist attitudes. By representing these anti-Arab and anti-Islam attacks, perceptions of Arab American inferiority to white Americans were solidified. Arab American racial formations have been contingent on the United States' imperialist agendas. Within these heightened tensions amongst Arab communities in the United States, the 9/11 terrorist attack of 2001 exacerbated public attitudes even further. The concept of the Arab world as “the others” to the West quickly became “the threats” to the West. In response to 9/11, the United States and the United Kingdom initiated military campaigns, domestic security advancements, and targeted community surveillance collectively termed “the War on Terror.” The targets of the War on Terror were Arabs and Muslims, configuring these populations in the US as the enemy and as a threat to national security (Abraham, 2011). However, the racialization and subsequent discrimination of Arabs did not only harm Arab Americans, as many victims of post 9/11 hate crimes were

individuals who were “mistaken as Muslim or Arab.” Most notably, the first victim of a post-9/11 anti-Arab/Muslim hate crime was a Sikh man who was mistaken for a Muslim man because he was wearing a turban (Abraham, 2011).

Nabeel Abraham characterizes the implications of 9/11 and the following “war on terror” in *Arab Detroit 9/11* investigation. Post-9/11 Detroit and Dearborn are denoted by a steep rise in surveillance, and policing programs. By 2003, the Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) headquarters in Detroit and Dearborn housed the largest counterterrorism investigation in US History (Abraham, 2011). While foreign invasions in Middle Eastern countries drove more refugees out of their home countries, the Arab community in Dearborn became more and more populated. The domestic programs of the “War on Terror,” government attention, and media coverage become centered on Dearborn. Abraham terms the decade following 9/11 as the “Decade of Terror” in Detroit, marked by widespread anti-Arab/Muslim discrimination, violence, and villainization of the community that US imperialist agendas inadvertently created (Abraham, 2011).

Most pertinent to this research is how these conditions lead to perceptions of family and gender being altered by real or imagined tensions between the United States and the Middle East (Naber, 2018). Arab nationalist responses to European and US global power induced a transnational development in Arab culture. In an effort to reinforce legitimacy and continuation in the diaspora, an image of Arabness was constructed and amplified to portray respectability through Western eyes. Ironically, the social construction of Arabness serves to satisfy notions of morality in the United States, yet is performed in a way that is in direct opposition to perceptions of American norms. These political environments manifest as a binary of two polarized perceptions of family and gender where one end (the culture of the “home country”) should be

“maintained” while the other (US culture) should be “avoided.” As demonstrated in the next section of this literature review, such divides rely on gendered, classed, and heterosexual presentations within the community.

With this idea in mind, it is necessary to understand that the large Arab community in Southeast Michigan is predominantly composed of Levantine Arabs. It is necessary to recognize the predominance of Levantine Arabs in this community as it influences the community structure as a whole. By highlighting an uneven distribution of Levantine Arabs in one area, I hope to emphasize that the community’s cultural values do not stem from the entire Arab world. It is fundamental to recognize that the aspects of traditions that are being maintained within Southeast Michigan are not coming from one general “Arab” culture, frankly because this imagined culture doesn’t exist outside of orientalist perspectives that homogenize all 26 Arab countries into one cohesive identity. This includes the practice of a *tolbeh* itself, which has various names and practices in different regions of the Middle East but is not universally practiced in the Middle East either.

Attempts to “maintain” an imagined Arab American culture manifests through the glorification and ritualization of traditions. A community is enabled to celebrate their Arabness and inadvertently represent themselves in solidarity with their home country. These presentations of nationalism also act as a form of authentication to Arabness, which appears to maintain some connection within the community. In doing so, weddings are repurposed, consequentially ritualizing and romanticizing events that were not previously traditions but have been invented as such in diasporic experiences (Serhan, 2008). The concept of “Invented Tradition” was proposed by Eric Hobsbawm as “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior

by repetition which automatically implies continuity” (Hobsbawm, 2012). An important distinction is between convention/routine versus tradition. Routines that occur without symbolic meaning may acquire that over time or after a change in circumstances (Hobsbawm, 2012). In the case of the Arab diaspora, the change in circumstances would be migration to the United States.

Serhan (2008) argues that the elements of Arab culture that get passed on are chosen selectively. The routines that are selected are then developed into coveted representations of nationalism toward their home countries. It is here where normal or simplistic repetition of events becomes ritualized traditions. Gender norms enter the conversation when patriarchal overtones are emphasized within these invented traditions. Maintaining a selective and exaggerative approach to upholding tradition, is a response to assimilation that has gendered consequences (Serhan, 2008). In Serhan’s work, these consequences meant increased importance placed on the presentation of the family at weddings. Specifically, she described the quality of clothing and makeup women wore as Palestinian wedding guests as a primary factor that influenced how they were perceived by the community. She further demonstrated that these factors are integral to the modesty and marriageability of women. Such standards were additionally thought to reflect the entire family’s respectability. By forming these connections, there is an implicit connection between morality, respectability, and class. The responsibility of women to fulfill some imagined standard also engenders the continuance of such imagined culture.

It is important to approach this research project in a way that fully encapsulates the formation of cultural identity in Dearborn. Establishing a general background to the political and historical tensions between the Arab Diaspora and the Middle East is imperative to creating a

foundation for the analysis of these interviews. As tensions are heightened in Dearborn through various policing and surveillance programs, the Arab-Muslim community is increasingly aware of anti-Arab/Muslim attitudes exacerbated by the media. In response, an oppositional image to the “dangerous terrorist” Arab is constructed through the reinvention and amplification of cultural traditions. This is valued as a defense against the real or imagined political tensions to erase or assimilate Arabs into American communities. Cultural events like marriage become sites for nationalist support or representation of one's origin country. By reinforcing the ideals of a good Arab family, gendered, classed, and heteronormative systems are emphasized in an effort to maintain the continuance of an imagined cultural past.

Arab-Muslim American Women and the Arab or American Paradox

Within Arab-Muslim American communities, Arab identity is often expected to be inextricable from some form of modesty and purity. Meanwhile, assimilation into American culture, “being Americanized” signifies a detachment from Arab identity inseparably assumed to be some moral shortcoming. Conversely, from an American eye, maintaining Arab culture is often linked to an essentialist notion of traditional and static values, made out many times to fit a barbaric stereotype that immigrants can be saved through assimilation into a progressive and free American identity (Mir, 2016). Where families stand on these contradictory scales is commonly dictated by the sexual experiences and behaviors of women within those families. The paradoxical expectation yields a burden to be navigated by AMAW that is deeply connected with marriage.

Upholding tradition thus becomes a form of nationalism against a real or perceived attempt to assimilate or erase Arab identity within American communities. This pressure

reinforces gendered roles and heteronormativity uniquely so that we can distinguish the gendered experience of Arab American women from both Arab women and American women. Patriarchal institutions in the United States present uniquely from those in the Arab world which complicates the reproduction of these institutions in an Arab American community. Gendered control is more implicit yet still deep-set in the United States compared to that of Arab culture (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). The intersection of Arab ethnicity, Islamic faith, and gender produces a unique reality for second-generation Arab-Muslim American women as they navigate the United States. As formerly described, the Arab-Muslim diaspora in Dearborn have experiences that are further complicated by being a diaspora of the empire. Perceptions of historical tensions between the Middle East and the US accentuate pressures to maintain cultural continuance in Dearborn (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). However, this continuance relies on the gendered, classed, and heteronormative presentations of Arab authenticity. The gendered expectations included dressing modestly and abstaining from pre-marital sexual relationships. While men bear some responsibility for providing for the family, a burden of social control is inflicted on women (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019).

AMAW are perceptually bound between these two sides yet continue to navigate different paths around their social obligations that cannot be characterized by a binary measure. Maintaining a research lens that characterizes women along a binary idea such as an Arab to American continuum fails to recognize the complexity of their experience. Naber (2008) examines this further in her own work to unpack the deeper aspects of cultural navigation with Arab American women. In thirty interviews with second-generation Arab American women, she analyzes a binary in comparison to the first generation of immigrants before them. A necessary distinction Naber explains is the production of Arab cultural identity *in response to external*

pressures of assimilation “Americanization,” and internal pressures to have tight familial and communal bonds (Naber, 2006). This relates to the previous discussion of invented tradition as an effort of cultural nationalism and social control. Therefore, the social control of daughters is perpetuated through a patriarchal weaponization of Arab identity. There isn’t a simple carry-over of culture, instead, there is an intentional implementation of specific segments of Arab identity as a tool. Oftentimes, virginity is valued as what divides the “Arab” and “Al Amerikan.” There is an implied connection between reputation and sexuality and therefore an overarching connection between relationships/dating and reputation. This indicates a dimension of social control which is inextricable from Arab American experiences with love and marriage (Naber, 2006).

Both Aboulhassan (2019) and Naber (2006) describe communal structures producing a society reliant on reputation and shame. This system functions by communicating information to various members of the community, through gossip. Dreby (2009) examines gossip as it bears consequences unevenly toward women in an immigrant community. Although Dreby focuses on Mexican American communities, the nature of communication within the community and transnationally to one’s home country is generalizable to many ethnic communities in the United States. Gossip, which she examined as a cultural practice not only serves as a platform for bonding and entertainment with friends and family, it also grants members the ability to participate in defining the norms and values of their communities (Dreby, 2009). While gossip reinforces gender roles, shame, and social control it also in part allows negotiation with gender roles allowing transitions into American society.

All in all, this section speaks mostly about what may differ between generations. How women feel toward “dating,” courtship, and love may have a gap between both generations and also may be influenced by what path they took in their own marriage. For example, a

first-generation woman who had a traditional marriage path initiated by her parents may feel differently than a first-generation woman who dated her spouse prior to marriage, yet they may both differ from the opinions of a second-generation woman who is arguably in a different sphere of gossip and social expectations. And so, what is socially acceptable for courtship and marriage is expected to differ.

Arab-Muslim American Women and Forming Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships in Arab-Muslim communities come with a lot of confusion around what the norms are for second-generation couples. Living as ethnic and religious minorities in the United States challenges the ability to keep up traditional practices cross-generationally. Hammer (2015) explains how religious law is a guide to traditional relationships such as arranged marriages. She describes the role of marriage as an important religious institution within the Islamic faith while also functioning as a factor in maintaining heteronormativity and gender roles. Marriage is actually considered to be a religious obligation as it constitutes half of one's "dean" (religion) (Hammer, 2015). However, queer Islamic marriages are a rarity, and it is treated as a contradiction to Islamic values despite this being an ahistorical simplification of sexual attitudes in Islam (Taylor, 2015). Multiple periods of Islamic history prior to Western engagement and colonialism have shown that sexual attitudes toward homosexual figures have continually varied from highly lax to highly disapproving. However, there is a very important distinction between these attitudes as they existed in pre-colonial periods. Naber (2012) argues that the categorization and language such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual" are western binaries that cannot fully characterize the complex forms of sexuality that existed in Muslim societies (Naber, 2012). For that reason, I find it important to articulate

the danger in expressing Islamic societies as “homophobic” by nature rather than fully examining the political histories of heteronormative expectations.

In this case, interviews often reflected that compulsory heterosexuality is an assumed precondition for enacting legitimate Arab-Muslim relationships and marriages. These conversations emanated the understanding that the idea of a “good Arab girl” expropriates homosexuality and queer Arab-Muslims. Despite this, it is imperative to recognize that queer Arab Muslims have always existed, and the community in Dearborn, Michigan is no exception. So while these individuals have a position within the community, have influenced and been influenced by the community, they are often erased from the conversation entirely. Heteronormative productions of Arabness and cultural authenticity have historically constructed homosexuality as a Western concept (Naber, 2012). In response to negative orientalist representations of the Arab world in colonial discourses, masculinist Arab nationalists have responded by designating homosexuality as non-normative and “Western.” In doing so, identities were unified in response to a perceived western threat and served to strengthen nationalist attitudes in the region (Naber, 2012). Upon immigration, these oppositional identities were continually produced in response to the perceived negative attitudes in American society. The conflation of “homosexuality” with “Western” has functioned to further sever the Arab from the American identity and reinforce heteropatriarchal systems in the community (Naber, 2012).

Hammer emphasizes the challenge in applying Islamic law to the lives of American Muslims because they are not living in an Islamic country. Instead, Muslim Americans of many cultural backgrounds depend on organizational structures within their community to practice Islam. Thus, Muslim societies across the country debate marriage and sexuality as they interact with American culture. This creates a diversity of experiences and opinions around the

appropriate way to approach a romantic relationship (Hammer, 2015). For many women, seeking a relationship for themselves is something that is typically done in great privacy from extended family and community members in order to maintain optics until the traditional ceremonies are confirmed (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). Social mores unique to Arab American communities are especially important within the pre-marital courtship period where being caught “dating” bears social and familial repercussions for being in an inappropriate or *haram* relationship (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). For some, finally making it to the *tolbeh* without facing repercussions is often the goal, and so the event appears to become a “hall pass” for couples to be together publicly especially if the couple was established without the permission of either person’s parents.

The public perception of courtship in Arab and Muslim American communities is treated as if it is on a sliding scale of “traditional” to “Americanized” processes (Mir, 2016). Mir describes the many planes of disagreement between American and Islamic mores in the courtship process. This research was not focused on an Arab community however the implications of Islamic mores are generalizable to Arab-Muslim communities. Leaving Arab or American (if not both) cultural expectations unsatisfied by one’s relationship choices is nearly impossible to avoid. For this reason, it is not uncommon for young Muslims to mask the reality of their romantic situation. This could mean hiding a relationship from one’s parents to hiding one’s lack of romantic or sexual experiences from non-Muslim peers. Because of the vast disconnect between American dating culture and traditional Islamic marriage customs, the progression of romantic relationships is not strictly dependent on one’s emotional feelings for another. Muslim American women mediate both their romantic feelings and cultural expectations in a number of ways. Although the gendered continuum of courtship practices might be useful for characterizing

distinct values and perceptions, the reality for many Muslim American women was not clearly situated at one point on the spectrum (Mir, 2016).

One major shift in relationships is the larger role Arab-Muslim American women getting married now have within the courtship process than women have in previous generations. Othman (2019) takes a comparative stance on first and second-generation Arab-Muslim women to identify contributing factors to the shift in courtship through interviews. Second Generation women reportedly delay marriage until after finishing their education, going against perceived traditional cultural expectations for a woman to marry as soon as possible. Education and socialization with Muslims outside of their ethnic community along with limited options for potential Muslim spouses frequently leads Arab Muslims to pursue relationships with other ethnic backgrounds but the same religious ones (Othman, 2019).

Continuous development of a complicated courtship scene for AMAW suggests there is a gap between how the experiences of forming a relationship differ cross-generationally. Second-generation women may be more willing to start a serious relationship in secret and then initiate marriage for themselves whereas the first generation may have waited until their parents found a spouse for them and navigated a different role to see the outcome they desire from their marriage (Othman, 2021)

Navigating relationships prior to the *tolbeh* has become a very unclear path as a means of avoiding gossip of being in a *haram* relationship and the social repercussions it bears. For this reason, the mechanisms of self-initiating marriage become more elaborate cross-generationally (Othman, 2021). Women are able to form emotional connections on their own terms through different outlets than what has previously been available. With influences of schooling, workplaces, and the internet on the table, one can question if and how second-generation Arab

American women navigate their path to the pre-wedding tradition of a tolbeh in comparison to first-generation Arab-Muslim American women. Therefore, it is possible to question if first-generation women felt a more personal connection to their tolbeh as a site for a potential union while second-generation women more often have pre-established relationships that are only publicly confirmed through the event.

The three main areas focused on building an important context through which this study has been conducted. The understanding of tradition in the diaspora allows us to investigate the tolbeh as a site of cultural nationalism to one “home” country. The selective reproduction of culture through diasporic communities pressures skewed gendered roles. Community structures of reputation and gossip then influence the unclear path to marriage for AMAW. With the intention of dispelling an essentialist or universal Arab American experience, one can question the emotional experiences with love and sexuality of AMAW as they navigate their way to marriage.

Methods

I investigated the generational differences in pre-marital relationship-making and the marriage experiences of 14 Arab-Muslim American women who grew up in Dearborn through partially structured qualitative interviews (Appendix I). I utilized snowball sampling, social media flyers (Appendix II), and emails to recruit these participants. Target participants were individuals who identified as Arab, identified as a woman, were born in the United States, had grown up within Dearborn, Michigan, and had either had a *tolbeh* or *katb kitab* at the time of their interview. Ultimately, the sample consisted of 11 Lebanese American women, 2 Iraqi American women, and 1 Yemeni American woman. Ages ranged from 21 to 48 years. The sample of women interviewed in this research has been limited to Arab-Muslim American women who grew up in Dearborn. All the women interviewed either have been married religiously through a *katb kitab* or will be married within the next year. All of the women are in heterosexual relationships that have progressed past the point of a *tolbeh* although not all of them chose to have one. In order to analyze the generational differences, I focused on recruitment for two separate samples: women who had been married in the last 10 years (second generation), to women who had been married prior to that (first generation).

My interviews were partially structured around three specific areas: perceptions of cultural and gender identity, pre-marital relationship-making experiences, and marriage processes with a thorough inventory of the *tolbeh*. In-depth and partially structured interviews allow women to speak to their own realities without having to follow an exact path of conversation as one would with a structured interview. This was my goal as it lives up to the feminist principles of allowing women the space to speak to their experiences subjectively and emphasizing the diversity of these experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

A primary approach used to investigate lived experiences within these interviews was Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) existential phenomenology which treats the body as the viewpoint of the world. Merleau-Ponty conceptualized the embodied person as they exist in a network of relationships that situates them in the world. Experiences with our existence are interconnected with that of other people and with the world in which we live (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). Hence, in this study, the lived experiences and meanings being interpreted are inseparable from the societies, cultures, and people with which they are connected. Understanding relationship-making, sexuality, marriage, and culture are greatly influenced by the situational context in which we live and navigate (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). This approach is imperative to the ultimate goal to underline the complexities of this cultural phenomenon and the multitude of ways in which Arab-Muslim American women in Dearborn mediate it.

The population of interest highlights the intersection of religious law, cultural tradition, diasporic trends, gender norms, and heteronormativity. Focusing on Arab Muslims in Dearborn Michigan is useful because it has the largest concentration of Arab Muslims in the United States. Not only does Dearborn offer great diversity of individuals with different backgrounds and experiences, but it also maintains a tightly knit Arab American community with a rich history. Arab Americans are not officially recognized as a minority group in the United States so knowing the exact demographics is difficult. However, the Arab American Institute estimates that as of 2017 there are approximately 98 thousand Arab Americans living in Wayne County, which includes the city of Dearborn (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2017). Having strong Arab-American communities produces social expectations that are unique for both Arab and American communities. Tools of reputation and social control function differently for those in Southeast Michigan than they would for Arab Americans living without a strong community

elsewhere in the United States where Arab American communities are more diffuse (Abouhassan, 2019).

Reflexivity Statement

It is necessary to acknowledge my own social position in relation to those discussed in this research. I am a second-generation Lebanese American woman who grew up in a tightly-knit Arab American community and have had to navigate the same social boundaries I dissect in the literature review. As detailed in the introduction, I have watched my close family and friends navigate their romantic relationships through the Arab American subculture, until leaving Dearborn to go to Ann Arbor to pursue my bachelor's degree. That being said I still visit often and stay in touch with friends, family, and community organizations. For this reason, conducting these interviews came with benefits and possible disadvantages. By being a member of the community I interviewed within; I was better able to facilitate the interview in a productive manner. I was conscious when navigating culturally sensitive topics and I could often bond with interviewees over shared experiences. Through a lived cultural understanding of Dearborn along with an academic foundation to dissect it through, rather than solely an academic background. Participants may feel less obligated to paint a perfect picture of the community and more comfortable focusing on their own experiences within it. Because of xenophobic and islamophobic tropes emphasized in American media, I often feel the need to express that I am not a victim, nor infantilized by Arab culture to non-Arab individuals. I am hopeful that women who share this concern didn't feel the pressure to prove such to me as a member of the community.

One disadvantage present in this research is that women may assume that I would be too connected to their community. This could lead to a fear of judgment or gossip from myself that may prevent participants from disclosing their experiences in full detail. I always began interviews by disclosing that these interviews were entirely anonymous. I am confident that disclosing that these interviews would be detached from their name and other identifying factors mitigated this fear to the best possible extent. However, there are specific topics discussed in my interviews that carry a heavy stigma within the community. At times when I feel that this may affect the results I am presenting, I will thoroughly elaborate on possible limitations within the chapter.

Furthermore, participants may not have explained things that they assumed I understood even though their experiences and understanding differ from mine. Many times throughout my interview process, women have referenced aspects of the community that I personally do feel aware of. However, my experiences with these factors could be very different from their experiences. For that reason, I often urged interviewees to expand more on what we were discussing even when they appeared self-explanatory.

Chapter One: “We Don’t Date, We Get Married”

“Before we had a *tolbeh* I would say, we talked a couple of times, we went out a couple of times, and then I told him, ‘you know I gotta let my parents [know], because I can’t lie to my parents.’”
– Samar, *First Generation Lebanese American*

Interviewees met their significant others in a number of ways: through mutual friends, through high school or college classes, by being long-time family friends, and some even met through social media like Instagram. Various participants even emphasized not being a part of an “arranged marriage.” Making this distinction appeared to be important to demonstrate that they held agency within the relationship.

Only one respondent, Maria, was “set up” with Omar, her now-husband, my family members. However, when reflecting on her marriage, she expressed that being set up by her family felt like a setback for her relationship with her husband. Maria is a first-generation Lebanese-Muslim American who grew up in Dearborn and moved to Dearborn Heights after getting married. At a family wedding in 1994, she was a bridesmaid, and Omar, who is a close member of the bride’s family, was a groomsman. The bride of this wedding noticed them talking to each other and pointed out the potential couple to Maria’s father. Her father, who already knew Omar and his family and felt he had established trust with their family, went to Omar’s father and suggested that Maria and Omar could get to know each other. Under the supervision of both fathers, the couple was expected to spend time together and consider whether or not they would get married. From there, Omar would regularly visit Maria’s home and sit with her and her family members. Having a third party present as the couple got to know each other was a religious and cultural expectation that Maria’s family had. This was also the case for most first-generation interviewees, where the third party was expected to prevent physical contact like touching or kissing, inappropriate conversations, and premarital sex between prospective

couples. These supervised visits went on for a few months before Maria decided to no longer see Omar.

Maria: He was going to propose on my birthday. And this was really hard for me to swallow. I was starting to get really nervous because I wasn't in the same place that he was. It wasn't the timing, it just wasn't how this all should come about.

It just wasn't what I envisioned. When you asked me earlier, "What did I expect getting married to be like?" I didn't think *so*. This is not what I wanted. You don't put two people in a room with your brother and sister right there and tell them, 'Talk, get to know each other!' You know?

I told my parents, 'This isn't working out for me. I don't want to do this. I'm not in that place right now, I don't have feelings for him. It's just not right. I don't feel it.' And so my dad was like, 'OK, if that's what you want but you need to tell him now before this gets any further.' But my whole family knew about it, and that was like a lot of pressure for me. I broke his heart and I broke up with him and he hated me afterward, now the whole family hated me. "

Maria, who was 17 at the time, expressed feeling like she had let her family and Omar's family down but she also didn't want that pressure to dictate how she would get married. Although she felt like she let her family down, she expressed relief to figure things out on her own. As time passed, she graduated high school and started her first semester of college. It was around this time that she ran into Omar for the first time in almost a year, and grew curious about whether her feelings would change under the changed circumstances of her life since graduating. However, she feared getting stuck in the same situation she had experienced before. With her younger siblings always present, she found it difficult to fully get to know Omar. With that barrier in mind, she feared committing to a relationship with someone she didn't know well enough to love. In our interview, she reflected on how she went home and immediately talked to her dad about getting to know Omar in a different way. She hesitantly proposed getting coffee

with him outside of the house, and with equal hesitation, her father approved. After a phone call of making amends, Maria and Omar began going on dates alone.

Maria: It was always just us like we actually dated. You know, we went out, we went to shows. We did everything. We did so much and I felt like that was very nontraditional back then.

Maria's experience highlights several common trends of these interviews that I will elucidate in this chapter: the role played by parents in facilitating the transition from "getting to know" to "getting married," the authority to navigate intimate relationships discreetly, and the shame associated with an unsuccessful relationship.

The "Paved" Path to Getting Married

An especially apparent difference between the first and second-generation interviews is the shifted dynamic of parental facilitation. Most interviewees who had gotten married over 10 years ago depended on their father to facilitate their relationship until the wedding and coordinate the religious and practical logistics of the marriage. The initiation of the relationships varied greatly, but there was a perceived pressure to make the father aware sooner rather than later. Again, this was for a multitude of reasons. Some women expressed that they felt guilt, or as if they were breaching their religious values by spending time alone with their significant other without their father's permission. Furthermore, concealing the relationship from the father figure took away from the envisioned role he expected to play within the family. Others expressed the pressure as coming from a perceived community expectation to pursue romantic relationships through the familial space rather than publicly.

“I told my mom first so she could go tell my Dad. And then my dad had to accept that or not accept my husband's request to get to know me. My dad approved and we were allowed to talk on the phone -- only my Dad's phone-- for four months before my dad would let me pick up the phone and call him. Of course, I did it anyway... And then there'd be a time when he would be allowed to come over. That period of time wouldn't be too long, it wouldn't be more than like 30 days, 60 days before the tolbeh.”
 -- *Mona, First Generation Lebanese American*

Mona describes a really interesting aspect of the relationship-making process that I found from a lot of first generation women. The initiation of the relationship was contingent on the approval of her father and her prospective husband’s father. Her father played a role in the premarital phase of the relationship, designating the length of this phase and the terms that Mona would get to know her prospective husband. She describes a systematic process where they would get to know each other over the phone, and then get to spend supervised time together. When Mona says “of course I did it anyways,” regarding breaking her fathers rules about making phone calls to her prospective husband, I remember we both just laughed. When we started our interview, she asserted her experience was “the most basic, classic, by the book marriage process” which made this moment all the more interesting to me. There was an implicit understanding that the reality of relationship-making in both generations deviated from what was communicated or represented as the normative processes.

Traditionally, communal structures were maximized as a network for parents to find spouses for their children and initiate a series of meetings for a potential couple (Othman, 2019). This arrangement puts the options for courtship mostly in the hands of the parents. This is where a tolbeh would come in as a way for the families to formally meet and for the young man’s family to formally request the woman’s hand in marriage (Othman, 2019). This occurs after the

couple gets to know each other more personally, but typically in the presence of a family member so the couple is not left alone together. The marriage is finally made legal with a marriage contract known as the *katb kitab* that usually takes place after the *tolbeh* but before the wedding ceremony.

For this reason, I found the communication between Mona and her mother was really interesting alongside other interviews. Mona, like many others, emphasized the importance of their mothers in this process. I found that this position as the “middle man” was much greater than a simple line of communication. In this section I intend to emphasize the crucial position of the mothers of these participants in navigating their relationship making process. Furthermore, I intend to demonstrate how this role grows with the second generation as the relationship making process moves out of the familial or household space.

Participants felt that publicly spending time with a prospective husband “looked like” or was associated with American “dating.” Many women noted that they did not date their partners, or did not like labeling their relationship as dating because they weren’t having premarital sex. They often viewed dating as an “Americanized” relationship that was not compatible with their religious or cultural values. Therefore, it was not uncommon for women to conceal their relationships from the Dearborn community. They would do this by having dates or meetings outside of the city. A complicated yet consistent understanding of dating across all participants is a core motif of this thesis and will be discussed further in the next section. From both generations, participants expressed a distinction between how they understood “dating” and the way they experienced relationship-making from the time they met their significant other until the *tolbeh* or even the *katb kitab*. For that reason, the time frame from meeting until the *tolbeh* will

be referred to as “getting to know each other,” “talking” or the “talking stage” as described by the women I interviewed.

For first-generation participants, a father figure was usually responsible for designating the boundaries of the talking stage. This meant setting rules to when, where and under what conditions a couple sees each other, talks on the phone or engages with one another's family. Although these rules were ultimately decided upon by the father, mothers played an important role in negotiating these terms as well. The mother's role often functioned as a gateway for the women, because the mother would hear the concerns of the women regarding the internal conditions of the relationship. So if the interviewee felt like she needed more time to get to know her potential husband, or if she was concerned about the relationship she would turn to her mother. Many first-generation interviewees described the pre-marriage time period taking place in their home, however, the conditions varied greatly. Some described being alone with their significant other, with a family member in a different room or nearby. Others reported that there was always a family member in the same room. Whether or not these set conditions were followed closely by the respondent varied between first-generation participants. Many women commented on ways they would circumvent these conditions through things like secret phone calls, taking walks together through their university's garden, and studying together in public libraries.

Furthermore, the talking stages for all but one first-generation participant lasted for a duration of less than a year. Some participants had taken as few as a couple of weeks before a *tolbeh* was initiated with their partner. It seemed to be agreed upon amongst many women that this period was meant to be short, even amongst second-generation interviewees who had been in 3 to 4 year-long relationships with their husbands prior to their own *tolbeh*. In most of these

cases, it was the prospective husband that asked the woman's father for a tolbeh. In some cases, it was the woman's father and prospective husband's father that initiated it. The logistic progression through the different marriage stages was mostly reliant on male father figures.

Mona: If I meet people who don't have the same background as me, when I tell them my story of how I got married and how I met my husband, how we had the tolbeh, how we had a katb kitab and then we had the wedding ... They sometimes think we were oppressed in a way. They think that we were confined to this path and we're only allowed to do that. But I think what people don't understand is that when you're growing up in our community, and when you're growing up in our culture, and around our people, that's something that you want. Everybody's doing it and you see everybody else having that tradition. We were always *excited*, like I was excited about my tolbeh, I was excited about my katb kitab, I was excited about my wedding, I was excited to be able to start the path and go through the path you know? And honestly, I think my kids would be the same way because it's always been such a positive part of our culture and our religion.

Women in the first-generation group expressed their contentment with these cultural expectations. Demonstrating agency in the marriage process appeared to be important, especially as women compared their experiences with marriages in the community today. I found it interesting that they immediately made this comparison to contextualize their experience to how they perceived more recent marriages. They appeared to be conscious of a changing relationship-making culture in younger generation couples which they saw as straying from this “path” that was normative to them. They frequently voiced that their marriage traditions were not debated, nor did they want them to be. Having a designated “talking stage” and subsequent events designated through their father isn't perceived as burdening nor as controlling. Mona, for

example, expressed being excited to go down the “path” to getting married. After watching older sisters, cousins, and friends get married in the same way, these marital traditions didn’t pose a barrier to the expectations respondents already had. She also believed having the support of both sets of parents deepened the confidence she had in her spouse. The approval of prospective husbands is a standard that was expressed in many different interviews. In this way, the marriage process paralleled hegemonic American traditions because young women were socialized to expect these steps to get married. Subsequently, it is assumed that they will idealize and desire the same marriage process they witnessed, continuing the tradition.

Nadine Naber argues that articulations of “Arabness” in diasporic communities allow Arab Americans to gestate a cultural identity that dissents anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes (Naber, 2012). Such articulations centralize what she describes as the “triangulated ideal” of a good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory heterosexuality. I found the presentation of these aspects to be particularly important to interviewees, where strong family and community ties were common descriptors of their Arabness and their experiences in Dearborn. More specifically, I can sense deeply rooted notions of womanhood in their affiliations with relationship-making serves as an especially apparent site of demonstrating Arabness. How relationships are initiated through work and school settings, rather than actively going out on “first dates,” or the urgency to tell their parents when they’re interested in a boy in order to avoid being caught in a haram relationship are both aspects that they perceived as distinctly Arab. Women immediately recognize a girl and a boy being alone in public as a transgression of familial and social norms. This heteronormative presumption that a man and woman are bound to be in some romantic relationship directly implicates their image as a “good Arab girl.” Seeking permission from their parents to get to know a man for the purpose of getting married

relies on the function of a “good Arab family.” These are factors that articulate cultural authenticity before cultural traditions such as the *tolbeh* and *katb kitab* are even brought up. Positioning this investigation of Arabness and how it functions through relationship-making represents the maintenance of the family through the crossover of generations. Values of relationship making are inherited from the parents, most importantly the mother, to build a relationship with various qualities that support the reproduction of a “good Arab family” in their progeny. The acceptability of family within the community and how such acceptability is uniquely reliant on the women of the community yet governed by the men in the family. Such that the ultimate permissions and privileges of the relationship are dictated by the father within the family. Consequently, designating the ideals of a “good Arab family,” as Naber describes it, perpetuates a binary struggle between Arabness and Americanness. Arabness is represented through family loyalty; in my own interviews, this implies loyalty to the family structure and its gendered hierarchy as well.

As Mona shows in her own experience, there was a known road, a normative and “authentic” cultural dictation to what relationship making would be. Furthermore, Arabness is represented through womanhood, more specifically through sexual purity and religiousness (as Mona said, “Our culture goes hand in hand with religion. Religion implies preservation of dignity and self-respect of a woman and the honor of a man to not risk that preservation before marriage”). Many women viewed breaching these rules of “good Arabness” as signifying sexual deviance and threatening marriageability and family respectability. Furthermore, these ideals integrate essentialist interpretations of Arab purity into standards of belonging and respectability. Many interviewees demonstrated such standards played a large role in their decision-making process, and that belongingness was inherently conflated with marriageability. As Maria

articulated in her experience, and as many women will demonstrate in this chapter, there is an inherent shame they feel with a failed relationship. These conversations highlighted how painful experiences with relationship-making have an added layer of embarrassment for how it reflects on their families. Going on dates, getting divorced or having premarital sex were all treated as deviant sexual behaviors which reflected poorly on the women who experienced these things. However, the consequences of these behaviors were not limited to having a harder time getting married. Such reflections were not limited to the women and their marriageability alone. Interviewees often assumed that doing these things would implicate family relationships.

With regards to how many women compared their own experiences to a perceived communal change, I speculate that this binary struggle of Arab purity and Americanized impurity is exacerbated by generational gaps. Furthermore, the responses I have gathered are directly influenced by each woman's experiences with time and cultural change.

I argue that emphasizing the ability to demonstrate agency was an important ability for interviewees to show. First of all, as I mentioned earlier, women were contextualizing their marriage experiences in comparison to how they viewed premarital relationships in Dearborn recently, whether that be through their children or other community members. Their perceptions of the younger generation are that they hold oppositional opinions: the traditional *tolbeh* being meaningless or patriarchal and the normalization of “dating.” It’s possible that the first-generation interviewees are explaining that they did not feel the need to skip any steps because the normative experience was not one they were trying to change. Furthermore, it is possible that this emphasis on agency was also a reflection of the dynamic between myself and the first-generation interviewees. I am younger than this group but still a member of the Dearborn community, so it is possible that they assumed I took the oppositional opinion.

Furthermore, they could simply be defending their own experiences against a perceived counterculture.

I also question if the nature of these interviews enflamed the assumption that I took an oppositional opinion. Or possibly, if interviewees had an assumption that I was critiquing the normative experiences as traditional, backward, or barbaric as a result of orientalist stereotypes that have been weaponized in colonialist discourses. I began each interview by introducing myself as a student in the Women's and Gender Studies department at the University of Michigan. Women's studies, and hegemonic feminism, are historically linked to the United States' imperialist efforts to intervene in Middle Eastern countries under orientalist presumptions that they are barbaric countries and unsafe for women. A consequence of this history is the stereotype that Arab culture is oppressive, traditional, and violently patriarchal. In the United States, many Arab and Muslim women are conscious of the frequent victimization of their experiences, including stereotypes that insinuate Arab-Muslim women are always victims of forced marriage. It is possible that the women I interviewed were especially careful to emphasize their agency to counter any expected efforts to "victimize" them.

On this same note, attitudes toward the gendered roles in this "path" to getting married were neutral for first-generation women. I find it important to emphasize that respondents in the elder generation group were critical of gendered experiences with things like community reputation and financial independence ("there is no such thing as a bad reputation for boys in this culture;" "Guys can run around town doing whatever they want, it's always forgiven.") For this reason, I speculate that the neutrality toward gendered experiences in the talking stage was an intentional presentation of their comfort with the normative experience, rather than resulting from blindness to ideas of gendered expectations. The awareness of how patriarchy functions

within the community was acknowledged even when women disconnected the gendered roles in the relationship-making experience from the power dynamic that is invoked under patriarchal processes. The father figure was expected to oversee the talking stage and then manage and present it according to his standard of respectability. These standards could then be negotiated or bargained by the mother. There was a social order of decision making in the normative relationship making process that was described by respondents, however, whether they experienced these formations as oppressive varied.

Mona: So my dad wanted a tolbeh a lot sooner and my mom wanted to give it some time before we did it because my mom was a little more lenient... She played the role of trying to get to know what was going on in the relationship trying to get to know if this really the right person for me. She'd asked me more questions because my mom was born in America, and she wasn't blind to the way things happen or whatever. So they [her parents] played separate roles. My dad set the rules. My mom tried to talk to me, to make sure that the rules weren't getting in the way of me really finding out if this was the right person for me.

Nadia Dalal Shebli: Did you trust your mom's opinion on that?

Mona: Oh yeah. Absolutely, we could always talk to her.

Mona's high regard for her mother's approval of the inner relationship represents one of the most obvious themes in this project. Mother-daughter relationships seemed to be a tool of navigation and security through the pre-marital phases. Many individuals expressed having a closer relationship with their mother than their father and felt less inclined to conceal aspects of their private life from them. Maternal kinship produced a consultative space for women to depend on each other in order to maintain accepted social positions within the community. Many women reported informing their mother that they were interested in their prospective husbands

very early, for some as soon as the day they met. Most women expressed trusting the advisory role their mother took on in response. In addition, mothers acted as liaisons between the women and their fathers who may not be receptive to how women choose to meet or get to know prospective.

Patriarchal bargaining, as described by Deniz Kandiyoti, is a strategy used by women as a tool for navigating different forms of patriarchy (1988). There are a unique set of constraints for Arab-Muslim women living both under the patriarchal conditions of the United States and within the aforementioned struggle between Arab “authenticity” and American “impurity” that exists amongst communities of Arab diaspora. These constraints are incredibly variable and related to numerous factors such as age, race, sexuality, country of origin, and more. Women in these interviews leverage mother-daughter relations into opportunities to maximize their own potential marriages. More specifically, this kinship allows maternal bargaining with the father’s governing role in relationship-making without transgressing the gendered hierarchy of the family structure. I want to note that while this warrants indirect mobility within the romantic relationship, it also adds another dimension of parental control. Facilitating the needs of the interviewee through the mother figure also requires the screening and approval of their mother. Furthermore, while mothers are bargaining with patriarchal constraints, they are also filtering which constraints they are bargaining under according to their own perceptions of Arab womanhood. Such perceptions are implicated with gendered, racialized, and hetero compulsory biases that often prioritize endogamy. In maintaining a gendered family hierarchy, family respectability in the community is upheld by the triangulated standard of “Authentic Arabness” (Naber, 2012). However, the mother plays a fundamental role in supporting and advising interviewees in their marriage experiences.

In contrast to the second-generation group, first-generation women shared common expectations of what their Arab-Muslim marriage experience would look like. The perception of marriage was a path that was pre-paved by the expectations and conditions set by a father figure and had the potential to be negotiated with by their mother. Nonetheless, each woman's experience deviated from this imagined standard in some way, such as how Mona lightly mentioned how she would have phone calls with her partner behind her father's back. It's important to reiterate that while each individual cited the rules they had laid out for them, they all expressed the ways they circumvented those rules as well. Maria and Omar, the couple I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, are just one example.

Andrea: You know, you picture yourself, that you're going to fall in love with somebody, you're going to marry someone, and that's it. There are no problems, there's no divorce, there are no issues, there are no variables. You're not going to worry about anything. It's a happy thing.

Nadia Dalal Shebli: Yeah. How about the logistics of that part? Like how you would meet him?

Andrea: Really never thought about it. I just thought that he would come and ask my parents. And then that was it. Obviously, that didn't happen that way.

Andrea, a 44-year-old Lebanese-American nurse practitioner from Dearborn, had already been Islamically married with a *katb kitab* and then divorced before meeting her current husband. Connotations with divorce were very negative, and interestingly, fearful amongst participants. Divorce was characterized by most women as a worst-case scenario as it would implicate familial and communal perceptions of their reputations. In Andrea's case, there was greater pressure than before to perfect her next marriage. She explained that being divorced felt like she had two strikes already and the next time she wanted to talk to a guy it *had* to be perfect.

But she also emphasized that her parents, especially her dad, weren't doing anything to cause that pressure. It was more so an internalized understanding of what she was supposed to do, and what she did wrong according to that standard. Furthermore, she recognized divorce and its association with a failure to meet the perceived standard of Arab womanhood. Such failure threatened the respectability of her and her family to the extent that she never intended to ask for the divorce herself.

Andrea: I graduated high school and I got engaged to someone else because it was the right thing to do. You know, a good guy from a good family. Well, my heart was somewhere else. And not just that, there were issues. I'll just say this. I already grew up in a strict home. I didn't need another strict home. I didn't need somebody checking my face to see if there was makeup on... Let me give you an example: we would go to a restaurant, we would pick the corner seat. You know, don't show your wrists, don't wear jewelry... I'm not going to say or do or change anything, or say I don't want him. I could never build up the guts to. Looking back now, if he had hit me— which he never did— I probably would not have said that either.

Nadia Shebli: Really?

Andrea: Oh, you don't say those things. It was like, you're going to get in trouble for everything if you complain. But my dad noticed. My dad came to me and asked. I just got quiet and he said, "No, we're not doing this."

Divorce was not something she had initiated herself, it was her father who interjected into the relationship. It was under her fathers' governing in the relationship that divorce, which is regarded as shameful on the woman in the relationship, was permissible. As these marriage standards were set by the father figures, they have also privileged the confidence to break or re-decide those standards. All in all, the support of her father did not mitigate the internal consequences of getting divorced. Andrea even emphasized a palpable degree of shame that her

experience left her with, independent from how her parents responded to the divorce. While divorce is permissible in Islam, women often fear being socially outcasted and experience feelings of isolation and shame (Al-Krenawi & Jackson, 2014). More specifically, she feared the way the divorce served as a reflection of her ability to be a good wife, and her ability to fulfill Arab womanhood. Whether the judgment she felt as a result of a real or imagined community perception, her experience reflects a central fear of many participants: the possibility of divorce. As we will see in the next section, avoiding divorce was often a driving factor women considered when prolonging the pre-marriage talking stage. Interestingly, many of the deviations faced by first-generation came with perceived consequences that can be contextualized by the failure to meet a shared and imagined standard for getting married as an Arab-Muslim American woman.

Nora, a 32-year-old first-generation Lebanese American mother from Dearborn, met her husband over social media when she was 14 and married him when she was 18. She was the only respondent in the first-generation group who met their significant other through social media and had a pre-marital stage that lasted over six months. Nora's relationship was strictly over text messaging and calling until she was ready to get married at 18, which bypassed establishing the in-person conditions of her "getting to know" phase. This was unlike any other relationship reported in these interviews. Because of her circumstances, she felt that she was able to establish love, trust, and friendship with her now-husband without ever seeing him in person. This mitigated any imposition of parental facilitation. There was no concern for a communal perception nor any need to manage familial hierarchies. Also, this foreshadowed the role of technology as a space for courtship in the second-generation interviews. Online courtship allows for relationship-making to circumvent physical proximity and public perception of the

relationship. Muslim women specifically benefit from the increased sense of agency, ability to set boundaries, and confidentiality through online courtship (Rochadiat et al., 2017).

Eman: So I knew my now husband for many years before he even courted me, and I say courted.

He told his mother he was head over heels over me and his mother came and told my mother and my mother told me and said, “are you interested right now?”

But before any of that, we bumped into each other at the library. He went to Wayne state at the time I was at U of M Dearborn. We'd see each other in the community, I knew him, I knew his family was family very well.

And it was friendly right, but then that moment when you're not even thinking like this could be the one that they show interest in you, it sort of prompts all these feelings right it just it's interesting because when somebody shows interest in you, it sort of prompt all these emotions think you had come out.

It's not like I was thinking “God I wish this guy would talk to me,” I would see him, it never crossed my mind. But the moment he showed interest, I was like “oh hell yeah,” It's funny how that happens, right?

... Then he came to the mall where I was working in the shoe department. He's like, “Hey I'm looking for a graduation gift for my sister-in-law.”

And I'm thinking to myself, “you're lying through your teeth, I know exactly why you're here my mother already told me.”

I took him upstairs for some shoes and as we were coming down the escalator he said to me, “Did your mom talk to you?”

I lied initially and I was like “No ” and he looked really upset so then I was like “okay yes.”

Eman, a 40-year-old first-generation Lebanese American lawyer from Dearborn Heights, has divorced parents and expressed the absence of her father from a strong decision-making role within her family. So while having a talking stage with her husband within her house after she

had the permission of a parent, these were conditions set by her mother and Eman negotiated with her directly. This was unique from others who had seen their mothers as middle men. Having watched her mother take on this role after struggling with her divorce, she expressed having a unique perspective on getting married. Her experiences made her especially wary of initiating a marriage, but also especially reliant on the approval and guidance of her mother. For that reason, she had prioritized education after high school over marriage, which she felt made her experience different from her peers at the time.

The Second Generation and the Confidant Mother

Although the mother-daughter relationship guided the intimacy of many women in both groups of interviews, the second generation of interviewees demonstrated a more elaborate role for the mothers to play. There appeared to be a shift of parental responsibility and an increased pre-marriage time frame between the first and second generations. Many second-generation women reported having been exclusively seeing their now-fiancés/husbands before the tolbeh for a much longer time period than most of the first generation women. These pre-tolbeh time frames lasted anywhere from 6 months to 6 years. Some first-generation participants, like Mona, relied on their mothers to balance the scales of cultural expectation and relationship quality. In the second-generation groups, mothers played a new role in reconstructing how women were expected to get to know their potential partners.

Laila: There was definitely a down-low time in the beginning. No one knew, not even friends, not even roommates knew we were even like talking to each other.

I told my mom though, I was like “I’m not rushing into anything like it’s just the vibe” and she was like “okay bring him over, let me meet him... Maybe you’re a little blinded by what you see, let us be like those outside lenses for you.”

Laila, a recent graduate at the University of Michigan, reminisced about meeting Alex, her now-husband, on campus. Laila played a big role in Arab student organizations on campus and found her greatest sense of community amongst those organizations. After growing a strong connection with him she told her mom about him but stressed that she wasn't ready for an immediate commitment. It was important for her to keep the first few months of her relationship private from her friends, siblings, and father. Laila was the only interviewee who married a non-Arab and non-Muslim man who eventually converted to Islam. This posed concerns for both of them, and they kept their relationship private to avoid outside pressures and judgment. For Laila, she expressed an internal struggle with the relationship because Alex was not Muslim when they met. From the start, Laila prioritized marrying someone who was also Muslim and emphasized the value she put on her religion. It was imperative to Laila to conceal her relationship until the viability of their relationship, by her religious standards, was confirmed. If the relationship were unsuccessful, she hoped to circumvent a negative public perception of both being in an inter-religious relationship and an unsuccessful one.

Laila: Religiously, I made it clear when it was a couple of weeks in [getting to know each other.] I told him “I'm Muslim, this is a very big part of my identity and it's not something I'm going to change. While we're fresh and new, is this if this isn't like something you can see yourself growing into and learning about? If you 100% will never ever see yourself as being Muslim, we can't even get to know each other,” you know?

...I did have some internal struggles where I was like ‘I'm just like putting all this time for him not to be Muslim’ or ‘how am I gonna like recover from it, from all this time I put into this religion, and all the feelings I had for him.’ Like... knowing that my mom warned me from the beginning... At that point, I was like I'm just going to face it head-on just going to ask him.

This “down-low” period lasted a duration of 10 months before making close friends and family aware of her relationship with Alex. During this time frame, Laila was committed to

building stability from the inside. This included giving Alex time to learn about Islam. It was with her mom's guidance that Laila was able to produce the stability she was looking for and ultimately move forward with her relationship by meeting his family and introducing both sides of the family to each other. Othman (2021) describes steps taken to normalize self-initiation of marriage by second-generation Arab American women. There is resistance to these processes in a natural effort to maintain Palestinian nationalism in which women respond with numerous strategies to see their desired marriage outcomes. Recognizing the various mechanisms women navigate and negotiate with cultural expectations is crucial as they ultimately became a central part of my research analysis. Second generation Palestinian American women utilize resources such as education and larger social networks to connect outside of their own communities (Othman, 2021). These social spheres offer greater independence and therefore space to initiate relationships privately. Cultural expectations were then negotiated more independently by these women, increasing the agency of their relationship-making processes (Othman, 2021).

This experience reminded me of similar interviews conducted by Enaya Hammad Othman investigating marital choices of Palestinian American women found it was common for her subjects to prioritize having a Muslim spouse but not one of the same ethnic background (2019). Unlike first-generation women, parental acceptance of spouses outside of their ethnic group was more common for second-generation women. Muslim identity becomes prioritized over Arab identity when negotiating marriage prospects who are not within the same ethnic group (Othman, 2019). Prioritizing religious identity and religious expectations over cultural ones was a common trend within lots of previous research done on the Arab-Muslim courtship process. However, there is still contention over the acceptance of non-Muslim men being accepted by Arab-Muslim parents. The meaning of marriage is prioritized in its relation to

religious duties in Islam, and so it takes precedence over cultural origins. In Islam, getting married is believed to complete half of one's *deen* (religion) (Othman, 2019).

Laila: She (her mom) was big on asking him the hard questions, the questions that I would only bring up casually. And she was big on talking about cultural differences like, “What do you do if you guys have kids? How are you going to make sure no culture is lost? How are you going to raise your kids, under which religion? He converted, but things like that she was big on those but when she recognized that he was growing into the answers, [I got approval/encouragement from her to continue the relationship].

Even after bringing her dad into the conversation, she described his role as “laid-back,” where she coordinated the marriage with her mom. She stressed not wanting to rush to get married right away even after the families got to know each other. The marriage process was not initiated until three years into the relationship. She cited wanting to graduate from her university before getting married as her main reason for not wanting to get married sooner.

Completing undergraduate schooling or receiving acceptance into a graduate school program was a common benchmark for second-generation respondents to accomplish before taking a step forward in their marriage process. Interviewees cited a variety of reasons for education serving as the benchmark. Education has previously been used to measure female accomplishments because it predicts economic access. Arab Americans demonstrate higher rates of female educational achievement yet lower rates of female employment (Read & Oselin, 2008). Jen’nan Read terms this gap as the “education-employment paradox”, offering an important distinction in how education may not reduce gender inequality under various cultural and religious contexts. Instead, female education achievement can act as a collective family resource and subsequently is a mode of cultural capital. By prioritizing education, women are equipped to uplift their family status with and without utilizing that education in employment.

Many of the first-generation women who pursued higher education degrees started college after getting married and having kids. Taking on motherhood, education, and sometimes working all at once is a heavy load of obligations to balance. This group of women expressed relief with the perceived progress for younger AMAW, emphasizing that it makes room for them to meet someone and not have to push off their education for marriage and children. A few first-generation women went on to say establishing financial independence is a way to establish security and education as a way to accomplish that security. I designate this shift in social expectations around education as “perceived progress” to recognize how educational attainment may actually play a role as social and cultural capital rather than demonstrate a movement away from cultural normalities (Read & Oselin, 2008).

Furthermore, the exact dynamic of the role parents play in the second-generation women’s experiences varied greatly. Some had experiences similar to Laila’s, where their fathers were made aware of their relationship as soon as the relationship was internally established. Similarly, the role these dads played was laid back, while the mothers acted as advisors to the women and facilitators of the pre-marriage conditions and through the marriage.

On the other hand, some women felt that their dad would want a bigger role in the relationship. And by having this role, the women would have to follow the conditions set by their fathers. For this reason, women would wait until they were ready to get married before making their fathers aware of the relationship. Amanda, a second-generation Lebanese-American dental student from Dearborn, told her mom about Adam the day she met him. She met Adam when she was 16 and began an exclusive relationship with him a few weeks later. She depended on her mom for advice about the relationship, saying she “screened” Adam for red flags. She told her dad that she met Adam when she and her mother decided it would be a good time to initiate the

marriage with a tolbeh. She told her father about her relationship in January of 2021, and her tolbeh took place 5 years later, in April of 2021. This was a few weeks after completing her undergraduate degree.

Many women expressed that they weren't raised with an obvious standard or expectation to get married. This was a core difference between the two different groups. While first-generation women could define the standard for getting married, and contextualize their experiences in comparison to that standard, second-generation women could also define or reference the standard but didn't feel like that was their path. Most of them explained that their expectations to get married were second to their expectations to get an education past high school.. Furthermore, older generations may be more content with the idea that "love comes after marriage" whereas second-generation women may feel differently (Othman, 2021). Emotional connections play a different role because they are established differently cross-generationally due to the various new ways for independent courtship to occur such as through schooling, over the internet, and in the workplace.

I noticed a common "half open-book" attitude from a lot of the second-generation interviewees toward their moms. Interviewees expressed giving their mothers complete honesty on their concerns and feelings over their romantic relationships. Some women were even open with their mom about their first kiss, but most drew the line at sharing sexual experiences with their mom. Not only did the mothers work with the daughters to produce a good relationship with their significant other, but they also tried to guard the daughter's reputations. This meant finding a way to make the relationship work without crossing the perceived norms in the community. How the relationship "looked" mattered. Even when women were open with their mom about their relationships, the way that relationship is presented to the community and to

extended family was closely regulated. The second-generation women were intentional about where they went on dates, what they called their significant other, and who knew they were in a relationship.

In situating the preliminary relationship details with participants, I found a complex representation of the imagined normative marriage experience that was prevalent in the first generation. Triangulated notions of the good Arab girl, the good Arab family, and heteronormativity are maintained through relationship making and marriage. Yet interviewees often expressed these standards to be virtually unattainable in the relationship-making path set out in front of them. Furthermore, both groups demonstrate maternal kinship ties are central to negotiating familial expectations. Between the two groups, maternal guidance is amplified in the second generation because of the development of “Arab Dating” within these experiences. As father figures are left out of the loop of the relationship for extended periods of time, mother-daughter ties are central in producing a strong relationship. It is through these ties that the normative experience is continually restructured and negotiated to allow these relationships to manifest continually in private settings away from the familial sphere. The continually dynamic realities of the relationship-making culture in Dearborn lead to imagined community responses and stigmatization of second-generation women. Therefore relationships are concealed and associated with new language to reify communal repercussions until the father is brought into the marital process. these relationships guide change yet maintain heteronormative and patriarchal expectations of marriage and culture.

Chapter Two: “They Think Dating is Haram, They Think *Everything* is Haram”

Munna: “It wasn't allowed. You're not allowed to date, you have to marry an Arab-Muslim man from Lebanon. Preferably Bint Jbeil.”

Nadia Dalal Shebli: Did you care for the label “dating?”

Munna: No, because I wasn't allowed to date. I think because the word dating is just like such you know it's a bad word. Don't say dating. You're “getting to know” *quote-unquote* someone, we use that term.

Munna (later): So, like when I was in high school, the Arab boys that were in high school with me, would try to protect us or be like our brothers... I feel like now they're helping girls sneak out the window. Like they don't care now. Before, the Arab boys were told not to date good girls. Now they don't care, everybody's dating. And I feel like now, the *tolbeh* is really just a joke.

–Munna, *First Generation Lebanese American*

The Labels of Relationship-Making

In chapter one, I mentioned that participants were avoidant of the word dating. Instead, they preferred terms such as: talking, talking to, or getting to know. There was an established understanding that the word dating was an *Americanized* term. Dating, or “American dating,” as some women described it, described a relationship where there was no real commitment between the couple, that the couple in the relationship was having premarital sex, or that the couple was not following religious expectations to remain abstinent or follow rules of Islamic marriage. Therefore, participants described their version of relationship making as a distinct process from dating. The idealized understanding of *getting to know* someone prior to marriage is a non-physical interaction that takes place in a family-supervised setting for the sole purpose of initiating marriage. Also, as Munna represents in her experience above, this idealized interaction

is also heterosexual and endogamous. In fact, at various points in the interview process, women characterized an ideal relationship as being with someone of the same sect of Islam, and sometimes someone from even the same region of the same Arab country they are from. Because relationship-making was viewed strictly as a prerequisite to marriage, this process is initiated under the same endogamous and heterosexual pretenses. Marriage was often treated as a site of cultural preservation, where marrying outside of one's ethnic group was presented as a form of cultural loss. This was characterized most notably by Samar, a 48-year-old Lebanese American elementary school principal. She explains growing up with the perception of endogamous heterosexual marriage as a way for parents to protect women and the cultural values within the family.

It was like we need to get our daughters married you know we don't want them to go off and possibly marry someone that was not of Arab and Muslim descent. They [her parents] thought that marriage was the way to secure their identity and to secure and maintain the cultural values that they had instilled in us. My parents and my grandparents all got married very young. Because that was the woman's role, you know we needed to get married.
 –Samar, *First Generation Lebanese American*

Marriage is presented as a responsibility to the community to preserve authentic Arabness, but importantly designates the woman as the bearer of that responsibility. Furthermore, by meeting these expectations, women not only are constrained by a gendered burden of cultural maintenance, but they also are expected to oblige to racially, ethnically, and religiously discriminatory borders. Furthermore, these relationships are exclusively and compulsory heterosexual. The ideal expectations for marriage are not only highly restrictive and exclusionary, but it is also unattainable for queer Arabs and Muslims.

These borders not only exclude non-Arabs and non-Muslims, but they also produce divisions within the community. For example, which relationships are considered “endogamous” varies greatly and can divide between ethnic groups (i.e. Iraqi Arabs and Lebanese Arabs), between Islamic sects (i.e. Shia and Sunni Muslims), and racial groups (i.e. non-black Muslim-Arabs and black Muslim-Arabs). For example, Hala, a 21-year-old Iraqi-American undergraduate student who got married in July of 2021, expressed feeling extra pressure from her family to marry a Shia-Muslim Iraqi man. She explained that this pressure was intensified because her sisters and cousins who had gotten married before her did not marry within her ethnic group or religious sect and that made Hala her “family’s last hope of doing marriage the right way.” Non-endogamous marriages were often characterized as a loss or failure to the community and more importantly to one’s family.

Laila, who married a non-Arab man, expressed that while marrying a non-Arab did not interfere with her religious beliefs it did pose complications to her relationships with extended family members. Furthermore, maintaining a private relationship was crucial to her to avoid social repercussions that would implicate her reputation within her Arab-American community networks. Idealizing an “authentic Arab-Muslim relationship” functions to uphold heteropatriarchal marriages in a way that sharply contrasts that of American relationships and therefore excludes non-Arab Americans. Furthermore, prioritizing relationships that maintain a “traditional, moral and conserved” difference from the surrounding American relationship culture appears to produce an important courting culture within Arab American communities.

In this section, I will examine the juxtaposition of American and Arab American premarital relationship making as experienced by interviewees. This will take a special focus on the experiences of second-generation interviewees because of the ways the idealized path to

marriage that we examined in the first chapter has been greatly distorted in this cohort. Rather than approaching relationships very briefly before taking the relationship to their parents and initiating a *tolbeh*, second-generation interviewees were more inclined to initiate the relationship and navigate the relationship for years before having a *tolbeh*. However, the perspectives of first-generation women contribute an especially important position in the negotiations of relationship-making. All first-generation participants were also mothers, although this was not a requirement for participation. This cohort frequently referred to their governing role in their own daughter's relationship making. Furthermore, I will explore the mechanisms by which notions of marriageability are both upheld and negotiated through the public presentations of relationships. Such notions are interlocked with the maintenance of “Arabness” and reinforce endogamy, gendered and heteronormative roles in marriage. Finally, I will address the dominating theme of abstinence within conversations of relationship making, as it often served as an unbreakable “golden rule” to maintaining respectability within the Arab-American community. This standard, as explained by participants, is especially gendered and warrants social repercussions for heterosexual women.

Constructing Femininity Through Relationship-Making Terms

The same things that signify dating also threaten the respectability of a “getting to know” type of relationship, and even more so, the respectability of the woman in the relationship. Being caught in a relationship without parental permission, on a date, holding hands, kissing or other displays of affection was believed to result in irreparable damage to the woman’s reputation. Many women acknowledged or critiqued that this norm did not reflect poorly on the man in the relationship despite it having ruinous consequences for the social position of the woman.

Upholding cultural rules through reputation heavily regulates the bodies of Arab women in diasporic communities like Dearborn. The gendered nature of these social norms places the continuance of tradition and the maintenance of culture on women. The authentication of Arabness is measured by sexual compliance to heterosexuality, virginity, monogamy, and not getting divorced (Naber, 2012). Furthermore, Arab femininity is constructed in opposition to American femininity, where notions of virginity and purity were intrinsic to Arabness so much so that relationship-making adapted different terminology in order to separate from the presumed sexual deviance present in American culture and American dating (Naber, 2012).

Relationship-making appeared to be deeply connected to idealized Arab identity and to Arab respectability through these interviews. Despite these constraints being unanimously acknowledged, navigating them manifested through a variety of mechanisms.

Arab cultural tradition and Islamic religious ceremonies served as checkpoints that validated the respectability of the women in the relationships. In the case that the relationship didn't work out, ending a public relationship would threaten the perceived marriageability of the women. There was a perceived order to the validity of a relationship, based on the stage of marriage it was in, where proximity to marriage was correlated with validity and respectability. The *katb kitab*, the Islamic marriage ceremony, was prioritized over the *tolbeh* due to its religious power. However, it was often coupled with one of two possible celebrations. Some women coupled their *katb kitab* with the wedding reception itself. They would have a sheik come to the wedding hall or they would go to the mosque prior to the reception and have the ceremony there. Others celebrated the *katb kitab* with an "engagement party" which was a smaller and more intimate gathering than a wedding and that often took place months or years prior to the wedding reception. A wedding party and *katb kitab* was more valid than a *katb kitab* and

engagement party; where the latter would not be considered fully validated until the wedding party occurred despite having religious validation. Both of these were considered to be more valid than a *tolbeh*; which simply stated that the couple intended to get married. The *tolbeh* was considered to be more valid than “getting to know someone” which was as aforementioned as chaperoned interaction that takes place in a household setting. “Getting to know someone” was more valid than dating as it did not signal deviance from gendered and sexual norms.

Within this order of respectability, it is necessary to recognize that it is very uncommon for religious leaders or Imams to perform or recognize same-sex marriages (Taylor, 2015). By using proximity to marriage as a yardstick to the respectability of the marriage, LGBTQ+ Arabs and Muslims are excluded from normative community structures. The expectation for women to pursue heterosexual Islamic marriages positions homosexuality as a form of sexual deviance. As the sexual compliance of AMAW is treated as the crux of cultural continuity in the Arab-Muslim diaspora, LGBTQ+ Arab-Muslims are treated as a threat to that continuity (Naber, 2012). Examining the intersection of homosexuality, religion, and Arab diaspora displays how the politics of cultural authenticity reinforce heteronormativity within these communities.

For most women in both groups, *looking* like you were dating jeopardized their marriageability. To avoid looking like they were dating meant taking a number of steps to conceal the relationship. This meant not making social media posts with their significant other, not going on dates near the community, not referring to their significant other as their boyfriend, not being visibly affectionate or physically touching, and keeping the group of people who knew you were in a relationship very minimal. Even without terming their own relationships as dating, the logistics of relationship-making were strictly policed by this norm. Furthermore, even when women were in exclusive relationships for months or years prior to marriage, it was necessary to

conceal that from the community until plans for a *tolbeh* or *katb kitab* were established. These conditions were interesting because while it silenced the women in these relationships, it was also comforting to have the privacy to grow a relationship without being committed to their spouse through marriage. Maintaining relationship privacy allowed women to explore their compatibility with their significant other without sacrificing their marriageability or committing to these checkpoints.

These conversations reminded me of my own experiences in similar situations as an Arab American woman growing up in Dearborn Heights. My own mom shares stories with me about when her aunt caught her on a date with my dad at a shopping mall. All in all, it speaks to the lengths women have gone to in order to represent themselves or their families in a “respectable” way. Women reflected on times they would duck their heads as they drove through their neighborhoods with a boy in the car, on driving hours to sit at a chain restaurant in a different city, and rushing out of the building when they spotted family members. Exchanging these stories was a very unifying moment of the interview, where we could laugh over the ironic nature of these stories together. Interviewees were conscious of the “rules” and felt that they were non-negotiable. But much of the interviews were oriented around how those rules were bent and broken. The social rules that produced these circumstances are still upheld – and they at the very least *looked* like they were being followed. Concealing the relationship was a way to work around the function of reputation in Dearborn and appease the community that holds women to cultural norms. There was a distinctly performative response to this social rule that is especially noticeable in the second-generation group. Even if women defined their own experiences as dating, it was not unusual to avoid using the label. The norms of relationship-making can be examined through interactions with the terminology these relationships are associated with.

Salam Aboulhassan (2019) argues that the cultural policing of Arab American women functions through reputation and gossip. Furthermore, reputation acts as a tool of social control and is directly dependent on the sexual deviance or compliance of women. Previous research has shown gossip to play an important role in the maintenance of patriarchal structures in other diasporic communities (Dreby, 2009). Reputation and gossip work as systems of social control but also function as a place for disagreement, discussion, and development of social expectations. What I referred to earlier as the “Arab or American woman” paradox characterizes an ultimately unsatisfiable standard for a community that has built Arab identity to be in direct opposition to American identity and yet expects success within both of these social spheres. However, it is a driving force for women to reach an imagined cultural authenticity.

These mechanisms of relationship labeling play a fundamental role in the process of courtship and marriage. Women face a contradictory social expectation to navigate these carefully constructed images of identity, and how they do so in terms of forming relationships is unclear. That being said, there isn't a known right and wrong because opinions and social norms are frequently changing. Women in relationships are affected but also have the ability to affect notions of shame and secrecy around courtship practices with their own interactions within the community (Dreby, 2009).

Nadia Shebli: Can you tell me a little bit more about why it (Leena's relationship) would have to be so private in the beginning?

Leena: Our families really care about what other people think. And that's a big thing that I actually don't like... But I understand it too, because of course, you don't want the city to talk about your daughter and say, “Oh, this girl was seen out with a guy” or whatever. The whole thing is people assume you're doing things you're not doing, you know? And it's like just because you're out

with a guy or because you have a boyfriend doesn't mean you are doing one two three.

Nadia Shebli: Can you elaborate on one two three.

Leena: It doesn't mean you're having sex with them, which is what people assume. You know they do. They assume you're doing the worst. They assume you are doing things that you are not, as Muslim, not just as Arabs, but as Muslims are supposed to do before we get married. And they think it's a bad look. And you know, who knows if she's going to get married to him? And if people see you out with this guy, then another guy is not going to want you if it doesn't work out. That's not the case, but that's how people think.

(Later)

Leena: People [in Dearborn] don't even like the word [“dating”], and they don't even like the word boyfriend. First of all, they don't take it seriously when you're not engaged because they don't think it's going anywhere. Also, they think everything's haram. Once you're engaged it's okay to bring them to your family's house, but before it's not right. They say it's not right to bring a guy you're not engaged with to family events.

Leena is a second-generation Lebanese-American woman who had her katb kitab in July 2021, four years after committing to an exclusive relationship with her now-husband Hadi. She maintained a private relationship from the view of the community, but this was under terms decided by her parents. Her parents knew about the relationship from the start but she still was conscious of how her relationship was presented to the community. Although she didn't label her relationship as dating, she didn't feel like there was a difference in her experience from what she thought American dating was. She was wary of what labeling her relationship as dating, and looking like she was dating, would signal to the Dearborn community. In her experience, religion and cultural authenticity were linked to patriarchal rules in which dating someone once would threaten her marriageability. She presents herself as someone who doesn't date, and therefore

doesn't have sex, in order to signify her religious commitments but also to signify sexual purity to the community. Failing to live up to the patriarchal notions of virginity and purity has perceived implications for her marriageability. Leena, and multiple other women in the Second Generation pool, recognized the stigmatized meaning of dating but disagreed with them. But these women responded in a variety of ways.

“Because most of my friends were white, I would just say dating because it's kind of weird explaining like oh yeah “we're just talking” it's not familiar terminology” – Zeinab, 21,
Yemeni-American

A few second-generation women expressed changing what they labeled their relationship based on who they were talking to. Zeinab, a Yemeni-American University of Michigan student, used the label to her non-Arab and non-Muslim friends who weren't familiar with the implied meaning of dating within Dearborn. The way that relationships are characterized to individuals who were and weren't a part of the Arab community in Dearborn interested me. Switching between the two words functioned to portray the relationship in an acceptable way in different communities. As relationships appear to be validated by their proximity to marriage in the Arab community and dating signifies non-marriageability; in non-Arab settings, the term “getting to know ” appeared to have a similar effect. For example, Laila's husband isn't from Dearborn, and his family isn't Arab or Muslim. So while Laila wouldn't label her relationship as dating in front of her own family, she did when she was around her husband Alex's family. She described that “getting to know” didn't sound serious to Alex's family. Women would label their relationship as dating around non-family members and non-Arab friends. But many interviewees were very intentional about using other descriptors in order to avoid signaling the wrong idea within their families or to their communities. This occurred regardless of the women's internal opinions on the word dating.

One woman, Reem, called her relationship dating and didn't care about the communal implications. Throughout her interview, she frequently mentioned that she wasn't the type of person to hide things or be dishonest. She was noticeably irritated by the attitudes she felt the Dearborn community held toward dating and she was especially conscious of these attitudes because she didn't make any of the aforementioned efforts to conceal her relationship. She told me that someone had even reached out to her parents directly and asked if she and her then-boyfriend at the time were married after seeing the couple hold hands in a local park. Reem felt like it was ignorant for people to assume that dating meant you were having sex or that being in a private relationship meant you weren't having sex.

Performing Virginity

Most notably, these conversations characterized a pervasive construction of the Arab-Muslim female body as a site of familial respectability. More specifically, when interrogating relationship-making discourse, virginity acted as the root guiding principle. As noted earlier in this chapter, it was treated as a near-unanimous "golden rule" amongst participants. Multiple women even explained that they were not opposed to things like kissing and touching, so long as they never had penetrative sex. This assertion relies on penetrative penile-vaginal heterosexual sex to be a definitive version of virginity. Using this measure to define sexual purity underscores the heteronormative expectations behind relationship making and sexual intimacy. Arab-Muslim American marriages are treated as though they are mutually exclusive from homosexuality, once again failing to recognize queer relationships within the community. Moreso, designating penile-vaginal intercourse, only through which a woman can get pregnant, as "sex" while disregarding other forms of sex further centers heteronormative expectations. Although others specified that any form of physical contact was avoided until the

katb kitab. Participants understood their sexual choices as not only religiously guided but guided by cultural expectations, and expectations from the local Arab-American community in order to protect their reputation or marriageability. Also, as previously explained, these expectations were also implicated by the juxtaposition of Arab identity in the United States where women relied on an image of a “good Arab girl” and negotiated with this image. The women I interviewed described their decision-making to be guided by their positions within the sociocultural contexts with which they negotiated. Given the elaborate decision-making processes portrayed by interviewees, these experiences oppose Western neoliberal discourse that represents AMAW as passive victims of oppressive patriarchal religion/culture that threatens gender justice and western modernity (Tabahi, 2020). It is imperative to approach this discussion with a critical lens that does not undermine the ability of Arab-Muslim women to negotiate with social structures; yet recognizes that the decision-making processes take place at an intersection of social, political, and historical contexts.

Women distinguished the presence of penile-vaginal heterosexual sex in a premarital relationship as the main differentiator between “dating” and “getting to know.” This led me to explore notions of virginity, marriageability, and Arabness in these conversations and in my analysis. Hala, a 21-year-old Iraqi-American undergraduate student, got married in July of 2021. She met her now-husband, Ahmad, through mutual friends and they began seeing each other privately. For two months, they would go to public locations outside of Dearborn where Hala would ask Ahmad interview-style questions. She explained that she didn’t want to waste time on small talk or flirting. By sticking to a list of interview-style questions to get to know him, she would be able to decide whether or not she wanted to marry him quickly. Hala emphasized wanting to have a quick-paced marriage, getting married a little over a year after meeting

Ahmad. The extent of alone time between the couple was intentionally limited by Hala, more than her parents, and she related this back to her religious commitment to abstinence from premarital sex. Having a shorter amount of time between meeting Ahmad and getting married left less time to cross sexual or physical boundaries that are considered haram, or forbidden, in Islam (Ilkcaracan, 1970). Therefore, she avoided circumstances that would have allowed her to have physically touched Ahmad until they were married. The marriage-oriented nature of the relationship, as well as her strict physical boundaries, were both reasons she didn't consider her relationship to be dating. Maintaining virginity, as well as the image of virginity, was a factor that Hala emphasized throughout the interview.

Salam Aboulhassan's qualitative interviews with women from Dearborn, Michigan revealed how reputation was socially constructed and suggests Arab and American femininities operated in opposition to one another (2019). Participating in western presentations of gender threatened the reputation of women in Arab-Muslim American communities. Purity and Arab identity were perceived as inextricable from one another for Arab-Muslim American women (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). Reputation served as a powerful tool of social control within the ethnic community that guided both men's and women's behavior yet mostly harmed women in comparison to men. Aboulhassan illuminated that one's reputation reflected on the entire family, yet is dependent on the women of the family. The compliance of the daughters of the family to gendered expectations was used as a measure of the family's respectability (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019).

“Growing up, dating was always described as something that made you a bad Muslim if you did it. It was bad for your reputation, it always had a bad connotation... From the get-go, we told each

other “this is for marriage,” so he has to be explicitly serious about it. It wasn’t like “I’m bored, let me get to know this girl.” No, that’s not what we were doing. We just said we were ‘getting to know each other,’ it was the easiest term. *We laugh about it now because it was like we were kinda dating but it wasn’t... We had expectations; we didn’t just do whatever we pleased.*” – Hala, 21, Second Generation Iraqi-American

Abstinence until marriage appeared to be a non-negotiable rule that no one directly disagreed with within their interviews, although two participants didn’t disclose an opinion at all. Many women went out of their way to demonstrate to me that they were not having sex before getting married. I was interested in the way that some women didn’t see their relationship as dating primarily because they were not having sex. Some women, like Hala, agreed that sex was a precondition to dating and that’s why they weren’t dating their significant other. When I asked women how they characterized or labeled their relationships, I was often caught off guard by the immediacy of responses like “I didn’t call it dating, because we weren’t having sex.” Many women illustrated having sex as the worst rule to break in terms of their own moral and religious values. Islam, like other major religions such as Christianity and Hinduism, strongly discourages premarital and extramarital sex. Furthermore, previous macro-level research has shown that Muslims are less likely to report participating in premarital sex than members of other major religions even when they reside in countries of religious diversity of the country they reside in (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012). Previous research has shown that practicing and non-practicing Muslim women felt premarital virginity to be essential to gender performance and the maintenance of cultural identity in the Arab-Muslim diaspora (Amer et al., 2015).

Similarly, in these interviews respondents did not only intend to not have sex until marriage but also *displayed* sexual abstinence. That display was through the concealment of the

relationship and the intentional avoidance of the words “dating,” “girlfriend,” and “boyfriend.” The intersection of virginity, and cultural preservation was reminiscent of Sarah Abboud’s research (2015 and 2018) which evaluates the *embodiment* and *enactment* of virginity in Arab American women. I found the internal and external interactions with virginity (embodiment as internal and enactment as external interactions) to be an effective model when considering the special emphasis second-generation interviewees put on virginity. The enactment of virginity was represented through the aforementioned intentional terminology, avoidance of public displays of affection, and traveling outside of the local community to have private dates with their significant others. Interestingly, adjusting the relationship-making process to appease community perceptions did not stay confined to the dating/premarital stage. It often extended into the marriage initiation process. Hala, Amanda, and many others discussed a series of adjustments they made in order to mitigate any assumptions that they were having sex. For Hala, this meant getting Islamically married as soon as possible. For Amanda, this meant putting off the Islamic marriage until she was planning to have her wedding reception so people did not assume she wanted to have sex.

Amanda: Like people were saying “oh don’t have a katb kitab way before the wedding people are going to know you just want to have sex.”

Nadia Shebli: But what’s wrong with wanting to have a katb kitab so you can have a relationship that satisfies your religious values before you have sex?

Amanda: It's just so weird because I guess they want to keep you as pure as possible for the longest time. Until you get to the age where you're too old to not be married or to have kids. So it's like you're either one or the other like I swear like it's literally you are either too young and then you're old. There's no in-between, there's no good time, there's no middle or common ground.

Women I interviewed frequently alluded to the gendered double-bind that Amanda describes in her experiences. Purity was often described as a “losing game” where there were negative connotations to every expression of women’s sexuality yet women were expected to pursue heterosexual relationships and get married on an undisclosed and unattainable timeline. They often expressed this gap in their early 20s, when they felt that their parents wanted them to get married to men, but didn't want them to talk to men or initiate a relationship. Feeling as if there was no way to satisfy the community expectations to abide by gender roles was very frequently discussed with all participants. Moreover, the absence of this expectation for their male Arab-Muslim counterparts was central to these conversations. Sexual control was strictly applicable to women in the community, and sexual “purity” was intrinsic to their religious virtue. Interviewees expressed with disdain that the religious texts that set this standard were also applicable to men, but never enforced upon them through the family or community. Many scholars have addressed gender equality as it is presented in the Quran contradicting how it has been historically misinterpreted and practiced by religious authorities (Ilkharacan, 1970). In the Quran, religious laws inform sexual and marital behaviors such as consent for sex, consent for marriage, and divorce. Furthermore, it discourages premarital sex, extramarital sex, and sex crimes such as rape and incest (Ilkharacan, 1970).

From the conception of Islam, the Quran has been historically been skewed by patriarchal misinterpretations in order to produce social order and establish Islam as a religious, political, and economic system (Ilkharacan, 1970). Following World War II, increasing hostility between the West and the Middle East led nationalist fundamentalist leaders to perceive the west as a threat to the “Muslim” identity. In response, the “Muslim female” identity was constructed at the center of fundamentalist agendas (Invoking women’s dress codes; Reducing women’s

divorce rights; Placing the burden of proof on victims of rape) placing the continuance of the “Muslim Identity” on the sexual behavior of Muslim women (Ilkharacan, 1970). Furthermore, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent rise of Orientalist discourses in American media produced a “hypervisibility” on Arab Americans (Naber, 2012). Images of the oppressed, passive Arab and Muslim women were constructed in comparison to sexually liberated and free western women. Thus tensions to uphold Muslim and Arab identities are heightened within the American Diaspora, and the survival of this identity is constructed to rely on the physical state of Arab and Muslim women’s bodies (Mahmood, 2005; Naber, 2012). The social consequences of these historical events transcend into the Arab-Muslim diaspora in the West and implicate their sexual decision-making (Amer et al., 2015; Naber, 2012; Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012; Abboud, 2015).

A brief explanation of my positionality in these interviews, especially with second-generation interviewees, is pertinent to this discussion on the community, sex, and reputation. Although I did not have personal relationships with participants in this study, it is necessary to recognize that I am Lebanese-American and I grew up in Dearborn Heights as a member of the Arab-Muslim American community. Furthermore, many of the second-generation interviewees were around the same age as me and could have overlapping social circles with me. Therefore, participant perceptions of my own reputation and of my ability to communicate with other members of the community may have influenced the way women responded in their interviews. Navigating the Arab American community restrains women to conceal their experiences in an effort to conserve their social position and respectability. I attempt to negate this influence by briefing each participant on the precautions I took to maintain anonymity and conceal their identities in my analysis. Some women seemed to be uncomfortable with discussing sexual decision making so I would redirect my questions accordingly. Sexual

experiences and sexual decision-making have shown to be a sensitive area for discussion, likely because it is closely interconnected with socially constructed standards of respectability within the community. Therefore, if any participants did not follow these standards, they may not feel comfortable disclosing that within our interview if I am perceived as a member of their community. All in all, it is important to recognize that these factors may have created greater pressure for Arab-Muslim women to respond in a way that they perceived as socially desirable.

The embodiment of virginity explains how sexual abstinence is commonly romanticized through a combination of moral pride and symbolic values (Abboud et al., 2015). Farah, a 21-year-old Lebanese undergraduate student from Dearborn Heights, best exemplifies the embodiment of virginity that I witnessed throughout these interviews.

“My mom always told ‘you wear a white dress for a reason,’ there's a reason why you wore a white dress at your wedding. It has a significant meaning.

You know my dad was the first man my mom ever kissed. So to me, I have always wanted to be like my mom. We all look up to our moms.

So when it came to sex, I never like crossing that line with anybody. I am saving myself for marriage. It's personal preference, I want to for religious reasons and moral reasons, like, I want to wear that white dress and I wait for it to signify something, I want it to mean something to me. It's more for me that's a personal thing ‘I know that I'm wearing this white dress.’”

– Farah, 21, *Second-Generation Lebanese American*

Similar to the Arab-American women in Abboud's interviews, I found virginity to be embodied as a valuable process that is experienced with someone that is trusted, and premarital virginity-loss as something that would be prone to stigmatization or cause shame (Abboud et al.,

2015). Furthermore, she argues that the embodiment of virginity has moved beyond notions of honor and developed into a cultural representation of Arabness. Virginity appears to move from a characteristic of being into a whole reflection of identity, leading to different enactments of sexual behavior under a complex background of conflicting social norms (Abboud et al., 2015). These conflicting norms are mediated through the creation of the “good Arab girl” that is a virgin, is educated, and follows traditional gender roles (Abboud, 2015; Naber, 2012). Furthermore, the embodiment of virginity in a good Arab woman relies on the existence of a bad, immoral and promiscuous American woman. Unlike Abboud’s research where virginity was mostly seen as a reflection of Arabness, the participants I interviewed felt that virginity served as a representation of their religious piety and Arabness. Again, Farah presented these factors in our conversation thoroughly.

I'm not religiously married but I love him enough to be married to him so sometimes we might act like a married couple. Not with sex, nothing to do with sex... But I wish we were religiously married already because it's difficult, it's really hard. I applaud anybody that's not physically intimate with their significant other before they're married...

Depending on who I tell, they think I'm crazy for being a virgin. Especially outside of the Arab culture people are like, “you're 21, what the fuck?” And then to Arab, they're like “wow as you should,” it's a good thing.

– Farah, 21, *Second-Generation Lebanese American*

Maternal Perspectives and First-Generation Perceptions of Relationship Making Culture in Dearborn

In hand with the discussion of virginity embodiment, Abboud addresses virginity *disembodiment* which is described as the importance of a woman’s virginity to other individuals

such as family or community (Abboud et al., 2015). In Farah's experiences, she refers to the way she was raised and the importance of following in her mom's footsteps. Conserving sexual "purity" was an inherited value. Its value extended beyond the romantic ideals of trust and love and into notions of respecting one's family and maintaining their perception within the Arab community. As explained in the previous chapter, the crucial role mothers played in relationship-making not only facilitates a crucial negotiation with some heteropatriarchal family dynamics. This relationship also reinforces gendered heteropatriarchal values at the same time. However, standards of respectability were not applicable to the male figures of the family, like their brothers and male cousins.

First-generation interviewees commonly described how they allow different circumstances for their children's relationship-making from how they experienced it. I found this interesting, especially considering the importance of maternal kinship in relationship making for both groups. Women in the first-generation group agreed that they didn't label their own relationships as dating prior to marriage. This was especially supported by the larger role played by their parents, the lack of actual dates outside of their own house, and the aforementioned restriction from premarital sex. They also felt that because the talking stage was being done strictly for the purpose of marriage, it was more religiously appropriate. Many of them believe their experiences were very different from how relationships are initiated currently, which they view as more comparable to dating.

"I think we need to redefine the word date. I was "getting to know somebody [before I got married]." I mean, I'm all about tradition. There are just certain things you don't do prior to marriage. But I think now with my daughter, I would be very different.

I don't want her to go into a home with somebody without being certain she knows. She needs to see him outside of the home. She needs to see how he is with his parents. She needs to see how he

acts in a restaurant or how he acts under pressure. Those things are dating. That's what happens when you date. You get to know this person that you're potentially going to spend your whole life with.

So I think for us (first-generation women), it was because you don't date. This is what you're marrying. And that's it.

– Andrea, 44, a Lebanese-American nurse practitioner

Andrea most concisely summarizes a common concern amongst first-generation interviewees who felt open to the perceived change in relationship-making culture. Although the terminology appeared to be connotated with a gendered and sexualized meaning, the extension of this period before marriage seemed valuable to many women who didn't have it for themselves. Interviewees who were mothers expressed relief, hoping that this change would reduce the odds of divorce and protect their daughters from committing to a harmful relationship. Andrea, who had been divorced herself, was especially passionate about the opportunity for her daughter to have more control over her future relationships. Generally, interviewees who were mothers weren't resistant to the "dating" in Arab-Muslim couples they observed in the community now, so long as the couples weren't having sex. Many of them suggested that in the younger generation suggesting everyone was dating now, even if they weren't calling it dating.

Another reason that this group of women valued this perceived change was that they felt their daughters would be able to get a substantial education before getting married. This was interesting to me, especially from the viewpoint of the three first-generation women who got married and had kids after high school but then obtained their bachelor's degrees afterward. They often reflected on the challenges they faced when pursuing an education while also attending to their familial obligations like raising their kids.

Nadia Dalal Shebli: Did you feel like the bar was high (for getting married), did you feel like the expectations were high?

Samar: Like no matter what, yes yes yes... we were young. We didn't really challenge everything we just thought, "this is the way it is" so it was more of going with the flow. It was like "okay, this is the way it is, this is what we *do*," you know?

This is our life, This is our culture... Now I think to myself "my God it's not as easy as they made it seem," but that's how we were raised. We were raised to make it feel like it's no big deal.

Nadia Dalal Shebli: What do you think the biggest differences are now?

Samar: I think the biggest difference now is. I feel like our community is more accepting of girls who may have talked to somebody or who may have been divorced before which divorce was a huge, "no, no." Now I see people are married for a few months, and then they get divorced.

As described in the previous chapter, increased rates of education may not act as a resource for gender justice (Read & Oselin, 2008). Instead, education is commonly treated as cultural and social capital for AMAW to provide as a resource to their kin. Education often becomes treated as a collective family resource rather than an accomplishment of financial or professional independence. Through my interviews, it often appeared that relationship-making and education facilitated the progression of each other in second-generation couples. Additionally, Abboud (2015) describes educational success as a tool for AMAW to establish trust and freedom with their parents. For that reason, being educated is included within her explanation of the "good Arab girl" standard that women are often held to (Abboud 2015; Naber, 2012). As this relationship was a recurring theme through many interviews and could be a valuable direction for future research.

This chapter was really important to me because it highlighted the disruption of traditionalist visions of Arabness. As women reflect on their role in the relationship-making changes, there are aspects of guilt and shame that are associated with these ideals. The idea of cultural continuity is grappled with through complex discussions on marriage and sexuality. Yet our discussions emanate a sense of failure to an imagined community or familial expectation. Arab authenticity is constructed through the Arab-Muslim woman's body, subjecting women's sexuality to a public eye. As the relationship-making process is transitioned to the public sphere, sexuality is tailored accordingly. There are a variety of new standards introduced to the relationship-making process to reinstate new notions of Arabness.

Furthermore, this chapter rooted these conflicts in heteropatriarchal discussions of virginity. Discussing virginity and its function in the standard of a "Good Arab Girl" was more so a surprise to me. I wasn't necessarily sure what to expect when I asked about the implications of "dating" within the community. Yet public presentations of behavior that signaled virginity further imply the deep tie of the "Arab Woman" with the "Arab Family." Furthermore, the embodiment and disembodiment of virginity strongly characterize how heteronormative expectations for sexual abstinence are integral to cultural identity as it is constructed within this community. In this chapter, I became aware of the various rationales for community change against a static understanding of Arabness. As a result, multiple new negotiations with identity manifest through the distinction between "American Dating" and "Arab Dating." In the next chapter, I hope to shed light on the complexities of how this change implicates the start of the marriage process.

Chapter Three: “It Really Wasn’t a Tradition Back Then”

(Re) Inventing the Tolbeh

There was a large pavilion, a coffee cart, and enough food to feed the 200 people standing shoulder to shoulder in Jenna’s backyard. At the entrance, there was a mirror propped up on a stand with a Quran verse engraved in gold paint, “And We created you in pairs (78:8),” for guests to take pictures in front of. In a last-minute turn of events, my aunt booked the imam to come to perform the katb kitab. At that point, she had invested so much time, money, and energy into Jenna’s tolbeh that it seemed excessive to do it twice for an engagement party. Instead, the event would begin with the tolbeh and end with the katb kitab.

I wore a black mid-length dress and more makeup than I had put on in almost a year. Guests dressed in formal and expensive clothing, makeup, and jewelry. My mom offered me her nicest shoes and purse before we left for the event, stressing the importance of representing my family as “put together and classy.” I was frequently reminded of this moment in interviews, where women would describe the tolbeh as an expression of wealth. “It’s just another chance to show off their family’s money,” was an especially common critique from first-generation women and for second-generation women who decided to not have a tolbeh.

Money and classism within the wedding environment was not a topic interviewees were eager to discuss. Some expressed that money was not a concern they had in the event planning process for a few reasons (“*Hamdillah* (praise God) it was not a big issue for my family”; or “We didn’t have that many people so it wasn’t too big of a deal.”) Most women brushed past the topic entirely when I brought it up. Interestingly enough, Nadine Naber came across the same issue in her research on the middle-class Arab American community in San Francisco. In her discussion on the politics of Arab cultural authenticity in Arab American men, it becomes clear that

establishing financial security is a precondition to them getting married (Naber, 2006). However, diving further into the discussion was limited as her interlocutors also did not discuss their financial status with her directly.

Many interviewees did acknowledge a perceived emphasis on the appearance of the event. This is what led me to investigate systems of class within my interviews. Socioeconomic status was not a variable I controlled for when recruiting interviewees, so I was interested to hear different perspectives. That being said, the conversation was typically limited to descriptions of the event size, and other aspects of the event such as having dessert tables, decor, and floral arrangements. Reem's observations most clearly represented the consensus amongst most interviewees. Even women who did have these things acknowledged the perceived change in material amenities of the reinvented tolbeh ("I had the stereotypical dessert table and everything;" "Mine wasn't how they did it in the olden days;" "The tolbeh thing became big over the years and it's a big thing now, so I did end up having one like that.")

Reem: Tolbehs became more like "Oh, like who's gonna decorate my table and who's going to design my party?" When traditionally in the olden days it used to be just the family and the uncles would come to ask for the hand in marriage and now it became like this almost like this big event. So I did mine at my house and after the family members left, I had a little small get-together in my backyard with my closest friends, his closest friends, and family.

I feel it is important to reflect on my own position as the interviewer. Having grown up in the same community as most of the interviewees, it is possible that respondents felt discussing money or classism with me could potentially reflect poorly on their families. Because financial success can be perceived as an indicator of cultural and social success amongst diaspora (Naber, 2006), class struggles have been a very stigmatized point of conversation within the Arab

community I grew up in. I was taught very young that discussing money was always ‘*3eib*’ (shameful), as it was crucial to prevent being treated with pity or paternalistic stereotypes by the community. On the other hand, discussing the presence of wealth was also considered shameful, because it would represent a lack of humility and modesty. So to me, displays of wealth were often reliant on unspoken presentations (large weddings, name brand clothing, cars) and masking of financial hardship. Having the financial capital to attend The University of Michigan, let alone having the resources and time to conduct a research study, can be taken as a display of wealth in itself. Coupled with being perceived as a member of the Arab American community in Dearborn, I briefly felt embarrassed for bringing the topic up despite it having a deep relevance to the research. I want to emphasize that although it was initially unexpected that interviewees were reluctant to engage with this topic, it was not necessarily a surprise given my position.

On this same note, respectability politics within these traditions are inherently intertwined with class. Margot Dazey (2021), draws a connection between respectability politics and oppositional politics of various diasporas (Black Americans, Latino Americans, and Muslim Americans) that function distinctly through class (Dazey, 2021). She articulates respectability as “the process by which privileged members of marginalized groups comply with dominant social norms to advance their group's condition.” Employing notions of respectability in Arab American communities establishes opposition to the racist dominant culture, yet it is simultaneously reinforcing the values of the white American middle class. Despite not centralizing class in my research process, it plays a clear role in upholding the oppositional image of the “Good Arab Girl” against dominant anti-Arab/anti-Muslim American perspectives. In addressing the fundamentally classed presentations of the *tolbeh*, I argue that the respectability of the relationship-making processes is characterized by subversive yet conservative

ramifications. As the imagined “Good Arab Girl” is continually negotiated around an ever-changing reality, the “Good Arab Family” must be adjusted accordingly.

As reflected in the first two chapters, characterizing Arabness, gender identity, and diasporic communities is integrated with notions of marriageability. However, the logistics of having (and not having) a *tolbeh*, which served as an initiation point for the marital processes, played a crucial role in maintaining cultural ties in relationship making. For most women who had gotten married within the last five years, the decision-making process behind having a *tolbeh* was loaded with a variety of rationales that went far beyond gaining the father’s blessing for marriage. How the *tolbeh* is presented, how guests are dressed, and the size of the event all became foundational to the marriage process. These aspects were absent for those who got married over five years ago. However, they often reflected on their experiences in comparison with the way they see *tolbehs* celebrated in their community today. The observed shift of the *tolbehs* cultural significance was a noticeably charged and ascertained topic.

These observations led me to evaluate this observed change through the framework of invented tradition in the diaspora. Invented tradition is defined as a set of practices of symbolic or ritual nature that instill values and norms of behavior in an attempt to provide continuity between an unclear present and a “carefully circumscribed image of the past (Buchanan, 2018).” Researchers have demonstrated that the continuance of Arabness in the Arab diaspora relies on an intentional construction of the Arab woman (Amer et al., 2015; Mahmood, 2005; Naber, 2006; Tabahi, 2020). Notions of morality, religiosity, and marriageability are central to the image of the “good Arab girl.” This image is produced in opposition to the “sexualized, promiscuous, *Americanized* women,” designating significant value to characteristics like dressing modestly and sexual abstinence. These characteristics set socially acceptable guidelines that are

specifically focused on the management of Arab-Muslim American women's bodies (Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019). Politics of respectability are further complicated by this reinvention, which relies on the performance of the tolbeh. Familial and Communal approval of a relationship becomes contingent on how the tolbeh is presented within the community. By highlighting respectability within oppositional practices in diaspora, I hope to also bring attention to its inherently classed implications (Dazey, 2021). Driving a deeper distinction between Arab and American upholds heteronormative, classed, and patriarchal social structures that emanate the same importance in white American dominant society.

Maria: You know, back then, I don't know if there was necessarily a lot of tradition, but I feel like there's more tradition now. I mean, just before it was like basically just coming together and just officially asking for the hand. It was just a formality. Doing that was a formality, not necessarily because of tradition. You just make it official and that's it.

The ritualization of the event itself was what interested me the most in terms of invented traditions. Maria's understanding of the way the tolbeh is treated shows a crucial divide between the two generations. The tolbeh is treated with two distinct ideas that most interviewees differentiated very early in the interview. Participants described their tolbeh within a comparison of two images: the "old-timers" tolbeh (where there were at most 10 close family members present in casual attire, the event took place at the woman's house, and there was little to no prior arrangements made) and "the new generation's tolbeh" (where more than 10 people attended the event in formal attire, there were prior decor arrangements made, and the event either took place at the woman's house but there were additional arrangements made to support a larger crowd – such as renting tables, chairs, and tents– or the tolbeh took place at a banquet hall.) The rituals being produced within the tolbeh are consistent with the idea of invented tradition, leading me to

characterize the “new generations tolbeh” as the *reinvented* tolbeh (Hobsbawm, 2012). This reinvention exacerbates gendered performances within the Arab-Muslim community in Dearborn in order to maintain cultural bonds with the marriage process. Politics of respectability are extended through adoring the tolbeh to announce the relationship as distinctly “Arab.” By announcing, I specifically refer to the public presentation of both the couple and the tolbeh to the Arab American community through word of mouth, public dates, and social media. The perception of this announcement can refer to the couple's actual visibility in the community, but it can also rely on the imagined visibility participants felt accountable. I find this distinction to be pertinent in this chapter, as diasporic communities are built through shared experiences, common perceptions, and reflections on how one imagines they would be perceived within it (Anderson, 1983). Gendered and classed performances act to resituate the Arab family within its opposition to dominant American images of individualism (Dazey, 2021; Naber 2012).

Samar: I think they're beautiful. A part of me likes the fact that some people still try to maintain you know, the way it really is supposed to be. Like the traditions and the cultural way that things are supposed to be, but I feel like they're a little over the top, at times. But I can't say that my kids won't have the same thing because they probably will.

Samar, a first-generation interviewee, simultaneously addresses reinventions of the tolbeh and its apparent cultural continuance for the Arab American community. She highlights the way the tolbeh is embellished yet functions to uphold a cultural purpose. I feel that this underscores a crucial tension between the ever-changing realities of the community with the desire to establish continuity. The tolbeh is reinvented as a symbol of identity within the community. Accordingly, it is situated within the oppositional construction of Arabness and performed as such to the imagined community. This presentation is reliant on systems of class, heteronormativity, and

gender. Its importance is further centered on the politics of authenticity and belonging of respectable marriages.

I would like to restate that politics of belonging in this sense assume the marriage is heterosexual. Discussions of relationship-making within these interviews did not acknowledge how these processes would address couples that were not heteronormative marriages. The absence of these discussions highlights that heterosexuality is treated as an expected precondition to interact with the community landscape of relationship-making. It is imperative to recognize how these social structures function to exclude queer Arab-Muslims as well as any individuals who deviate from normative relationship making processes in Dearborn. By further associating heterosexual Islamic marriages with Arab authenticity, the position of queer members and individuals who are unable to participate in these marriages themselves are further excluded.

About an hour after Jenna's *tolbeh* was scheduled to begin, she stood at the far end of the backyard with her dad, grandfathers, and brothers. Her boyfriend Belal arrived soon after with a large bouquet in his hand, and his male family members following closely behind him. When he reached Jenna and her father, he asked for Jenna's hand in marriage and my uncle gave him his blessing. The crowd of men behind Belal erupted in celebration. The couple's fathers initiated a prayer amongst the guests in order to bless the start of the relationship, which is one of few "conserved" traditions that occurred at the *tolbeh* in the first and second generations. The next few hours consisted of eating, dancing, and most notably a long line of guests waiting to take pictures with the young couple. When the imam arrived, guests quickly took their seats and the *katb kitab* began.

The tolbeh is still presented as an exchange between the two fathers of the couple, transposing the paternalistic governing in the relationship to the public sphere. This is done regardless of the role the fathers played in the actual relationship-making process. Not only is the paternal and patriarchal nature of the event maintained, but it is also exaggerated as well. A common occurrence in the second generation, that was relatively unheard of in the first, was the group of men trailing behind the potential groom and his father. Respondents in the first generation typically described this group as the groom's direct elders (father, grandfathers, and great grandfathers.) In their experiences, this group was much smaller, limited to direct male family members. They also didn't elaborate that there was any grand entrance or celebration, rather this group seemed to take a spectator role to the eldest men of the family. It was the eldest men who would make an agreement for the couple to get to know each other, and then say a short prayer to bless the initiation of the relationship. Like Belal's family, the second generation usually mentioned something similar to Belal's male family members' "erupting" in celebration upon receiving the bride's father's approval, despite many of these men not playing a role in the relationship-making process. The public approval of the relationship between the fathers, as well as the male entourage, served as an exaggerated and gendered performance. This was reminiscent of Randa Serhan's "Inventing Palestine in New Jersey" where the gender performance within Palestinian marriage traditions becomes ritualized. She emphasized the palpable exaggeration of patriarchal performances within weddings. In her ethnographic work, cultural dances that were historically performed by men in the family developed into presentations of masculinity (Serhan, 2008). She argues that in the Arab diaspora, anti-colonial nationalism stresses gender distinctions more than that of Western nationalism because gender performances in the family are thought to belong to spheres of life untouched by colonial rule. In

recognizing that colonial powers dominated the public sphere of one's origin country, colonized populations are inclined to turn inward to the family. Therefore, leaning into family and patriarchy fosters nationalism in the private/domestic sphere of post-colonial societies. Serhan argues that nationalism in the Arab-American diaspora cannot be reduced to "complying with tradition." Instead, in response to anti-Arab/anti-Muslim in American society, conservatism was fostered in an already conservative immigrant group (Serhan, 2008). Kinship-based trust networks in postcolonial societies predate immigration, however, these ties are strengthened under American social structures (Serhan, 2008). Furthermore, the political histories of post-colonial diaspora fuse with cultural identity and construct ideals of the family around Arab authenticity. In doing so, gender performance is highlighted within the family and presented to the community (Serhan, 2008). Serhan's analysis of gendered performances in invented traditions amongst Arab diaspora allows me to characterize similar trends within the tolbeh.

Using weddings as a site of nationalism in response to external assimilation felt by Arab Americans perpetuates exaggerated gender roles within Arab American communities. Different details of the tolbeh could play this role, explaining such dramatic growth of the event itself. What began as a small meeting becomes a celebration of a potential union for a much larger portion of the family than it used to. Showing the agreement between the fathers of the potential spouse and groom absolves a couple of following social mores restricting them from dating publicly as now they are expected to get married. This is important for a community that relies upon and maintains social norms through reputation and gossip.

The image of the father as the governing head of the traditional Arab family is reconstructed in function but reinforced in presentation. To characterize the production and reinforcement of these community norms, Naber proposed the concept of "reverse Orientalism,"

where Muslim and Arab diaspora reproduce a static and traditional image of Arabness that is inherited through generations in order to generate cultural continuance (Naber, 2006). By focusing on the enactment of reverse orientalism the tolbeh, I found a conflict between the idealized image of Arab-Muslim American marriage and its reality. From the orientalist perspective, Arab societies and their cultures exist in a vacuum that maintains their normative values through time. These societies are characterized as backward, traditional and oppressive toward women. In reverse orientalism, diaspora in the West takes in these concepts when constructing the normative Arab-American community. Furthermore, it is used to construct the Arab identity as subversive that of American identity. As relationship-making norms shift under the ever-changing reality of cultural evolution, women of the community negotiate the normative marriage experience to be compatible with other components of their lives (such as education) and to also maintain respectability within the perceived community. By extending the pre-tolbeh relationship (especially within the privacy that most couples maintained), the “traditional” concept of a tolbeh is made ineffectual. Interestingly, the tolbeh has not faded or diminished, but instead, it has been ritualized and exaggerated. Furthermore, I argue that the invention of the tolbeh remedies the disagreement between a shifting relationship culture and the “reverse-orientalist” image of Arabness in order to establish continuance to the imagined past. In doing so, patriarchal and heteronormative standards are centered in the marriage process even when they are not centered in the relationship-making process.

Performing Marriageability

In the first generation, the tolbeh often took place within months to a year before the marriage. However, many women had external factors that stood in the way of what they thought

of as ideal (having a second tolbeh due to a prior divorce; delaying the tolbeh due to deaths in the family; having the tolbeh without the spouse who was out of town.) Interestingly, I had received explanations from most interviewees about how their experience differed from the normative experience, and the reality was no one's experience fit any singular imagined tradition. These conversations made it very apparent to me that there was a seemingly static mental standard that women were holding their experiences to. When interviewees recognize the inability to maintain the "cultural continuance" they feel responsible for, they often felt pressure to justify their perceptions to me. Such justifications were often connected with their internal negotiation with their cultural identity. The tolbeh is treated as a tool of authenticity within the Dearborn Arab-Muslim community, often putting excessive pressure to make sense of its apparent loss in functional value. Instead, it develops a unique purpose of representing authenticity to the greater community.

Munna: So it's gonna sound a little bit cynical, but before I felt like a tolbeh meant something. It would have been men saying "Okay, we have all this respect for your daughter so I came here to ask for her hand." And their parents saying "We're coming to say that you know we want our son to marry your daughter. We hope that this works out and they will get married" I feel like now, it's just pointless. Don't get me wrong, I still believe in them. I would still say that I would never let my kids not have one. But I just feel like now it's a joke.

Now I feel like you're saying "We're going to have a tolbeh, we're going to officially ask for your daughter's hand, we're going to bring some people with us ... even though they've been talking and dating and going out. You know they've had this two-year relationship, we're just going to act like none of that happened. They act like this is the first time they're going to be talking like it's supposed to be – which everybody knows it's not.

Munna's frustration with the perceived reinvention of the tolbeh highlights this aspect of invented tradition. She expresses feeling as though the event has become meaningless in regards to its original purpose. To her, the event appears like it's a joke because she knows and the event attendees know that the young couple in her analogy has been together for years prior to the event. The event is recognized for its performative value, yet she also holds this tradition mandatory. Despite the legitimacy of its original purpose being complicated by changes within the relationship-making process, Munna insists that it is a necessary event in order to retain Arab-Muslim identity. The tolbeh is considered to be a part of a normative marriage experience in Arab-Muslim communities. So when the normative marriage experience is tested by longer pre-marital "dating" stages, these relationships are concealed from the greater community until the tolbeh. By reinventing the tolbeh one is able to satisfy the constructed idea of Arab authenticity, and more importantly to match the image of the "Good Arab Girl." Enacting a more elaborate tolbeh puts greater emphasis on the presentation than its traditional functionality. In an effort to legitimize these relationships within the carefully circumscribed image of the traditional Arab, respondents lean into traditions and rely on them to perform respectability and marriageability.

Socially, having a tolbeh allows women to present their relationship as "intending to get married," as opposed to "dating." In the second generation, this change in presentation often came with the freedom of going on public dates in the community and spending more time with each other's families. While this offers a new relationship-making path that grants certain freedom to the women in these relationships there are also important implications to consider. Specifically, the reinvented tradition of the tolbeh draws a new distinction between "Americanized relationships" and "Good Arab relationships." The image of a "Good Arab girl"

is perpetuated through the tolbeh, granting a certain level of respectability to couples that have publicly announced having one (Abboud et al., 2015). The significance of the “announcement,” especially through social media will be unpacked further later in this chapter.

As discussed in previous chapters, in second-generation relationships there was generally a much larger gap of time between meeting their significant others and initiating their tolbeh. At that time, participants had the privacy to get to know their significant other. Interestingly, many women in the second generation expressed feelings of love for their significant others way before they even considered initiating any formal events.

Reem: A lot of people in Dearborn just want to play “house.” They find the first man that they meet and get married. I don't know, it's just not for me if I wasn't with someone who I was in love with and wouldn't be with them.

Reem fully emphasizes the value in establishing her emotional connection with her husband, seeing short-term “dating” stages as a disservice to her own goals of marriage. This was interesting to me because love and relationship building was portrayed as a precondition to the tolbeh, unlike the first generation. Of the first-generation group participants who had a tolbeh very soon after meeting, participants usually expressed feeling emotionally connected or in love with their significant other leading up to the katb kitab (which typically took place within a year of the tolbeh) or very soon after. The tolbeh was typically initiated through the fathers, or through the potential husband and the woman’s father. That being said, most of these women also didn’t note a very significant emotional connection to the tolbeh. It was usually described as a mundane or unimportant event that served a contractual purpose rather than a celebratory one. One woman even compared it to a business meeting or an average family dinner with more guests. Another woman described it as “calling dibs” on your potential husband.

That being said, the tolbeh did still come with a certain degree of privileges within the community. After announcing the relationship through the tolbeh, interviewees in the second generation often described a period where their relationships continued to develop. The tolbeh was important to the respectability of the relationship. This played a direct role in extending the freedom of couples in the community and within their potential spouse's family. Without the tolbeh, the relationship was not considered to be approved by the fathers of the couple. This limited the extent to which these couples could spend time with their families as it would look 3eib (or shameful) on the women in the relationship for spending time at a man's house without any formal blessing. This limitation relies on a patriarchal family dynamic that utilizes the father figure to verify the relationship, further exaggerating the role of the tolbeh.

Leena: And then, after we had the tolbeh our love just continued to grow. You see people in a different way, like he was always able to come to my house when my family was home, of course, and hang out with me here. But I was never allowed to go there because, out of respect for myself, I wouldn't go to his house and hang out until I formally met his family. So once we had the tolbeh and I was like you know his family, I was able to go to his house.

Maintaining a separation between the relationship and the marriage was important for second-generation women. Initiating the tolbeh was dealt with mutually between the couple based on what was compatible with other factors in their life (i. e. education, financial stability, other marriages in their family, being ready to move out of the house) before negotiating their plans with their parents. For multiple participants, these decisions were made and agreed upon before the parents even knew that these women were in a relationship at all. When they did tell their parents, this is when the tolbeh was planned as well. Deciding when to have a tolbeh was ultimately at their father's discretion, but usually resulted in some compromise based on the

interviewee's career and education timeline. Yet the presentation of the tolbeh was imperative to some interviewees to maintain the respectability of the relationship.

As previously mentioned, education was commonly used to leverage the interviewees' marriage timeline in their favor. Furthermore, the tolbeh was sometimes lumped together with the katb kitab, for others the tolbeh occurred years before the katb kitab. Some women skipped the tolbeh altogether. The varying timelines and event types were structured around the same relationship-making factors I discussed in earlier chapters: parental expectations, educational goals, and internal values of respectability or readiness to initiate the marriage.

Therefore, the tolbeh was often treated as an announcement to the community rather than the initiation of a relationship in the second generation. The parents in the second generation approved of the relationship well before the tolbeh took place. However, the formal presentation of the tolbeh to the greater community through its embellishment and size. Disguising the relationship-making before the tolbeh, and signifying that it was approved through the tolbeh was crucial to maintaining respectability. These elaborate presentations symbolize belonging with the imagined community, but importantly communicate class, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and religion.

Amanda: The relationship before you have your tolbeh day is very taboo, so people hide it from the Community [and] hide it from their parents. They don't want it to be looked at as being like haram. The tolbeh day is coming out as official. Like they're coming out and they can be more public with their relationship. As opposed to liking people [before having a tolbeh], getting rude comments, or looking at them weirdly because they didn't have a tolbeh to show it to everyone.

The pressure for Amanda to maintain her respectability, and her family's respectability, is reliant on concealing her relationship until the tolbeh. She specifically recalled various comments she had received from family members about going on dates with her partner. I found this to be a pertinent connection to the performance of both virginity and marriageability. By avoiding behaviors that are perceived as haram, she feels as though she is protecting herself from judgment from the community. Going on dates prior to having a tolbeh are perceived as haram, however, the tolbeh is used to formally distinguish her relationship from "American dating." This divide constructs "Arab dating" as a form of pure and well-intended relationship-making, opposed to the promiscuous concept of "American dating." Even though Amanda's father wasn't aware of her spouse until 3 years into their relationship, his public approval is still pertinent to verifying the relationship. Her tolbeh was performed to the greater community through social media and communication through social networks. Therefore, an explicit representation of the father figures' approval of this couple to work toward marriage is necessary to make this distinction.

An underlying tone to this entire project has been the presentation of Arabness through social media. An obvious difference between the first and second-generation interviewees' experiences has been the mediatization of everyday life in the second generation. Digital technology plays a new and growing role in the symbolic construction of community amongst diasporic communities around the world (Yusupova & Rutland, 2021) The accessibility and convenience to opt into a community offers a more attractive way for ordinary people to engage with such constructions (Yusupova & Rutland, 2021). Furthermore, digital media plays an important role in the production of Arabness. The engraved sign at Natalie's tolbeh where guests can take pictures, for example, has become a hallmark of the reinvented tolbeh. Identity

formation served as a largely digital experience amongst second-generation participants. Many women recall the way they were publicly “single ” one day and then posted their potential husband at their *tolbeh* on Instagram the next day. From a digital perspective, the “announcement” allows the official presentation of a relationship in socially desirable ways.

For women who decided to not have a *tolbeh* at all, the same pattern typically took place leading up to the *katb Kitab*. Of the women in the second generation who did not have a *tolbeh*, none of them felt that their parents took issue with the decision. Instead, they typically explained issues they had dealing with extended family or with community perceptions. Oftentimes, participants, like Sara, prioritized their Muslim identity over their Arab identity and therefore did not engage with the tradition.

Sara: There was a little [familial pressure or backlash] but my dad didn't care about it. He's more of a like okay we're doing what's *halal*, and that he knows the *tolbeh* more cultural. What is Islamic is not Arab culture, they're different. But then there's my uncle who was a *haji*. I guess he got in his ear, and so my dad called me. He's like, “whoa, I want to do this the right way, we should have a *tolbeh*.”

I knew this wasn't happening out of nowhere someone's talking to him. I found out it was him, my uncle.

All in all, by the time second-generation couples initiated the marriage process, there wasn't so much importance in the *tolbeh* to officiate the internal relationship. Instead, it was often done to satisfy external expectations and “announce” the relationship publicly. As demonstrated by Munna's experience, the concept of “announcing” a relationship was recognized by both first and second-generation women. First-generation women often pointed out the contradiction between the purpose of a *tolbeh* (to get formal approval from their fathers to get to know each other) and the timelines of the actual relationships in younger couples

(second-generation couples having a tolbeh years after formally initiating the relationship.) In the second generation, the tolbeh was sometimes lumped together with the katb kitab (Islamic marriage, also referred to as the engagement), for others the tolbeh occurred years before the katb kitab. Some women skipped the tolbeh altogether. The varying timelines and event types were structured around the same relationship-making factors I discussed in earlier chapters: parental expectations, educational goals, and internal values of respectability or readiness to initiate the marriage.

In redesigning the relationship-making process, the tolbeh serves as a site of cultural verification. As patriarchal governing of the relationship-making process begins to fall away, the tolbeh produces an opportunity for this role to be reincorporated in performative practice. As women in the community negotiate the change in the relationship-making process, the static ideations of Arabness are threatened in a complex way. The paternal role is reinstated in the relationship-making process with the tolbeh, the triangulated notion of the “Good Arab Girl, Good Arab Family and Heteronormativity” is upheld in contradiction with community change. Furthermore, the reinvention of the tolbeh acts as a site of respectability that is palpable with classist implications. By ritualizing and adorning the tolbeh, new ideals of Arabness are produced that create an expectation for monetary investment into the event. Further integrating financial resources into the tolbeh inadvertently integrates class into notions of “Arabness.”

Conclusion

This thesis began as an exploration of the marriage process in the Arab-Muslim American community of Dearborn, Michigan. Ultimately, the pre-marital relationship-making process took precedence over the event of the *tolbeh* itself in the discussions I had with the women I interviewed. These interviews shed light on the complex narratives that make up an under-researched corner of the Arab-American diaspora. As the relationship-making process is reoriented out of the family sphere between these generations, it becomes parallel to the Americanized vision of dating. Yet this complicates the experience for women who exist within cultural expectations that are intentionally constructed against that of the American society. In an effort to maintain cultural bonds, the language and the presentation of their relationships to the community are intentionally managed in a way that is deemed socially acceptable. The relationship-making process seems to parallel dating yet is treated in privacy and in a way that signifies virginity, indirectly presenting both religious and cultural purity.

The dating (and not dating) processes in communities like Dearborn bring light to a functional system of normative expectations that are constructed in opposition to American norms but inadvertently maintain conservative notions of the White American Middle Class. As the role of the paternal figure is dissociated from the relationship-making process in the family sphere, the *tolbeh* acts to “rebound” the patriarchal maintenance of marriage through gender performances. In attempting to produce continuity from the imagined (and oppositional) past of the Levantine Arab world, conservative notions of patriarchy, heteronormativity, class, and religion become centralized to cultural authenticity. Furthermore, these notions are integrated into standards of respectability and marriageability that primarily lean on the behavior and optics of Arab-Muslim women in the community.

This thesis brings various internal and external debates about identity to light and emphasizes the complexities of gendered experiences in the Arab Diaspora in the Western World. It allows a close examination of the rippling influences of the historical and political environments such as the anti-Arab/anti-Muslim climate in the United States as it situates community dynamics. Furthermore, it serves as a window into the competing pressures of gender and nationalism in diasporic communities that are not reducible to a simple continuum of “Americanized” and “Arabness.” In highlighting the errors of this simplified binary, new approaches should be taken to carefully consider the realities of cultural change.

Furthermore, I feel that this thesis points to a number of new areas for potential research. Namely, the experiences of young Arab-Muslim Americans can be investigated further through digital technologies. Digital technology functions as a space for community making, social networks are expanded, reinforced, and reproduced. For the Arab Diaspora, digital technology also serves as a space to present cultural identity and nationalist support for their country of origin. Additionally, the interconnected value of respectability with class and gender suggests further research into marital finances. How these events influence financial resources or imply a class standard for Arabness should be further investigated to delineate these interconnected forces.

Finally, negotiations with sexuality and virginity can be a valuable direction for further research. The perspectives gathered in this research implied a heteropatriarchal and religiously authorized approach to sex. These perspectives highlight various important points that should be further investigated. Queer Arab-Muslims were not mentioned in these interviews, nor was it in a great amount of the literature I came across in my research on Arab-Muslim relationships. This truly implicates the quality of research on Arab-Muslim American communities. Perhaps more

importantly, it aids in the erasure of Queer Arab-Muslims from diasporic communities. By dismissing this conversation, we forfeit our ability to understand community networks as a whole and contribute to a long history of omitting LGBTQ+ narratives from important ethnographic work. LGBTQ+ members of the community are implicated by the processes I analyze in this research as homosexual Islamic marriages are treated as a rarity as well as a transgression against cultural and religious norms. Marriage is treated as a site of community-making and as a normative (if not required) experience for Arab-Muslim Americans, despite limiting who is able to participate in these experiences. This is undoubtedly a limitation of my own work as well as a substantial portion of the body of research that exists on these topics. It is not simply important to expand this focus to investigate the relationship-making experiences of Queer Arab-Muslim Americans in communities like Dearborn, it is pertinent to fully characterize systems of hetero-patriarchy in acculturative processes.

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Appendix

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

The Relationship Prior to Formal Events (External Social Experience)-- Arab-Muslim American Women and Forming Romantic Relationships

What was the relationship like before you decided to begin the marriage process (decided to have a tolbeh)?

- How long were you exclusive/ together
- Did you consider it or label it as dating

Where or when did love come into the relationship?

- Do you feel married/When did you feel married?

What role did your parents play in the relationship?

- Was it “undercover” and until when? Why?
- Was the relationship self-initiated
- Did your parents know the partner beforehand or find them for you

How/Did your religious or cultural values conflict or direct steps you took?

- Did one have a greater influence than the other?
- Did having a tolbeh make it easier for you to navigate the relationship

The Internal Social Experience -- Arab-Muslim American Women and the Arab or American Paradox

How/Did familial or communal expectations (to abide by certain rules) influence/ direct steps that you took on the path to initiating?

- What were the real or Imagined implications to living in an Arab-Muslim community
- Example: Staying “undercover”
- Example: Moving faster or slower than you would have liked
- Was there pressure to abide by the expectations of a real or imagined community

Was reputation a contributing factor?

- Who did the reputation reflects poorly on
- What did reputation have to do with navigating the relationship

Was there pressure or internal conflict to “stay true” to ‘cultural’ or ‘traditional’ roots?

- Responsibility or pressure to maintain or carry the continuation of “traditional Arab things”
- How did you reconcile with that pressure
- What were the real or perceived implications of not doing so

The Experience of the Tolbeh -- Arab-Muslim American Diaspora and Inventing Tradition

What is the cultural significance of a tolbeh?

- Does this line up with what a Tolbeh meant to you?

What was your tolbeh like?

- How many people were there
- What was your relationship with the people invited
- Where was it
- Was there a sheik // what other events occurred

Who initiated the tolbeh?

How long did it take to initiate a tolbeh?

What did the tolbeh mean to you?

- Does this agree with its “formal” purpose or its cultural significance
- Did this represent something to a real or imagined community

For Interviewees who did not have a Tolbeh

Why did you do not have a tolbeh?

Who initiated the marriage process?

What did the katb kitab or engagement mean to you?

- Does this agree with its “formal” purpose or its cultural significance
- Did this represent something to a real or imagined community

What aspects of your tolbeh were “unusual” from how it is historically or traditionally practiced?

What aspects of the tolbeh were most “normal” within the traditional practices?

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

FOR A STUDY EXPLORING THE CROSS-GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES WITH THE TOLBEH (طلبه) AND PRE-MARRIAGE EXPERIENCES IN ARAB-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE IF YOU:

- a. identify as a woman and Muslim
- c. are a First or Second-Generation Arab-American
- d. have been Islamically married, will be Islamically married within a year or have initiated the marriage process with a tolbeh
- e. are from the Metro Detroit area
- f. (optional) had a tolbeh prior to getting married

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:

- * Scheduling and participating in a one on one interviews (approximately 1 hour)
- * Recounting and reflecting on your Islamic marriage and the events leading up to it
- * Discussing details regarding the external and internal implications of growing up within an Arab American Community

INTERESTED IN AN INTERVIEW?

Please contact Nadia Shebli at (313) 932 - 8244 or sheblin@umich.edu for more information!